

The following content is provided under a Creative Commons license. Your support will help MIT OpenCourseWare continue to offer high quality educational resources for free. To make a donation or view additional materials from hundreds of MIT courses, visit MIT OpenCourseWare at [ocw.mit.edu](https://ocw.mit.edu).

**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

Good evening, people. We continue our discussion of neorealism by looking closely tonight at one classic instance of the neorealist movement, the single most famous film from that school, *Bicycle Thieves*. Before I turn to talking a bit about aspects of *Bicycle Thieves* itself, which I hope will frame your viewing in a way that will help you get a lot out of the first viewing of the film, I want to say a few words about Vittorio De Sica himself.

I mentioned this afternoon that the neorealist movement, although it was immensely influential and continues to be influential, in fact, on realist filmmakers and on documentarians, and it was especially in its earliest phases, hailed globally as a very remarkable movement, it incited criticism almost from the beginning inside Italy. And I suggested it this afternoon that some complaints against movie essentially came from conservative forces in the society that felt that the portrait of decay and breakdown and dislocation that was at the center of neorealist films-- after all, they were about the contemporary world and about the broken universe, the broken planet, at least a broken Europe that we encountered after the war.

There were many kinds of conservatives in Italy who felt that it promulgated a bad image for the society, that made investment more difficult, that it was a kind of downer. And this criticism was very powerful. But what really undermined the movement in terms of getting financing, the reason that the movement sort of ended after about the time *Umberto D*, the last of the truly neorealist films that De Sica made, was produced in 1952. Its life was very, very brief. Many people would say that was the end of neorealism although there are some films that come after that have neorealist dimensions and elements in them including some by Fellini.

Still the idea that the movement had a very short life despite its immense influences it is an accurate one. But what I had left out this afternoon is an important qualification or addition which is that the films also incited criticism from the left. When you see *Bicycle Thieves* you'll see why that might be a surprising fact, because the sympathies of the film are so totally on the side of the underprivileged and the underclasses of the culture.

It's difficult from our contemporary vantage point to see what would've offended leftists. But

there was a very vigorous and theoretically sophisticated communist movement in Italy in this period as there continues to be today in some degree. And many people on the left, especially communists, but socialists as well, also complained about neorealist films.

In particular about De Sica's films because their complaint was not that the difficulties of the World War were exposed. They were perfectly happy with that. But they were angry that there wasn't a program for renovation.

What they were really angry about was that there wasn't a Marxist or a socialist program built into the films. And it's always struck me as a very revealing and interesting fact about the movement that it couldn't satisfy either left or right, even though these films are among the most powerful and compassionate films about the lives of ordinary-- not just ordinary people, but people without power, of people without control over their lives that have ever been made. So it's a curious fact.

It bothered De Sica all his life that he seemed unable to please either side in that political argument. And at one point in an interview he said something-- if I could find my notes, I'd like to quote to you. He said in response to a question that asked him why do you think the socialists and the communists were somewhat-- or at least some socialists, so remember Zavattini was a socialist, so he collaborated deeply and loved De Sica and collaborated with him on his most important film.

So I don't mean that all socialists thought ill of neorealism. They did not. But some did and certainly people on the far left definitely did. And here was De Sica's response to why-- he expressed disappointment about this. But his response really in a way is a critique of the programmatic demands that these people were making on his films.

He said, "My films are a struggle against the absence of human solidarity." You should think about this quotation as you're watching tonight's film because as you'll see in the film, the official institutions of the society seem to have broken down or at least to have become not effective. They're overburdened. They're somewhat indifferent. It's mostly that there overburdened, that the problems of the society are too great for the institutional structures that are in place to handle the problems.

But in any case as you're watching the film, I think you'll notice not only that clearly this breakdown of institutions are very-- that we might expect to be helpful to Ricci in his quest. But what we will also discover is that there are other forms of solidarity that emerge in the film.

One of them is the solidarity of husband and wife. Another is the solidarity very much tested in the film. It's the great central theme of the film, the solidarity of father and son. And then there's also the solidarity of what we might call neighbors or neighborhoods. And you'll see how that element works toward the end of the film in its remarkable and surprising conclusion.

Now here's the quotation. "My films are a struggle against the absence of human solidarity against the indifference of society towards suffering. They are a word in favor of the poor and the unhappy." One reason I like the statement is it so, in a certain sense, unsystematic. It shows-- they seem to me to be the words of an artist not a political pamphleteer. And they partly explain the richness, the resonance, what I've been calling the multiplicity of *Bicycle Thieves*.

There's a moment in *Bicycle Thieves* about which Andre Bazin has written very beautifully. The same critic that was a champion of French poetic realism and of genre and of war of course becomes one of the great champions of Italian neorealism. He can see that the Italian form of realism is an extension and elaboration and in some ways a deepening of the implications of poetic realism. He's written brilliantly about the neorealists and especially about De Sica.

There's one place in the film that he particularly focuses on one of his essays. It's-- I have to give away a small part of the plot in order to explain this but it really won't trouble you because the plot engine gets going so early in the film that it's hardly a surprise. In fact, you really know what's going to happen almost from the opening dialogue in the film where people are arguing about who has bicycles and who does not.

The film is organized in a very elegant, relatively simple way. It covers essentially three days of time. The first day is the day in which Ricci gets the commission for the job. And then goes with his wife to get his bicycle out a hock. And you'll see that they have to go through certain kinds of tricks to find the money to do this. And then once he has his bicycle he goes to work.

On his first day of work, guess what happens? Someone guess who hasn't seen the film. What do you think might get stolen? OK, right. His bicycle is stolen on the first day of work.

Now the fact is you're really not surprised when it happens because almost from that first scene you're aware that bicycles are this incredibly precious object in the world and yet also incredibly common. And that's part of why it's such a resonant symbol in the film. But there at

the center of the film, the most fundamental and most memorable parts of the film involve what I'll call sort of the third segment.

I don't know that the segments are actually equal in proportion in terms of time. I think the third is the longer one. But the third sequence is the Odyssey or the quest in which Ricci and his young son embark upon in order to recover his bicycle. So he spends the whole-- I think he gets his job, gets his bike, starts his job on Friday, has his bike stolen on Friday. Or maybe it's on Saturday. But in any case, he then gets his bike stolen.

He then asks for help from various sources and the following day he spends the entire day walking through the city of Rome looking for the thief trying to find his bike. He actually finds the thief as you'll see in the grand climax of the film. Although the thief turns out to be as miserable and at least as much without prospects as poor Ricci himself.

Something very interesting happens in that moment in the film because your sympathies shift in some way to the thief in an odd way. And you watch as his neighborhood gathers around the thief to protect him in certain respects. So the heart of the film is this search that the father and the son go on through the third day of the plot looking for the bicycle.

As the day wears on, the father becomes more and more nervous, more and more uneasy, more and more filled with anxiety. The bike seems to him the solution to all difficulties. And sometimes the son slows them down and there are scenes in which the father becomes annoyed or angry with the son but I'm getting a bit ahead of myself. So I won't repeat this again. But I'll come back to these matters in the theme of fathers and sons.

In any case there's a moment in this Odyssey where the father and son are engaged in the search for the bicycle when it's just after-- I think it's exactly at the moment when there's a gigantic downpour, they're caught in a terrible rainstorm. I think in fact the rainstorm caused this. The boy has to pee very badly. And so he interrupts the quest to go and pee. I mean he has- you have to go, you have to go.

But the father is so upset that the boy has slowed him down that he slaps him. And you get a sense that it's maybe the first moment that this man has ever struck his son. It's a tremendously fraught moment. This is how Bazin talks about it. And this is why I mention this moment now. It's a way of illustrating this principle of texture or openness to experience-- that's part of the De Sica's vision of the world.

He is a socially conscious director but he's not a programmatic or a politically preachy director. So Bazin focuses on that moment I've just described to you. He says, the boy needs to pee. A downpour interrupt the chase. Then he says quote, "The events are not necessarily signs of something of the truth of which we are to be convinced. They all carry their own weight." The rain, the need to pee, the father's anger, right? "They all carry their own weight. Their complete uniqueness. They all have," Bazin so finely, "They all have that ambiguity that characterizes any fact."

When a film is able to capture that ambiguity that characterizes any fact, it's a work of art. It can be programmatic if it does that. And in fact the moment I'm describing is really in some sense, a version of what I've been calling the neorealist counter plot. What constantly happens in good neorealist films and what happens again and again the *Bicycle Thief* is that the ongoing quest for the bicycle is retarded or interrupted by various kinds of accident disturbance, strange encounter. So that the search for the bicycle becomes something much larger than that and every particular moment in the film has, as Bazin says, its own uniqueness, its own-- you don't feel that anything is in the film to further the plot or to illuminate the character or to tell you something about what political attitudes you should have.

Although by the time you're finished with the film you do have a very coherent sense of how the society is breaking down, of how people are sustaining themselves, about how difficult life is in postwar Italy. You're aware of all of these things. And aware of them with a concreteness and the clarity that you wouldn't have if you read an abstract essay. You've seen them embodied in a totally believable fiction.

But what gives the fiction its authority, what gives it its power is precisely that you don't feel you're watching a sermon. You don't feel you're watching something in which some political moralist is beating you over the head and telling you, oh you better love this poor guy, you better. And in fact as the film goes on, one of the things you discover is that there are nasty or bad sides to poor Ricci. We understand that he's driven by economic anxiety that's very deep and partly and certainly mitigates his behavior. But he behaves crudely and cruelly to his son, never intending to.

Then of course there are moments when he recovers and tries to make up with his son. I'll come back to this in a moment. So this passage from Bazin also calls attention to what I think of as a signal feature in these films and especially in the *Bicycle Thief*, that power that any moment in the film has to express a kind of complete uniqueness, the ambiguity that

characterizes reality itself. Well, what I'd like to briefly do is give you a partial account, a modest account of De Sica's own career and then say some things about the *Bicycle Thieves*.

De Sica was a stage actor. He gave regimental performances when he served in the Army in the first World War. He became a stage hand right after the war and an actor in 1923. He joined a theater company in 1925, a touring company, and he became a tremendous success in a series of performances.

In 1927 he appeared on stage in Rome in something called [? Sabun ?] Reviews and I think it involved singing and dancing. This was an unbelievable success and turned him into a kind of a matinee idol or at least a theater icon. He made his first film in that same year in 1922 as an actor. And his first success came-- he continued to act in films intermittently for the next decade but he didn't become a recognizably serious film actor until his first major success in 1932.

Then for 10 years, he's a kind of matinee idol Italian movies. He made over 40 films in the period as an actor between 1932 and 1942-- a very handsome man as some of you may know if you've seen him and capable of great subtlety as an actor. This may help to explain why he was such a great director of nonprofessional actors, because he knew intuitively I think, how to bring out the performance from someone who was not trained in performing, in acting.

He begins to direct in 1940 and makes a series of moments in interesting but forgettable films I suppose. His first really significant film from one angle anyway, especially if we're interested in the development of neorealism, is a film he makes in 1942, co-screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, it's entitled *The Children Are Watching Us*. It's-- I've seen the film. It's not a great film. But it's an interesting film. And there are some remarkable moments it.

The title tells you something about the neorealist commitment to focus on the under privileged and the dis-empowered in society. Many neorealist films focused directly on children. And *The Children Are Watching Us* is one such film. And it almost announces the idea that children are among the victims of society because they are subjected not only to all the political and social authorities of the society, but also to the arbitrary authority of their own parents and their own immediate family environment.

So *The Children Are Watching Us* announces this interest in the disenfranchised and especially in children. It's a film about the breakup of a middle class marriage mostly told through the eyes of children. So there are certain things, certain behaviors on the part of the

adults are never fully explained because you witness and experience the film through not just the eyes but through the perceptions the understanding, the sensibility of children who are somewhat confused about what they're seeing.

The film that established him as an international figure and established neorealism as an international movement was one that De Sica and Zavattini collaborated on in 1946. It was entitled *Shoeshine*. I sometimes have been tempted to show *Shoeshine* in this course, even though it's a much less perfect film than *Bicycle Thieves* because in its own way, it's so powerful and moving.

One of the most interesting things about neorealism, apart from the fact that it was so short lived, is how relevant the films still feel today. If you watched *Shoeshine* or another of the films that I've listed here on *Umberto D* which is about the problems that people who have gone into-- of the old, people who are retired, pensioners, and the problems they face when there is horrific inflation. De Sica dedicated the film to his father.

It's about an old man who was very proud. He used to be-- he dresses very well. But he's tremendously isolated. He's terribly poor. He's almost reduced to begging in the course of the film. There's even a moment near the end of the film where he contemplates and then pulls back from suicide.

But watching that film today, it feels much less dated than some films that are much later than-- were produced 10, 15, 20, 25 years after it because the theme is so relevant. Because we know that in society today there are so many-- in all of a Western societies but especially in the United States-- there are pensioners who can't make in ends meet.

The same thing is true, I think, in some degree of the role of the fate of children in modern society. So *Shoeshine*, although it has a very melodramatic and violent ending, it's an immensely powerful film. Essentially it's a story about two boys, two Roman street urchins who are taking advantage of in some sense by their own relatives who are trafficking in black market goods. It's set in the same moment at the end of the war.

In fact, the film opens with these urchins trying to make a living as shoeshine boys. That's why where the title comes from. And these shoeshine boys are wandering the streets of Rome, going up to American soldiers who are dominating the streets, it's still an occupied city, asking soldiers if they want shoe shines.

The children are unbelievable victims. They're very close friends. They end up buying a racehorse, a broken down old racehorse that can't race anymore and they stable it someplace. They are very excited about their possession of this horse. There's some early scenes in which you see them riding on the horse with tremendous joy and so forth.

But of course this is the dawn before the miserable night. Because what then happens is the kids are taken advantage of by one their-- by a close relative. They're involved in black market activities. The adults use the children because they know that children are less vulnerable than they would be if they're caught. The children are caught. They're sent to reform school.

Most of the film takes place in the reform school. You see these two bright-eyed, beautiful young children, maybe 10 years old, who are the fastest and closest of friends when they go into jail, slowly breaking down. You see their humanity being beaten out of them by the conditions in the reform-- in the children's prison. It's a terrible disturbing film in part because you could see that the people who are running the prison actually mean well.

They're not vicious, evil people who want to harm children. The system seems designed simply to cause more harm than good and to destroy the vitality and optimism. And when I say the film ends melodramatically, one child strikes out at his erstwhile best friend and knocks him down a bank and he dies. So he in effect accidentally murders a person who had been his dearest friend.

I think it's a failure in the film. I think that you didn't need the murder for the meanings of the film to be available. I think that De Sica learned something from that. When you watch the ending of the *Bicycle Thief*, one of the things I hope you'll ask yourself is why is it so apparently undramatic? And why does that undramatic ending in the end seem so profound, so moving, so meaningful?

It's as if De Sica sort of learned his lesson. It's as if he drove his point home too heavily at the end of *Shoeshine*. He realized that to have a truly organic text that did what Bazin wants text to do, reflect the unique the unique ambiguity of every experience. The ending of the *Bicycle Thieves* does that much more effectively as I hope you'll watch for when you you're watching the film.

*Shoeshine* made a tremendous impact and it won the first of four Academy Awards that De Sica won as best director. This was for the best foreign film of the year in 1946 and it put new realism on the map. Then two years later Zavattini and De Sica followed with what I suppose



we could call their masterpiece, *Bicycle Thieves*.

I want to say that this is not a complete-- remotely complete list of De Sica's films. I've just listed some highlights here because I wanted to give you a sense of his work. I mentioned *Umberto D* already, the last neorealist film according to many people, and a very moving one about an old pensioner.

The film *Two Women* stars Sophia Loren, one of the great sort of pulchritudinous Italian movie stars of the '50s and '60s. It got a lot of attention. There were many other interesting films that he made. But one of his great triumphs was the very last we made. That's what I want to mention it.

Zavattini returned to do an uncredited coscreenplay work on *Finzi-Continis* and you can feel Zavattini's hand in many moments in the film. It's an adaptation of a novel. As some of you may know, it's really a Holocaust film. It's about the buildup to the Holocaust. The Finzi-Continis are very wealthy Italian Jews.

The story is about a poor young Jewish scholar who is, because of the anti-Jewish laws that are developing in fascist Italy, is barred from using the public library. He's a very gifted young scholar. He's in his early '20s. So he finds out that this very wealthy aristocratic family, also Jewish, the Finzi-Continis have a magnificent library. The *Finzi-Continis* open their library to him since he's barred from going into the public library.

Of course what happens is, you might guess this too, it's a wonderful novel although the film is even more beautiful I think. He falls in love with the Finzi-Continis' daughter. Right, so it's a class issue. The poor boy, rich girl. So the foreground of the film is this cross class romance. But in the background of the film it's something like cabaret but not as dramatic, not as overt. Because what's going on in the background of the film is the growth of fascism.

The end of the film ends with many of the characters we've gotten to know very well, both young and old, all of them Jews, some very aristocratic and some at the bottom of the social hierarchy, all being herded together being ready to be shipped off to the camps. You don't actually go-- the final scenes of the film have them in the railroad station being prepared for their final journey. The film is also full of comedy, just as some of the passages that I showed you in clips from this afternoon mix comedy with socially serious themes.

This is even truer of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* One of the reasons I like the film so

much is that it's a return to the energies and the moral passion that had marked De Sica's earlier career. And I think that my own feeling is the *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is one of the great European films. It certainly would be on my list of the best 15 or 20 European films of the sound era.

I think many of you would find it very instructive and moving. But I think especially so after you saw some of the truly neorealist films, the early neorealist films. One can't really call *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* a neorealist film although it has many elements in common with those earlier texts.

So De Sica was a remarkable man, a significant actor, a great director. He directed 25 films in his career, won four Oscars for best foreign film. He acted in more than 150 films, mostly light, comic social matters kind of roles. But there's one exception I perhaps should mention. Playing in a film for his friend, Roberto Rossellini in 1959, Rossellini's greatest film, a film called *General Della Rovere*, De Sica plays the lead and it's probably his most memorable performance.

It's a very, very subtle and good film about political ambiguities and conflicts of loyalty, human frailty, and human inadequacies in a way that's characteristic of the best neorealist work. So those are all films I recommend or urge you to consider watching in your leisure time. Let me say a few words now about *Bicycle Thieves*.

I've already implied or actually said a part of what I want to say so what I think I can be briefer than I had originally planned. Let me remind you again about the structure. I mentioned to you that the structure of the film is elegantly simple, that the amount of time that passes is very compressed. And that's helpful because the time compression makes you aware of the urgency of the quest that the father and the son are engaged in when they're searching for the bicycle.

So one way-- and as the story unfolds, a number of things begin to happen. The quest for the bicycle becomes a kind of Odyssey in which several things happen. One is the film takes you on an exploration of Rome. It's like one of the great city films. It visits the city. It explores the city. You see different-- it's not just that you see police stations and religious institutions and the catacombs underneath the city. Where the unions meet, and where Ricci first goes to get help from Union members who promised him that they'll find his bike, very easily, and they give him a plan and he's very excited and then the next morning when they follow the

instructions of the union, the boss doesn't help.

So the unions are breaking down as well as the church, as well as certain kinds of welfare organizations in the state and so on. So one thing the film becomes then is a kind of travelogue, a kind of exploration of the city, the city's geography as well as the city's make up in some way. You go into different neighborhoods and you hear-- I think Italians can pick up the different neighborhoods speech patterns in the film, at least I've been told this made by native Italians.

So it's a kind of travelogue in one sense. It explores this place. And part of the exploration of course involves certain ancillary or other themes that are organically linked to the story of going through the city looking for the bicycle. One of course is what we might call the social themes of the film. Because as the protagonists make their way through the city searching for the bicycle what you encounter are little vignettes that tell you something about the social hierarchies of the society, about the efficacy or in efficacy of its institutions.

I won't go into great detail here. I hope you'll draw your own conclusions and name some of the specific examples that reinforce this general idea. But I do want to mention at least one moment in this Odyssey.

One of the most dramatic and disturbingly comic moments in the film occurs when Ricci and his son actually think they've seen the thief. They think they recognize him and they follow him. And they get to essentially a mission where relatively well-off, self-satisfied Christians are serving meals to the indigent and the poor, right? Ricci gets into this institution not because he sort of wants the meal or because he needs the religious uplift but because he's chasing his thief.

And he finds once he's in there that he can't get. It turns out that in this institution that not only do the poor have to pay for their meal by agreeing to all kinds of religious behaviors, prayers, and other kinds of things. But they're also locked into the building. They're not allowed eat, they're not allowed to leave at least until they finish eating. Maybe they're not allowed to leave until they can be checked to make sure they're not stealing the soup bowls.

But in any case, it's a very interesting moment because you can see that even the people who would intend to do well in society often do more harm than good. And of course the implication is that the traditional religious institutions and traditional religious arrangements are not sufficient to take care of or adequately to respect the difficulties of the poor. That's just one

such moment. There are number of others.

In fact there is one other moment I should mention as a kind of contrast. I've said that we see many instances in which we understand that the larger institutions of society like the police or the religious system or the union system are breaking down or not really helping people. But I will but I've also said that there are some other sort of unofficial, and non-institutionalized sources of solidarity and comfort that emerge in the course of the film and I hope you'll watch for them and think about what their significance is. But there's one moment which complicates this argument because we can see the social institutions of society not actually functioning effectively but at least showing some compassion.

It's an astonishingly vivid, meaningful moment in the film, another one of these moments so full of multiplicity that the meanings are so deeply embedded in what you dramatically see that sometimes you don't even step back to generalize on the meaning of what you've seen. This is a scene very early in the film where Ricci actually goes to retrieve his bicycle. His wife has figured out a way-- basically what she figures out is they sell her dowry. She has a couple of fancy silk sheets.

They take them to the hockshop, and they pawn the sheets in order to get enough money to get the bicycle out of hock. It means they're going to be sleeping on mattresses and but so what, this is more important right? You see Ricci and his wife go to the pawn shop which is clearly run by the state. Is not like a private pawn-- it's obviously a city institution of some kind. And they bring the linen up to the guy and he looks at them and he says, OK, I'll give you this much money.

And they need a little bit more because they need to get the bike out of hock so they ask him for more money. And he looks at it, he says, oh, it's not really worth it but, OK. And it's an act of generosity on his part because he didn't have to do it.

He gives them just enough money for this stuff so that they can get his bike out of hock. And then, completely silent, you see him pick this material up, this pawned bedding, this pawned linen, and he turns around-- I think he does-- he may give it to another character. I haven't looked at this scene a year or two so I don't remember the exact-- you'll recognize the scene. I think it's the same man who does it or he may give it to someone else.

The material-- the three or four sheets that are involved are taken by someone. He walks to the back of a room, and he begins to climb a ladder. As he climbs you realize that what he's

climbing up is-- he's climbing a ladder which is leaning against a series of shelves that seem to go on endlessly. They seem to be in an auditorium the size of the city of Pittsburgh. And they go up endlessly high and every single shelf, every single inch of space on the shelf is filled with bedding as if the entire city of Rome has pawned its bedding, as if everybody in Rome is sleeping on mattresses.

Now the film never makes a comment about this. No one in the film says anything about it. But it's an unbelievably resonant and rich moment. And it's also-- it does further the sort of social themes of the film. But it occurs in a moment in which you will also see the pawn broker showing a moment of compassion and generosity. And if you did not show that generosity they wouldn't have been able to get the bicycle. So it's a complicated moment.

But if all this linen has been pawned, there's some question about whether or not the city services are doing much good for anybody. The city's in obvious trouble if nobody has any bed linen any longer. The implication is this is an unbelievably impoverished and damaged environment. But it's done in such a quiet way there's even something almost comic about the sense you have of the endless number of these things. Even the idea that you have to distinguish one from the other seems from our vantage point a bit silly, even though each one has a ticket on it, each one belongs to an individual family.

So watch for that moment. It has some of that ambiguity that Bazin talks about. So the structure of the film is organic in the sense that nothing that happens in the film doesn't seem to arise naturally out of the needs of the characters. We have to find our new bike.

And in the course of their travels other things happen. The boy has to pee, they get hungry. They have to eat. Or sometimes it rains, they have to get out of the rain. Right? And that becomes part of the ongoing sort of organic development of the story.

You never once feel, I think, in this film that any event has been imposed from the outside. Every event seems to arise naturally out of the circumstances and nature of the characters. And that's why I call it organic. It's a deeply organic way of thinking about the material. But it's organic in another way too course because it's deeply coherent.

When you finally finished the film, when you step back, you say, OK, yes the film slowed down here. And yes, the film seemed to generate what Thorburn calls a counter plot here. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, there's a profound moral and thematic coherence in this

organically fluid movie. So the structure of the film is part of its essence.

And although I haven't put this on the outline because we've talked about this so often already, pay attention to the Renoir-ish type camera behavior. The film's visual style is like Jean Renoir's. There's a kind of elegant restlessness to the camera that's very much a part of what the film achieves. So in talking about the social themes all I meant to call your attention to was the extent to which in a variety of ways, the film calls attention to the miserably endangered circumstances of ordinary people in this broken down, war torn environment.

It also looks to those, or seems to find without even looking, to dramatize or reveal those sources of support and sustenance that get us through bad times. As you're watching the ending of the film, ask yourself what these things mean. I won't actually tell you whether he recovers the bike or not, let you see that for yourself. But ask yourself, whether or not he recovers the bike, would it have made any difference? Does it matter given what the film is finally saying to us in those final images?

Well, character. This is one of the great films about *character*, I think, especially about the relation between the father of the son. They're at the very center of the film. I've already said in a way that this Odyssey that they go on is a travelogue. It teaches us about the geography, social circumstances, social arrangements, and class system and institutional systems of Rome. It does that.

But it's also an Odyssey in which the father of the son get to know each other in a deeper and in many ways, much more disturbing way than has ever happened to them before. The most poignant and terrible thing about this film in fact, is that the Odyssey I've been describing through Rome with his son, by Ricci, is also an initiation story, a story about growing up.

But what happens to Ricci's son in this film doesn't happen to most young boys until they're much older. And it happens gradually, not all at once. But what Ricci's son discovers in the course of this day are his father's flaws. He discovers things about his father that no boy really wants to know even if he's 67 years old like your professor. And he discovers these things about his father in the most stressful circumstances. His father's violent toward him, his father is indifferent toward him.

Then there are moments when after his father feels terrible anxiety and grief over the way he's treated him where his father tries to make up with him and you can see the boy not wanting to let them do it. It's unbelievably rich. And I don't think anyone who pays attention to this will fail

to recognize the interactions between the father and son as unbelievably true, marvelously accurate to the way in which loving parents and loving children often interact with each other. Because they have many moments where they're really not happy with each other at all.

What the boy discovers about his father are some things that no child ever wants to know about his father. Not just that he's flawed, but he's deeply, deeply flawed, that he's capable of really terrible behavior. And the boy is-- something happens in this Odyssey. It's one of the subtlest things about the film. The basic relations between fathers and sons are reversed.

We find that the son, this little child, is twice in the film in the position of having to rescue his father. I'm simplify certain things because I don't want to give away the plot. But you'll see how this works out in the film. I mean there are two moments in the film in which Ricci fate would be far more dire than it is because of his son's presence.

His son, in a sense, is his Savior. The fathers are supposed to protect their sons not the reverse. Part of the meaning of this adventure is that Ricci has been reduced to such a miserable level that even has to rely on his son's help in order to get by.

Both of them, the father and son experience this reversal. So it's a psychologically traumatic and deeply moving experience. Although don't misunderstand. I'm not suggesting that the child doesn't come to terms-- he does come to terms with what he learns. I think is quite remarkable.

I mean I would have had trouble with what that boy comes to terms with as an adult but he does it as a child. But I think of course it's also believable as you'll see. So the film is profound and serious about the social circumstances of postwar Italy. Is profound and serious about the indifference of certain kinds of institutional arrangements to the real miseries of human experience.

And it is a powerful and deep exploration of human character and especially, centrally, the relation between Ricci and his son. The relation between fathers and sons-- becomes a kind of one of the great parables of the relations between adults and children. It's one of the great father and son stories of all time.

Let me conclude by saying a couple of words about the title. I mean there's much more in the film I wish I can talk about. But by this time in the course if you can't get this stuff yourself, I haven't done my job. I hope all of you are watching films much more attentively and carefully

than you had before. I hope that your enjoyment has been increased rather than decreased by what you've learned in this course.

Let the *Bicycle Thief* be a test. Because in many ways it's not kind of film most of you guys would go out to watch. First of all it's in black and white. Second it's more than 50 years old. But I think you'll I think you'll recognize that it hasn't aged, that the film is as compelling now as it was when it was-- maybe even more compelling now than when it was made because some of the political turmoil has disappeared. There's no longer the taint of fascism hanging over Italian artistic productions as they were at the end of the war. There's a historical sense of the importance of this movement.

So maybe we can look at these neorealist films with a more objective eye than the original audiences could. In any case the title is an interesting one. When it was first translated into English, and in fact it's still widely known, you might have noticed a slips of the tongue on my part where I started to call it the *Bicycle Thief*. And the reason is, it's still often called that.

When it was originally brought into the United States and translated both in Great Britain and in the United States, it was called *The Bicycle Thief*. Now the Italian is in the plural. It's *Ladri di Bicilette*. Thieves of the bicycle would be the literal translation. Right now the question is why the plural? I think you could imagine the answer just from that opening sequence that I showed you this afternoon.

Why would it be plural? Why would the title be plural? One of the reasons is from the very opening sequence, we see that everybody-- that the bicycle is a very ambiguous and complicated symbol in the film. Symbol is a bad word because it's such an actuality that it seems pretentious to call it a symbol.

You see hundreds of maybe thousands of bicycles in the film. That's part of what makes Ricci's loss of the bicycle so poignant. You have the sense as he's walking around the city, oh my God, everybody has a bicycle. There are 10 million bicycles in this city. Poor Ricci can't find one, can find-- there's something horrific about the idea that an item so common could still for Ricci you be so precious, as to constitute his livelihood or threaten against his livelihood if he can't find the bicycle.

You can guess now based on what I've already said one reason for why the title is plural. Why? As Ricci's walking around looking for his bicycle, walking through a city full of hundreds and thousands of bicycles, what might he think? What might you think if you needed the



bicycle desperately? Why not pinch one? Why not thief? So one of the reasons that the title is plural is that Ricci is one of the thieves.

I'm only suggesting that he's a thief by sort of psychological inclination. He looks lovingly-- as you'll see, the plot makes this even more explicit. I don't want to give away the plot. I will. He actually does in a certain sense become a thief. But long before he becomes a literal thief and actually puts his hands on someone else's bicycle, you and I might even think some people in the audience may get the idea before Ricci does.

When you're watching this guy, so terrible, looking every place for his bicycle, he's surrounded by bicycles, sees inundated by bicycles. After he recovers the bicycle, before he goes to work, on his wife asks him to take into a special location. She wants to thank someone. It turns out, that he had-- and they get on the bike, she rides behind him and he rides over on the bike. And he waits outside this place while his wife goes up. His wife is taking a long time. So he leans his bike against the wall.

He starts to go up the stairs. He looks, and sees his bike is vulnerable so he walks down, he finds a kid, gives the kid, I think he gives the kid a coin, and tells the kid to guard the bike. And then he starts walking up the stairs again. This is very early in the film. And think how clever this is. You're aware of how vulnerable the bike is from that moment. This is a day before it's stolen, right?

You're aware of how precious is and as he ascends the stairs you actually become afraid that his bicycle might be stolen. So one of the reasons the title is ambiguous is I think in the end, the title encompasses not just the thief who steals Ricci's bike and not just Ricci himself who contemplates becoming a thief in his desperation, but also the audience which becomes complicit Ricci's impulse to criminality because we are ourselves think God, steal a goddamn bike. Take the bike. Stop worrying about it. Get it. Get away. There's a bike you could take.

And I think anyone watching the film has this feeling after a relatively short time so that we are bicycle thieves as well. So part of the subtlety of the title-- and you'll see as the film works itself out, I've already implied this. When they finally catch up the thief, alleged thief, the guy they think is the thief, he turns out to be an even more miserable specimen than poor Ricci.

He's an epileptic. He's out of work. He has to be protected by this community. His mother's very protective of him. There's some modest minor possibility that he's acting, that he's faking his mental problems and maybe faking everything. But I don't think so.

You could judge yourself whether what is in any case, any case surely true, is that the neighborhood coalesces around him because Ricci and his son are strangers and are attacking someone from their neighborhood. So when this happens, one of the things you'll feel is not just that the thief Ricci was going after deserves some sympathy too. You begin to feel some sense that his difficulties are-- not that you excuse his thievery-- but you understand it in a deep and generous way I think.

That complicates your sense of who the thieves are and what thieves are like. And then you've come to recognize that Ricci is a potential thief. And you care about Ricci. You see what a loving father he is, how desperate he is to take care of his family. So you sympathize with him. And then, you realize if you've been thinking about it, that of course you've been covering bicycles yourself.

So the audience and the real thief and Ricci the would-be thief are all implicated together as if what he's saying is that our common humanity is what bicycle thieves suggest. And that's one of the reasons that the title needs to be plural because the film is not about a single bicycle thief. It's about the bicycle thief in all of us. Enjoy the film.