

VITTORIO DE SICA (1901-1974)

This month's essay continues the series on famous personages of the Neorealist movement in Italian cinema, which developed in the post-World War II era. As I have said in the earlier essays, this period is considered to be the "Golden Age of Italian Cinema." In this essay we focus on Vittorio De Sica, who began his career as an actor, and became very successful in that profession. He was a handsome and adored matinée idol and ladies' man; impeccable in his dress, tall, and handsome. With a following of adoring women, he was the model of the suave and urbane Roman sophisticate. All of this, together with his fine acting ability, made him the highest paid star in Italian cinema of the period, performing mostly in light-hearted musical comedies.



He was also nominated for the 1957 Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for playing Major Rinaldi in Charles Vidor's 1957 adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms, a movie that was panned by critics and proved a box office flop. His acting was considered the highlight of the film.

But he really made his mark as a director in the Neorealist genre. Four of the films he directed won Academy Awards: Sciuscià (Shoeshine, 1946) and Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves, 1948) were awarded honorary Oscars, while Ieri, Oggi, Domani (Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, 1963) and Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini (The Garden of the Finzi-Continis, 1970) won the Best Foreign Language Film Oscars. In fact, the great critical success of both Sciuscià, (which was the first foreign film to be so recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) and Ladri di Biciclette helped establish the permanent "Best Foreign Film" category of the Oscars. These two films are generally considered part of the canon of classic cinema; Ladri di Biciclette was cited by Turner Classic Movies as one of the 15 most influential films in cinema history, and Roger Ebert considered it one of the 10 best films of the 20th century.

VITTORIO DE SICA was born on July 7, 1901 into a middle-class family in Sora, near Rome, and grew up in Naples. He began working as an office clerk at a young age in order to help support his impoverished family. His father, Umberto De Sica, was a clerk with the Bank of Rome, and Vittorio wanted to follow in his footsteps. His father, however, had other ideas and prodded his shy son to perform, taking him to sing Neapolitan songs to wounded soldiers during World War I.

As Vittorio became more fascinated with the stage while still a young man, his father encouraged his good-looking son to pursue an acting career. He made his screen debut in *Il Processo Clemenceau* (*The Clemenceau Affair*, 1917) by Alfredo De Antoni, when he was 16 years old. In 1923, De Sica joined Tatiana Pavlova's famed stage company, and by the end of the decade his dashing good looks had made him one of the Italian theater's most prominent matinée idols. With *La Vecchia Signora* (*The Old Lady*, 1932) by Amleto Palermi, he made his sound-era film debut. In 1933 he founded his own company with his wife, Giuditta Rissone (*at right*), and Sergio Tofano. The company performed mostly light comedies, but they also staged plays by Beaumarchais, and worked with famous directors like Luchino Visconti. De Sica continued making a name for himself as a suave leading man in Italian films, especially in light, romantic, comedies.



De Sica began his career as director with *Rose Scarlatte* (*Scarlet Rose*, 1939). Over the next three years, he directed three more features: *Maddalena, Zero in Condotta* (*Maddalena, Zero for Conduct*, 1940), *Teresa Venerdi* (released in English as *Do You Like Women?*, 1941), and *Un Garibaldino al Convento* (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*, 1942). However, his work lacked distinction until he, along with fellow Italian filmmakers Roberto Rossellini and Luchino Visconti, began exploring the possibilities of documenting the harsh realities facing their countrymen as a result of World War II.

This change brought into existence the Neorealist movement in Italian cinema. With *I Bambini ci Guardano* (*The Children are Watching Us*, 1944), De Sica revolutionized the Italian



film industry. The plot was a mature, perceptive, and deeply human depiction of the impact of adult folly on a child's innocent mind. This film marked the beginning of De Sica's collaboration with author and screenwriter Cesare Zavattini (*at left*), a creative relationship that was to give the world two of the most significant films of the Italian Neorealist movement, *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946) and *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948). Both films received Special Academy Awards for their creative take on Italian post-war life. *Sciuscià*'s award was accompanied by a citation that read: "The high quality of this motion picture, brought to eloquent life in a country scarred by war, is proof to the world that the creative spirit can triumph over adversity."

His early films—especially *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946), *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), and *Umberto D* (1952)—are all tragedies of miscommunication. In *Sciuscià*, events turn first on a deception, and then on the separation of two boys, great friends placed in different cells when confined to prison. Apart from one another, each loses trust; words miscarry and cannot be understood. Here, as in other films, De Sica presents people who cannot reach each other through language, but stand hopeless and encased in their position in the world. They try to enlist or persuade others, find help, a loan, or support in their loneliness, but no help comes. Acts of charity short-circuit; sympathy fails to find its aim. De Sica was an expert on depicting the subject of being disregarded in his films. His characters are invisible persons made visible to us.

In *Ladri di Biciclette* and *Umberto D*, we are taken inside a particular life at a particular time, and yet never lose sight of the general fact that even in the present such tragedies are playing out somewhere. The central figures embody a universal defeat, while at the same time remaining absolutely unique.



This impression of the individual life finds itself in De Sica's eye for detail, etched into the surface of things like the scratches on the kitchen wall where, in *Umberto D* (at left), each morning the pregnant housemaid strikes the matches to light the gas stove. These are films depicting urban life at its harshest, leading us within what is, to middle-class audiences, the unseen city of the poor: the pawn shops, the cramped and ramshackle apartments, the fortune teller's boudoir, the markets, the soup kitchens, and the social clubs.

Using available light and documentary effects, his cameras shot in streets, alleys, and shabby apartments, not in well-controlled studios. The cameras picked up dripping water faucets, peeling paint, and the numerous pestering flies. In this way, De Sica explored the relationship between working- and lower-class characters in an indifferent and often hostile social, economic, and political environment. The result was gritty and searing storytelling that not only bared the truth about the harsh conditions inflicted on Italy's poor, but also represented a radical break from filmmaking conventions that had been established by Hollywood studios.

De Sica's Neorealist films permit us to penetrate both this teeming metropolitan world and also enter the individual life, drawing us in by attentiveness to sorrows which we might otherwise miss. Pushed by oppression and poverty, his protagonists fall into acts of moral compromise; the heroes must become people that their consciences condemn—a snitch, a bully and thief, a beggar. The characters are too flawed to be the pitiable saints some do-gooders

repute them to be. However, the sadness here is not inevitable; it is a consequence of social and political structures that lead to despair. The films lay a claim on us, with the non-emphatic persuasion that we ought to look at and consider such rough ways of life in their reality, and to try to do something about them.

Ladri di Biciclette was a virtual textbook of Neorealism in action. It featured all of Neorealism's key tenets—gritty production, almost improvisational acting, and a lean emotional compression—and it even added authentic documentary footage into the narrative to establish a greater sense of truth. With no money available to produce his films, De Sica initiated the use of real locations and non-professional actors. Although he went on to work with Marcello Mastroianni, Montgomery Clift, Sophia Loren, and Jennifer Jones, there are no film stars in these masterpieces of the 1940s and '50s. He was casting according to the authenticity of a face. The lead character in *Ladri di Biciclette* was played by Lamberto Maggiorani (at right), who, in real life, was a lean-looking factory worker. Carlo Battisti, who played Umberto D, was a retired university professor. (In directing these people, De Sica was often brutal, and at one point in the filming of *Ladri di Biciclette*, he traded sharp blows with Maggiorani, who burst into tears. That was the effect that De Sica sought, and with the leading man streaming tears he ordered the cameras to roll. But he was often contrite after the filming; in the case of Maggiorani, he set the man up with a cobbler shop when his movie career ended and when he was dismissed from his factory job).



No big-name actor could have lived on screen as these people lived in real life. After all, as De Sica asserted, there are millions of characters, but only 50 or 60 movie stars. It seemed to him a strange illusion that so few people could faithfully embody the experience of so many. Yet for all the appeal of this approach, a factory worker or a university professor still became an acting player, as much bound up in artifice as any movie star, for these are films that tell the truth about the contemporary world not as documentaries, but through the conjured illumination of poetry.

Miracolo a Milano (*Miracle in Milan*, 1950) was De Sica's second collaboration with Zavattini. It was a satirical Neorealist fantasy that explored themes which wavered between optimism and despair in its allegorical treatment of the plight of the poor in an industrial society. It was followed closely by *Umberto D* (1952), which was De Sica's last Neorealist film and arguably his last masterpiece.



Il Tetto (*The Roof*, 1956) marked something of a return to Neorealist form, but when it too failed commercially, De Sica's career as a filmmaker was critically damaged. Unable to secure financing for subsequent projects, he turned his full focus to acting, starring in a string of pictures including 1957's *A Farewell to Arms* (for which he earned an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor).

Finally, in 1960, De Sica returned to directing with *La Ciociara*, (released in English as *Two Women*), for which Sophia Loren (*at left*) won an Oscar for Best Actress in 1961. However, his subsequent output as a director was markedly less inspired and significant. Although he did have a few box-office hits, such as *Ieri, Oggi, Domani* (*Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 1963) and *Matrimonio all' Italiana* (*Marriage Italian Style*,

1964), film critics and audiences alike had concluded that the aging director had lost his genius touch. Features like *Caccia alla Volpe* (*Fox Hunting*, 1966), *Sette Volte Donna* (*Woman Times Seven*, 1967), and *Girasoli* (*Sunflowers*, 1970) were lightweight at best. Although *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, 1970) won yet another Academy Award, it bore little relation to De Sica's Neorealist classics.

He continued to direct until 1974; his final directing work, *Il Viaggio* (*The Voyage*, 1974), starring Sophia Loren, opened in Paris on the day he died. Over the course of his long career, he acted in over 150 feature films from 1917 through 1974. His last film as an actor was a TV movie, *L'eroe* (*The Hero*, 1974) that was directed by his son, Manuel De Sica.

PERSONAL LIFE

In 1937 De Sica married the actress Giuditta Rissone, who gave birth to their daughter, Emi. In 1942, on the set of *Un Garibaldino al Convento* (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*), he met Spanish actress Maria Mercader (sister of Ramon Mercader, the assassin of Leon Trotsky), with whom he started a relationship. After divorcing Rissone in France in 1954, he married Mercader in 1959 in Mexico, but this union was not considered valid under Italian law since Italy did not recognize divorce. In 1968 he



obtained French citizenship and married Mercader in Paris. Meanwhile, he had already had two sons with her: Manuel (1949), a musician, composer, and sometime movie director, and Christian (1951), who followed his father's path as an actor and director.

Although divorced, De Sica never parted from his first family, nor did he abandon his Roman Catholic faith. He led a double family life, with double celebrations on holidays. It is said that, at Christmas and on New Year's Eve, he used to put back the clocks by two hours in Mercader's house so that he could make a toast at midnight with both families. His first wife agreed to keep up the façade of a marriage so as not to leave their daughter, Emi, without a father.

He had a lifelong passion for gambling, which meant he often lost large sums of money (he was addicted to roulette and frequently lost as much as \$10,000 in an evening at Monte Carlo). To maintain his lifestyle and to help support his "two families," he often was required to accept cinema work that might not otherwise have interested him. He never kept his gambling a secret from anyone; in fact, he projected it on characters in his own movies, for example, *L'Oro di Napoli* (*The Gold of Naples*, 1954), and *General Della Rovere*, (1959, released in US in 1960), a film directed by Roberto Rossellini in which De Sica played the title role.

Vittorio De Sica died at age 73 on November 13, 1974 from complications following surgery at the Neuilly-sur-Seine hospital in Paris.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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Art has to be severe. It cannot be commercial. It cannot be for the producer or even for the public. It has to be for oneself.

— Vittorio De Sica —