



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

BICYCLE THIEVES

1948 Italy 87 mins

Director: Vittorio de Sica

Starring: Lamberto Maggiorani, Enzo Staiola

Preceded by a short.

Neorealism never got more real than in Vittorio de Sica's 1948 classic *Ladri di Biciclette*, or *Bicycle Thieves* - occasionally mistranslated as "The Bicycle Thief", though the plural is surely crucial. It turns out that there are two thieves: one at the movie's beginning, another at its end. This study of poverty in postwar Rome is now revived in cinemas as a somewhat astringent Yuletide treat. For me, it is as unbearable as any horror film.

Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani) is a poor man who is thrilled when he is at last offered a job: delivering and putting up movie posters. But he needs a bicycle, and must supply his own, so his wife Maria (Lianella Carelli) pawns the family's entire stock of bed linen to redeem the bicycle he had already hocked. On his first day at work, the unlocked machine is stolen and Antonio drops everything to go on a desperate odyssey through the streets of Rome with his little boy Bruno (Enzo Staiola) to get his bike back, pleading and accusing and uncovering scenes of poverty similar to theirs wherever they go. They create uproar in classic crowd moments: in the streets, in a market, in a church mass. Faces always gather avidly around the pair, all commenting, complaining and generally magnifying the father and son's distress and mortification.

This is a story that magnificently withholds the comic or dramatic palliatives another sort of film might have introduced. Antonio and Bruno are a world away from Chaplin and his Kid. The son is the intimate witness of the father's humiliation,

his inadequacy as a provider. The scenes at the beginning of the film, when Antonio casually leaves his bicycle unlocked but it remains for the moment miraculously unstolen, have to be watched through your fingers.

Antonio seems unable or unwilling to embrace the obvious redemptive moral - that his son is the important possession, not the wretched bicycle - and De Sica is unwilling to embrace it either, perhaps precisely because it is too obvious, or because this moral is a luxury that only well-off people can afford. The father is obsessed with finding a stolen needle in the urban haystack, obsessed with getting his job back. Again and again, he ignores his little boy while scanning the horizon for his bicycle. At one stage, he hears an uproar from the riverbank about a "drowned boy". With a guilty start, he looks around. Do they mean Bruno? No: there he is, safe and sound.

But the lesson is not learned. He doesn't even hold Bruno's hand! And, in a later scene, we see the poor boy almost run over by a car because his father isn't looking out for him. Bruno's simple physical survival is the movie's secret miracle, and he is finally to be his father's saviour, but in such a way as to render Antonio's humiliation complete. This is poverty's authentic sting: banal and horrible loss of dignity. *Bicycle Thieves* is a brilliant, tactlessly real work of art.

Peter Bradshaw



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PLEASE LEAVE ANY COMMENTS ABOUT THIS FILM ON THE REVERSE OF THIS FORM. MANY THANKS.

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TERRIBLE

FANTASTIC