

Neorealism: We Were Not Just Bicycle Thieves—a documentary on Italian cinema

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Directed by Gianni Bozzacchi from a script by Bozzacchi and Carlo Lizzani

Neorealism: We Were Not Just Bicycle Thieves, which last year had a limited release in a handful of US cinemas, provides a basic overview of neo-realism, Italy's most influential cinematic movement.

The loosely defined trend, which emerged in the early 1940s, after the collapse of Italy's fascist dictatorship, and developed during the subsequent decade, was characterised by its humanitarian focus on the plight of the working class and the poor, on-location shooting and the use of mainly non-professional actors.

Directors Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Giuseppe De Santis were some of the early and best-known adherents of the internationally-acclaimed style. Over 30 neo-realist features, including at least four or five genuine masterpieces, were produced by Italian filmmakers between 1943 and the early 1950s, many of them in or around the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI) or other left-wing organisations. Directors Visconti and De Santis and scriptwriter and neo-realist theoretician Cesare Zavattini were PCI members.

An early anticipation of the aesthetic shift that was to occur in Italian filmmaking was indicated in an October 1941 essay, entitled "Truth and Poetry: Verga and Cinema," by Giuseppe De Santis and Mario Alicata. While not specifically criticising the fascist regime, the essay rejected the "silly pretensions" of Italy's movie industry and said filmmakers should focus on real people and seek inspiration from the literature of Gustav Flaubert, Anton Chekhov, Charles Dickens, Henrik Ibsen and Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga.

The documentary's title is a reference to De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, the director's 1948 masterpiece about the desperate efforts of a worker, and his seven-year-old son, to find and recover a stolen bicycle. Set in Rome, the movie's final scene, in which the father attempts to

steal a replacement bicycle, much to the disbelief and shame of his son, is arguably one of the most affecting moments in post-World War II cinema.

The narrator and co-scriptwriter of *Neorealism: We Were Not Just Bicycle Thieves* is Carlo Lizzani, who appears throughout the 72-minute documentary, interviewing academics, writers, filmmakers and actors.

Lizzani, who joined the PCI in 1942, was an active participant in the neo-realist movement and remained a prolific filmmaker until he committed suicide in 2013, aged 91. He was also a film critic for *L'Unità*, the PCI's post-war newspaper, and made scores of features during his long career, many of them dealing with the anti-fascist resistance.

Lizzani, who worked with Rossellini on *Germany Year Zero* and as a scriptwriter for De Santis on *Bitter Rice*, directed his first film *Achtung! Banditi!* (1951) after the PCI raised funds from workers in Genoa. His other movies include *Chronicle of Poor Lovers* (1954), *The Last Days of Mussolini* (1975), *Fontamara* (1977), *Dear Gorbachev* (1988), *Celluloid* (2007), a dramatic account of the making of *Rome, Open City* in 1945, and countless documentaries and television films.

Throughout the documentary, Lizzani presents short segments from several neo-realist classics. These include *Ossessione*, regarded as Italy's first neo-realist film, and *La Terra Trema* (Visconti, 1943 and 1948 respectively); *Rome, Open City*, *Paisan* and *Germany, Year Zero* (Rossellini, 1945, 1946 and 1948); and *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan* and *Umberto D* (De Sica, 1946, 1948, 1951 and 1952).

These clips, which provide a general overview and illustrate something of the genre's history and stylistic convention, are cleverly projected into the open window-frame of Lizzani's apartment in Rome. *Neorealism: We Were Not Just Bicycle Thieves*, however, is a limited work that skates across the surface, focusing on inconsequential

issues and engaging in exaggerated praise for the genre.

The documentary, for example, begins with Lizzani and Professor Paulo Galluzzi, from the Galileo Museum in Florence, claiming that neo-realism was comparable to the Italian Renaissance. The comparison is ahistorical and unhelpful. The Renaissance, which began in Italy in the 14th century and continued for another 150 years, was a major political, economic and cultural shift. It marked the transition between medieval and early modern Europe and saw the emergence and increasing power of the bourgeoisie.

Neo-realism, by contrast, lasted just over a decade. Notwithstanding the ongoing international influence of its best work, the trend had dissipated by the 1950s. Visconti and other Italian filmmakers, including most notably Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni, turned away from the social framework laid down by neo-realist theoretician Zavattini. He, and other “left” critics, insisted that filmmakers should focus exclusively on the lives and times of workers and the oppressed. This transition is not examined in any real detail.

Lizzani asks contemporary filmmakers and writers—Umberto Eco, Bernardo Bertolucci, Martin Scorsese, Ermanno Olmi, the Taviani brothers and Gabriel Garcia Marquez—to explain why they were inspired by neo-realism. The comments are frustratingly brief and superficial. Discussions with cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno and actors Antonella Lualdi (*Bitter Rice*) and Enzo Staiola (the young boy in *Bicycle Thieves*) are little more than anecdotal tit-bits.

No reference is made throughout the documentary to the most significant political development during the early years of the neo-realist movement—the counter-revolutionary betrayal of the working class by the Stalinist PCI.

Masses of Italian workers saw the 1943 collapse of Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime, the growth of the partisan resistance and the eruption of mass strikes in northern industrial cities as the opportunity to put an end to capitalism, but the PCI, led by Palmiro Togliatti, had other plans.

Working under the direction of the Soviet bureaucracy, the PCI, like its French counterpart, politically disarmed socialist-minded and revolutionary workers, doing everything possible to assist the Italian bourgeoisie re-establish its rule. In conformity with Joseph Stalin’s post-war settlement with US and British imperialism, the PCI unconditionally defended Italian capitalism, joining the government of Marshal Pietro Badoglio in 1944 and then

various national coalition governments up until May 1947.

How this betrayal—imposed under the banner of preserving “national unity”—and the post-war consolidation impacted on filmmakers and other artists is obviously a complex question, but one that cannot be ignored in any serious assessment of the neo-realist trend.

While the documentary points to the aesthetic significance of De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves*, it fails to note that the all-pervasive poverty shown in the movie was a result of the PCI’s strenuous defence of Italian capitalism. As one critic has remarked, *Bicycle Thieves* was about, “Italy reborn not as a socialist paradise but as a capitalist purgatory beset with massive unemployment.”

Given his political record, Lizzani was obviously anxious to avoid any discussion of this and other related questions. One of his earliest documentaries—*Togliatti is Back* (1948)—is about the Stalinist politician’s return to Italy from exile in the Soviet Union.

Lizzani, who also maintained a long friendship with fellow PCI member and Italy’s longest-serving president, Giorgio Napolitano, was not about to break the official silence about the reactionary political role played by the Stalinists during these years. Gianni Bozzacchi, the documentary’s co-scriptwriter and director, who spent many years as a celebrity photographer, including almost two decades as Elizabeth Taylor’s personal photographer, appears to have no interest in these critical issues.

A documentary that honestly examines the political and social dynamics that produced the rise and decline of neo-realism, as well as its artistic strengths and limitations, and the relationship of the cinematic trend to the fate of the Italian revolution, is yet to be made. Confronting this issue is a crucial political and artistic challenge, not just for Italian filmmakers but for the working class itself.



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