

The Bike Thief: The desperate acts people are driven to

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Written and directed by Matt Chambers.

British filmmaker Matt Chambers' feature debut *The Bike Thief* is a harrowing drama about an impoverished immigrant family living in London. In its title and subject matter, the movie pays deliberate and admiring tribute to the famed 1948 Italian neorealist film, *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette* —US title, *The Bicycle Thief*), directed by Vittorio De Sica (1902-1974).

There proves to be some genuine substance to the artistic and social connection the new film has to the original classic—to the youthful director's credit.

As in the earlier Italian movie, the narrative in *The Bike Thief* centers on a means of transportation vital to the survival of a worker and his family. Through the unfolding of its story, the movie offers a scathing commentary on the whole social structure.

About the 1948 work, a critic once noted that "the film-maker obliges the viewer to think, as well as feel, to ponder the question: What needs to be done to make this a truly human society?" (Edward Murray, *Ten Film Classics—A Re-Viewing*)

Chambers' movie takes place in London, a city characterized by grotesque social inequality and home to hundreds of billionaires and multi-millionaires. From that point of view, the social divide is far greater in contemporary Britain than it was in postwar Italy. Concentrating within itself the malignant inequality ripping through UK society, London has inevitably become an epicenter of the pandemic.

Filmed before the outbreak of COVID-19, *The Bike Thief* concerns a nameless (simply "the Rider") Romanian immigrant (Alec Sec?reanu) who works as a pizza delivery man motorbiking through the metropolis. He needs the income to help support his wife Elena (Anamaria Marinca), teenage daughter Miri (Alexia Maria Proca) and baby son, sheltered in a cramped

housing estate apartment. His bulbous helmet with dark visor lends a sense of anonymity and self-quarantine as he careens through the impersonal neighborhoods.

The Rider's reality is a day-to-day grind of dropping his wife at her cleaning job, biking his daughter to school, then working into the night for subsistence wages. His scooter is what keeps the family from falling into homelessness and destitution.

However, one momentous night, after a shift, his bike is stolen from in front of the pizza shop. The desperation then etched on his face reminds one of the look of a man condemned to death. He cannot at this point tell his wife, who simultaneously loses her job due to a petty bourgeois wretch of an employer. The stress and menace of his situation grow by the second.

With the help of a teenage resident of the housing estate, he organizes a posse of young boys to help steal a scooter. But since there are no real criminals in the bunch, the excursion fails.

Going to the police is a dead end. Moreover, the owner of the pizza shop is the owner of the motor bike, as well as the Rider's landlord. So, no scooter, no job, no money, no housing, and because the heartless shyster carries no insurance on the vehicle, the triply exploited worker would have to somehow carve money out of his own hide for the moped. This is a London with no mercy.

The camera in *The Bike Thief* stays focused on the grim geography of working class life, its narrow confines and regimented rhythms. Human relations are dominated by the daily struggle to survive, which punishes the vulnerable and taxes the nervous system to its limits. The film creates an unusually intimate relationship between the viewer and the helmeted "Everyman." Neither he nor his family remain abstractions. They live and breathe and evoke a deep

personalized sympathy.

In an interview, lead actor Sec?reanu mentions that “many of my friends in Romania know a lot about this situation. Two million people now live outside the country. Many of the Romania immigrants are college-educated, teachers, but take jobs such as delivery boys, cleaners, construction jobs and truck drivers. They do this only for the sake of their kids.”

Director Chambers notes that London has a multicultural population, and adds, speaking of the social situation in the city generally, “I am obsessed with the transition that you can go from an estate [housing project] right into a gentrified area. With COVID, we are more reliant on delivery guys. People need to be more aware and sensitive to them.”

The film is exceptional in that it is one instance where the updated version is neither an insult nor a travesty in regard to the original. It conveys some of the same social sentiment and anger as the De Sica film.

Based on a story by Cesare Zavattini, De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* opens with a government agent calling out the name of unemployed worker Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani) as a desperate throng of Romans wait for a chance to work. Antonio is offered a job pasting posters on walls. It is a good job with family benefits, but absolutely requires someone owning a bicycle.

In fact, Antonio has had to pawn his bike. Now his wife Maria (Lianella Carell) will pawn their sheets to retrieve the vehicle. Relief is not long-lasting, as the bike is stolen on Antonio’s first day on the job! Much of the movie is taken up by Antonio’s tension-filled, needle-in-the-haystack quest, in the company of his devoted young son Bruno (Enzo Staiola), to find his stolen property, seen as his salvation, in Rome’s mean streets.

They begin at the Porta Portese market, where stolen bicycle parts end up on the black market. In these scenes, the strain on Antonio begins to become unbearable. De Sica also condemns the Catholic Church in passing, with its luxurious trappings, as it throws a few crumbs to the poor.

Father and son finally track down the thief and pursue him to a brothel, where hostile neighbors shield the culprit, another penniless soul (and an epileptic). As with the Chambers’ film, the police are useless. Physically and mentally depleted, Antonio makes a

futile attempt to steal a bike. Now, a bewildered vision of sweat and rags, Antonio, with a traumatized Bruno at his side, elicits the sympathy of the bicycle’s owner. The movie’s last sequence is one of the most heart-wrenching in cinema.

The black-and-white cinematography is both lyrical and agonizing, capturing the bleeding wounds of ruined, postwar Italy. The non-professionals perform with unity of purpose, their characters’ experiences directly associated with their own.

One critic aptly summed up the film’s concerns: “What seems to be a series of fortuitous episodes is in fact a carefully orchestrated tour through the various social hells of urban Italy at that time. And hidden beneath the semblance of life being lived is, in fact, one of the dominant themes of post-war Italian films: the kind of acts ordinary people are driven to by the circumstances of war and its aftermath.” (Ted Perry, *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*)

“The kind of acts ordinary people are driven to.” So it was then, so it is now.



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