

Humanist Masterpieces No 45

# Bicycle Thieves (1948)

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**I**N an article in the *New Humanist* (March-April 2006) Andrew Tudor argued that the term ‘humanist cinema’ was simply too big and too unfocused to have any real meaning or use. But he is wrong. The fact that the term is often loosely used does not render it meaningless.



If humanism exists as a distinct philosophy, then presumably there must be a distinctly Humanist approach to the arts, and to film in particular. And this is exactly how it has been seen in continental Europe, especially in Italy, the birthplace of Renaissance Humanism. What, then, are the chief characteristics of a ‘Humanist’ film?

First of all, we have to abandon the mindset of the Hollywood studios and their assumption that the medium is merely a source of entertainment to while away a couple of hours, a bit of mindless fluff that is quickly forgotten as we move on to the next slice of dross. At its highest level, the cinema is surely an art form and, like all the best art, it tries to communicate criticisms of the status quo, ideas to be debated, powerful emotional experiences, greater awareness of the human condition, insights into life’s meaning, and values worthy of emulation.

Secondly, and following from the first, humanist films are not simply a collective product of an industry but, more importantly, like other forms of art, they are expressions of a deliberate human activity by the individual director/artist who is communicating his perception of the world and stamping each frame of the work with his own visual and intellectual footprints. As the French critic André Bazin suggested, a film should represent the director’s vision.

A third distinctly humanist approach is that the content is as important as the form. A film seeks to say something, even if what it ‘says’ is not easily translatable into words. In short, a humanist film rejects the notion of art for art’s sake in favour of the belief that art should reach out beyond itself and connect with the wider world. The director is not just telling a story or speaking to himself; as a humanist, he is trying to connect with others through his art. This also implies that the text and structure of a film itself requires analysis in context, embracing extra-filmic considerations such as the social, economic, political, psychological and cultural environments in which the narrative occurs.

But what about the actual humanist content? Well, we have to dispose of the notion that it has to be anti-religious. *Life of Brian* can be seen as a satire on blind faith, organised religion and even Hollywood movies about Christianity. Federico Fellini was forever lampooning religion, as famously in the opening shot of *La Dolce Vita*, where God – in the form of a giant statue of Jesus – flies over Rome in a helicopter, reduced to the decadent celebrity status of the modern media world depicted in the film.

Yet in either case is the satire humanist? The negative aspect of secular humanism is only part of a big-

ger canvas, which might even embrace moral perspectives shared with theistic beliefs. A European humanist film is not just or even at all a criticism of religion; it is ultimately more concerned to convey a positive and life-affirming message.

Italy has undoubtedly produced some of the best humanist films of the modern era, although the term ‘neorealist’ has been used to describe many of the early works. It was first used by Antonio Pietrangeli, the scriptwriter of Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943) in relation to that film. Roberto Rossellini, who directed *Roma città aperta* (*Rome Open City*, 1945), said that neorealism was both a moral and an aesthetic cinema, by which he meant that it held up a mirror to Italian society and dealt freely with the country’s problems.

Neorealism rejected the old cinema with its restrictive codes and conventions and went for the gritty reality, especially the poverty and unemployment rampant in postwar Italy. Real locations and unprofessional actors were also frequently used. Governments disliked the social realism of these works, which they regarded as socialist. Certainly, they are broadly humanist, as the French critic André Bazin noted in the magazine *L’Esprit* in November 1949 and reprinted in *What is Cinema?* (Volume 4, 1962): “I am prepared to see the fundamental humanism of the current Italian films as their chief merit”.

The greatest masterpiece of early Italian humanist cinema is Vittorio De Sica’s *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948). Bazin, writing in the 1950s, described it as the ‘only valid communist film of the whole —>

past decade', although De Sica said that he never belonged to any political party and that "the theme of my serious work is the Christian theme of human solidarity".

De Sica began his career as an actor before directing films, beginning in 1940. His first major movie, *Sciuscia* (Shoeshine, 1946), which won a Special Oscar the following year, is the tragic story of childhood innocence corrupted and led into crime by an indifferent adult world. The use of children to dramatise the inequities of the existing social system is a continuing device of De Sica and other Italian filmmakers, and it is central to *Bicycle Thieves*.

Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani), who has been unemployed for two years, is a decent man who wants to sustain his wife and two children and a sense of moral dignity without religion or superstition. Outside an employment office he is offered a job as a bill poster for the city council but he must have a bike to carry a ladder and the posters. Unfortunately, he has pawned his Fides bike to buy food. He curses his bad luck, but his wife Maria (Lianella Carelli) has the answer: they can pawn the bedsheets to reclaim it. And so he gets his prized bike back.

Here we immediately discern that, although the film follows the story of one family, there are clearly many others in the same predicament. At the pawn broker's shop an assistant scales a tower of shelves containing bedsheets reaching to the ceiling and there are also rows upon rows of pawned bikes. Even when Antonio sets off from the depot on his first assignment, there are scores of others with their bikes and ladders heading off to various parts of the city to do the same job.

On this first day, while putting up a Rita Hayworth poster from the movie *Gilda*, Antonio's bike is stolen right under his nose. He chases after the thief but he escapes, thanks to the help of associates who throw him off the trail. So begins a frantic Roman odyssey over three days with his nine-year-old son Bruno (Enzo Staiola) to recover his treasured machine.

During his search, Antonio encounters representatives of key social institutions – the police, a trade union

and the Church – but none of them shows any real concern for his plight: he is merely one victim among many thousands and they are helpless in the face of human wickedness and an unjust social system. The police officer, for example, fatalistically shows him a huge pile of dossiers of unsolved crimes. The inherent absurdity of his quest is further emphasised in a flea market where stolen items are resold, including countless bicycle parts: are bits of his own among them?

In a later scene Antonio sees the young thief, who wears a distinctive German cap, talking to an old man. The thief runs away and the man is uncooperative. Antonio and Bruno follow him into a church in the middle of a mendicants' service, but the officials just regard Antonio as a nuisance for disrupting the Mass and anyway they are helping people who are worse off than him. To make matters worse, the old man exits the church and vanishes into thin air.

### There is really no other alternative description of the world out there

In desperation, Antonio visits a fortune teller – he had earlier scoffed at his wife for doing the same. She tells him that "either you will find it immediately or you will never find it". As soon as he leaves he again sees the thief and follows him into a brothel. The madame and her workers chase all three out into the street where Antonio confronts the young man, who feigns a fit. A crowd has gathered and they accuse Antonio of provoking it. He fetches a policeman and they search the thief's flat in vain. The policeman tells Antonio that he has no witnesses to the theft and the young man will clearly be provided with an alibi by his neighbours. Antonio leaves the scene to the sound of jeers from the young man's friends.

All this time Bruno has been accompanying his father in his search, but from time to time they get separated. After being slapped by Antonio, the son wanders off. Walking alone by the Tiber, Antonio hears a commotion about a drowning boy. Thinking

wrongly that it might be Bruno, he panics and rushes to the scene to find that the boy has been saved and is being revived. Reunited with Bruno, he decides to treat him to lunch, and a brief happy scene of the two together ensues before reality bites again when they leave the restaurant.

In the climactic act Antonio and Bruno reach a football stadium where a large number of bikes have been parked outside. The two sit down for a while. Suddenly, Antonio sees an unattended bike leaning against a building. A sea of people leaving the match on their bikes passes before Antonio's eyes and makes the desire to possess one unbearable. He rushes to the building and jumps on the bike. Bruno who had been sent to get a streetcar home but disobeyed now witnesses his father becoming a thief.

Worse still, a crowd of people and the owner then surround Antonio and pull him off. As Antonio is being escorted to the police station, the bike's owner notices Bruno crying and in a moment of benevolence tells the crowd to let Antonio go. Lowering himself to thievery and being humiliated in front of Bruno, Antonio has sunk to a new low. But Bruno stands by his father and grasps his hand as they walk away.

As with many humanist Italian films, it is the child who redeems the adult, acting as his saviour and protector. It is a theme which stretches from the 1940s right up to more recent times in movies like *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) and *I'm not Scared* (2003).

*Bicycle Thieves*, however, has a further dimension. Throughout there is the tension between an absurdist and a socialist message. In one sense, Antonio's quest is akin to Joseph K's in *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. The search for truth and justice is futile in a mad, absurd and meaningless world. In another sense, Antonio wants to be good, honest and kind but he is thwarted by an unjust and criminal social system which ultimately drags him down to its level.

There is really no other alternative description of the world out there. Perhaps it is a messy mixture of both. In which case, *Bicycle Thieves* captures it simply and poignantly, yet brilliantly. □