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## 1 Italy, 1948

Quite some care is taken in *Bicycle Thieves* to eliminate explicit date-markers,<sup>9</sup> but it is nevertheless a film profoundly of the here and now, of Italy in 1948.

Two days before Zavattini put the finishing touches to his screenplay, Italy had gone to the polls. The elections of 18 April 1948 still stand as the most momentous in the country's history, a watershed as profound as any since the unification of the modern nation-state of Italy in 1861. They were the first parliamentary elections after twenty-one years of Fascist rule (1922–43); the first under the finely wrought, new Republican Constitution which had come into effect on 1 January 1948; and the first in which women had the vote. And they set the seal on the shape of politics and society in Italy for the following fifty years. *Bicycle Thieves* was, then, forged in the precise weeks and months when Italy was poised on an extraordinary cusp, between the endgame of a long age of dictatorship and war, and a long postwar future of difficult, but sustained democracy, prosperity and modernisation. More locally and perhaps more pertinently, 1948 also marked the end point of a five-year interregnum between Fascism and democracy, war and peace, lasting from the mid-war ousting of Mussolini in 1943, through nearly two years of a dog-end dictatorship, civil war and double occupation before Liberation in April 1945, followed by three years of delicate nation (re)building.<sup>10</sup>

The single redeeming feature of this recent history for many Italians – and the foundation upon which a new, democratic Italy was to be built – was the partisan Resistance, which had significantly aided in the task of obstructing and then defeating the Nazis and their remaining Fascist allies during the period 1943–5. And the largest force in the Resistance was Communist. The Communists'

heroic role in this struggle, together with the famous declaration by their leader, Palmiro Togliatti, on his return from exile in Moscow in 1944, that the Party would pursue democratic rather than revolutionary politics, propelled the Italian Communist Party (PCI) into becoming a million-strong force within months of the Liberation. From 1943 and continuing after 1945, a broad coalition of anti-Fascist forces – Communists, Christian Democrats (DC), socialists, liberals – guided the nation through to a democratic future. Once established in government, the coalition staged a referendum which voted by a slim margin to abolish the monarchy, drafted the new constitution, (half-heartedly) purged parts of the Fascist state and amnestied others.

Meanwhile, as across all of postwar Europe, Italy's social and economic fabric was threadbare, where it was not entirely shot to pieces. The injection of American infrastructural economic support under the Marshall Plan had not yet begun – indeed the promise of Marshall funds, and the Plan's possible delay or cancellation if Communists came to power, was a key issue in the 1948 campaign – and housing shortages and unemployment, especially among the millions of conscripts returning from fighting or from imprisonment, ran higher and higher into the late 1940s. Official figures indicate 1,700,000 unemployed (8.9 per cent) in 1948 and the real figure was certainly considerably higher than that, possibly more than double.<sup>11</sup> Antonio Ricci, unemployed for two years at the start of the film, was far from alone in his struggle to find work.

Partly as an inevitable result of the establishment of a democratic political process, with mass parties and open ideological divisions along Cold War lines; partly as a result of socio-economic conditions; and partly as a result of opportunist politicking, the coalition government could not hold. In spring 1947 (a few weeks before Zavattini and De Sica would first discuss filming *Bicycle Thieves*), the Christian Democrats under Alcide de Gasperi excluded the Communists from government and the stage was set for the grand electoral stand-off a year later.

The election campaign was fought out with intense ferocity between two dominant blocs, the DC on the centre-right, with the none-too-hidden support of the Vatican and the covert support of the CIA; and the Popular Democratic Front (i.e., the PCI, with the socialists), supported and monitored from Moscow. The result was literally epoch-making: the DC won handsomely – by 48 per cent to the PDF's 31 per cent – and would remain in sole or coalition government until the 1990s. The PCI was nevertheless firmly established as the dominant opposition force: excluded from national power, it would remain a massive political and cultural presence throughout the Cold War era. The DC would consolidate its hold on the state briskly, including intervening with increasing aggression to rein in what it saw as the unfortunate penchant of one sector of the film industry for portraying the nation as excessively poor, oppressive and unjust.

The sector the new government – and especially a junior arts minister named Giulio Andreotti (later to become the most powerful politician of his generation in Italy) – had in mind was the loose tendency in postwar Italian cinema that was, by 1948, already widely known as 'neorealism'. *Bicycle Thieves* was to become one of its most lauded exemplars, but also one of its last triumphs at the start of a phase of retrenchment, so that the film stands at this other cusp also, at both the high point and the end point of the 'heroic' phase of neorealism.

Attempts at definition of neorealism often revolve around questions of start dates (1942? 1945?) and end dates (1948? 1952? 1955? etc.); and more or less flexible lists of film-makers (Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, De Sica, Zavattini, Giuseppe De Santis and possibly several more), films (anything from eight to sixty to over 200, but certainly including Rossellini's war trilogy, *Roma città aperta* (*Rome Open City*, 1945), *Paisà* (1946) and *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1948); Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948); and De Sica and Zavattini's four collaborations between 1946 and 1952) and points of film style (location shooting,

natural lighting, contemporary subject matter such as war, Resistance and poverty, non-professional actors and local voices, naturalistic editing and cinematography including a prevalence of medium and long shots, and long takes). It is seen as a rejection both of Hollywood (and its imitations in 1930s' Italy, where De Sica had made his name as an actor) and of Fascist aestheticism and rhetoric, to be replaced by a cinema of the everyday and of the common man or woman.

These are all useful indicators, but neorealism was also more diffuse and more elusive, more embedded in the larger history of Italy between 1943 and 1948 than such checklists allow. It was the prime response within the cultural sphere (in art, architecture, literature, theatre, cinema) to the transition from war to democracy. And its successes meant that the cultural sphere became an intensely important and highly politicised site of public debate and competition over the shaping of the new Italy. Italo Calvino famously characterised neorealism as a shared emotion, an affective sense of belonging to a community yearning for renewal, as much as a programme with a fixed aesthetic or ideology.<sup>12</sup> Neither Rossellini nor De Sica were political animals; they are better characterised as 'humanists' and, in Visconti's 1943 formulation, the cinema they dreamed of was an 'anthropomorphic cinema'.<sup>13</sup> Visconti, however, and others such as Giuseppe De Santis were committed Communists and the movement derived much of its energy and allegiance from the left, expressing an acute need for social renewal and reform, especially for the poor. Practitioners regularly found support from the PCI: the party funded *The Earth Trembles*, for example; and the party daily, *L'Unità*, sponsored screenings of *Bicycle Thieves* in several cities. There was never a formal grouping of neorealists, but there were frequent encounters, clusters, networks and overlapping crews between key films, as well as key journals, cultural initiatives (e.g. cinema clubs: Zavattini was instrumental in setting up the *Rome circolo del cinema* where *Bicycle Thieves* had its première) or protests (e.g. the February 1948 'Movement for the Defence of Italian

Cinema', or 1949 protests against film legislation), so that many of the players within neorealism and the wider film industry were in close, active contact.

The year 1948 marked a striking moment of achievement and transition in neorealism. *Bicycle Thieves* followed the release earlier in the year of two extraordinary, but also strikingly strained or 'extreme' entries in the neorealist canon, Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* and Visconti's *The Earth Trembles*. Both Rossellini and Visconti would move in striking new, non-realist directions for their next major projects (Rossellini made *Stromboli*, 1950, with Ingrid Bergman; Visconti made *Bellissima*, 1951, with Anna Magnani). Hollywood continued to pour both past and present products into the Italian market, where spectatorship was buoyant; and the local film studios, Cinecittà, opened on the edges of Rome by Mussolini in 1937, finally returned to active production in 1948 after years of war-induced interruption, marking an upturn in local commercial production (the huge Ancient Roman drama *Fabiola*, directed by Alessandro Blasetti, appeared in 1949). Meanwhile, as we have seen, committed cinema was under attack, for precisely the same reason that brought its success: because it tapped into the fraught social and political divisions of the day. Neorealism was under considerable strain, in other words, as the conditions that brought it into being waned and this would only be confirmed after the April elections.

The political atmosphere in Italy in the weeks and months after the election of 18 April 1948, as the cast and crew of *Bicycle Thieves* were shooting on the streets of Rome, remained febrile. The stability of the new Republic was by no means certain and the threat of political violence was still in the air. Europe had not yet settled into its long-term Cold War shape (in 1948 alone, the Communists faltered in the Greek civil war; Stalin broke with Tito; Communist rule was established in Poland and Czechoslovakia). On 14 July, in Rome, Togliatti was shot three times and left in a coma, and the government and state looked decidedly fragile. Protesters poured onto the streets, calling for insurrection; a handful were killed, a

general strike called and the demonstrations banned by the authoritarian Interior Minister Mario Scelba. (Scelba's police enforcers, the 'Nucleo Celere', are seen in *Bicycle Thieves* driving off to a demonstration.) Togliatti and the PCI calmed the crisis – as did, according to political folklore, the stunning success of the great cyclist Gino Bartali in the Tour de France in the days of the crisis – but it was clearer than ever that Italy was a society divided and fragile, shot through with structural weaknesses and inequalities, and any number of unresolved legacies.

None of this momentous public, national history is forced onto screen in *Bicycle Thieves*: and yet its resonances and its consequences within ordinary lives are exactly what the film set out to chronicle in its telling of one man's story over one weekend in Rome. If the macro-history is not worn on the sleeve, it is there, coded in the film's narrative and visual form and style (even in the bicycle itself), quite as much as the film is a collation of neorealist shibboleths. So, mass unemployment, rooted in the war, and the crises of identity it produced, are the deep causes of Antonio's problems. He has been unemployed for two years, when, we can surmise, he returned from the army, perhaps from an Allied or German prison camp (the friend who fetches him when his name is called in the opening scene is wearing an Italian army hat). The ideological divide between the PCI and the Church/DC is staged in two extended sequences, one set in a Communist workers' club (*casa del popolo*) and the other at a charity Mass. Class division is on comic display in the scene in a restaurant, as proletariat and *haute bourgeoisie* stare each other down across the class divide. The state and its institutions are there too, in the shape of the police, and talk of political meetings and demonstrations; in the public employment system, providing labour for some, but precious few; or in the public-housing project on the periphery of Rome where Antonio and his family live, Fascist in origin but now adapting to postwar housing needs. The film is also peppered with hints at the transition to a more prosperous, but also more disorienting modernity that awaits Italy in the 1950s. Finally, all of

Italy's recent, convulsive history is signalled quietly in the Ricci family itself. Bruno is around eight years' old, born just as Europe went to war (Enzo Staiola was born in November 1939), and quite probably separated from his father during the war (hence, perhaps, his resilience and maturity beyond his years). His baby sister, glimpsed in one scene, is weeks' old, born at another moment of momentous change, perhaps in April 1948 itself, figuring a future for the family and the nation, but one that the film shows as darkly threatened by injustice and poverty.

Some would criticise *Bicycle Thieves* from the left, arguing that it was not hard-edged enough in its engagement with the ideological questions of the day, preferring pathos to prescription. And yet this was precisely the balancing act Zavattini and De Sica set out to perform: to imbricate every frame with the charged particularities of Italy in 1948 and its overwhelming back-history and to use a sophisticated art of storytelling of everyday lives as a means both to analyse and to share the problems faced in the society at large.<sup>14</sup> It was this possibility that Zavattini saw intuitively when he first came across Bartolini's novel in July 1947.