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Theatre into Film: The Versatile Career of Vittorio De Sica

—for Kirsi

VITTORIO DE SICA HAS BEEN CONSIDERED one of the major contributors to neorealism, a movement that altered the content and style of international as well as Italian cinema. Despite these contributions and numerous citations of praise for such films as *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1951), and *Umberto D.* (1952), which are his best known and most beloved in addition to being his best pictures, De Sica has become a neglected figure in film studies. He may be seen as a victim of (postmodern) fashion, for today emphasis is frequently placed on technical or stylistic virtuosity and films of social content are looked upon—often justifiably—as sentimental or quaint (unless that content is of the politically correct kind). The works of De Sica that were once on everybody's list of Best Films have, to a large extent, been relegated to the ranks of 'historical examples' on the shelves of museums, archives, and university libraries. Then, too, the director who was lionized during the Italian postwar era was later dismissed as a film revolutionary who had sold out to commercialism. Except for *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, 1971) and *Una breve vacanza* (*A Brief Vacation*, 1973), De Sica's films after the neorealist period have been considered minor or inferior works in comparison to those of his contemporaries.

In Italy, one encounters very favourable reactions to his work; yet behind these reactions there are always attempts at qualification. Scholars there approach a discussion of De Sica with awe and respect, but also with the proviso that he was, of course, too sen-

timental. The fact that the first full-length study of De Sica's work was not published by the Italians until 1992¹ attests to his countrymen's ultimate indifference toward a major director who has been demoted to the rank of interesting but minor filmmaker. The French initially had no such indifference, being the first to hail De Sica as a 'genius.' During the 1950s and 1960s, French film critics and historians preoccupied themselves with De Sica to such an extent that they produced the only full-length studies of the Italian director ever to be published in any country.² (Germany and Romania, for their part, produced one biographical monograph each during the sixties.³) The waves of acclaim from France have by now subsided, however.

In contrast to French, there has been no major study of De Sica in the English language. In Great Britain and America, as in Italy, De Sica is known and studied as a 'link' in the Italian postwar movement of neorealism; that is how he is represented in the two basic British works on Italian cinema.⁴ In America, aside from interpretive articles or chapters on individual films, movie reviews, and career surveys in general film histories as well as specifically Italian ones, a critical study on the works of De Sica is non-existent. John Darretta's compilation⁵ is certainly valuable for its biographical information; filmography complete with synopses and credits; annotated bibliography of criticism in Italian, French, and English; and chronological guide to De Sica's careers on the stage and on the screen. But Darretta's critical survey of the director's films is limited to eight pages in a book that otherwise runs to 340 pages.

Perhaps this lack of critical or scholarly attention derives from the fact that De Sica was at once the Italian screen's most versatile artist and its greatest paradox. As a star performer in well

¹Lino Micciché, ed., *De Sica: Autore, Regista, Attore* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1992).

²Henri Agel, *Vittoria De Sica* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1955), and Pierre Leprohon, *Vittorio De Sica* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1966).

³Helmuth Pelzer, *Vittoria De Sica* (Berlin: Henschel), and Mihail Lupu, *Vittorio De Sica* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1967).

⁴Vernon Jarratt, *The Italian Cinema* (London: Falcon Press, 1951), and Roy Armes, *Patterns of Realism: A Study of Italian Neo-Realist Cinema* (London: Tantivy Press, 1971).

⁵John Darretta, *Vittorio De Sica: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

over a hundred films, he embodied the escapist show-biz spirit at its most ebullient, wooing a vast public with his charm and drollery. Yet De Sica the director aspired to, and frequently achieved, the highest cinematic standards, challenging the audience to respond to his unflinching social insights and psychological portraiture. De Sica's most disarming trait as a screen star was his nonchalance, which could shift irresistibly to a wry narcissism with the flick of a well-tonsured eyebrow. Particularly in his many postwar comedies, De Sica tended to play lovable frauds—smoothies whose looks and manner were a little too studied to be true. Yet when he relinquished his own close-ups to venture behind the camera, De Sica became the utter opposite of this extroverted entertainer. De Sica's signal trait as a filmmaker was his own compassionate self-effacement, which caused him to intervene as unobtrusively as possible to tell the stories of the powerless and marginal creatures who populate his best work.

This intriguing dichotomy is what distinguishes De Sica from the brace of other successful actor-directors who have enriched film history in all eras. From von Stroheim and Chaplin through Welles and Olivier to Kevin Costner and Kenneth Branagh in the present, most actors have turned to directing in part to protect and enhance their own lustre as performers. As such, their filmmaking styles tend to reflect the persona each projects on screen as an actor—the theatrical flourish of an Olivier, say, or the high-spirited pop lyricism that Gene Kelly projected in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). However, after his first forays as a director, De Sica only appeared in his own films with reluctance. Perhaps this was because, as a director, he guided his professional cast and amateur actors of all ages in exactly the same way: he acted everything out according to his wishes, down to the smallest inflection, then expected his human subjects to imitate him precisely. Therefore, for De Sica actually to perform in a movie he was directing himself would, on a certain level, be redundant. In any event, the visual spareness and emotional force that are the key traits of his best work behind the camera have no discernible connection to the sleek routines of that clever mountebank who enlivened four decades of Italian popular movies. Clearly, making his own movies touched some primal chords in De Sica that mere acting could never express—and may even have obscured.

To be sure, there was nothing in his personal background that could account for these inchoate artistic longings. Vittorio De

Sica was born on 7 July 1902 (a few sources give 1901), in Sora, Italy, a small market town in the so-called Ciociara district nestled in the countryside between Rome and Naples. He was the third child and first son of Umberto De Sica and the former Teresa Manfredi. His much-beloved father was a clerk for the Banca d'Italia, which in 1904 or 1905 transferred him to Naples—a city for which young Vittorio would feel a special affinity, a spiritual allegiance, for the rest of his life, despite the fact that the De Sica family also resided in Florence (from 1907) and Rome (from 1912) during his formative years. (Indeed, the triple regions of De Sica's early life made him attuned in his films to the characters, dialects, feelings, and attitudes that differ so widely from South to Central to Northern Italy—the intensely emotional, humorous temperament of Naples, the charmingly aristocratic manner of Rome, the cultural ambition and refinement of Florence.)

Umberto De Sica, a former journalist who possessed the gay Neapolitan character, admired artists and theater people, ingratiated himself with a number of celebrities of his day, and always steered the tall, good-looking Vittorio toward a career in entertainment. In an ironic reversal of all those movies about the early struggles of great artists, however, the younger De Sica expressed no interest in the stage even though he showed a talent for singing at Sunday masses, parish theatricals, and benefit concerts. He wanted to be a bank clerk like his father, a position that to him—the eldest son eventually responsible for the well-being of his family—represented a secure occupation. In Rome, Vittorio studied accounting at a technical institute, then later graduated from the University School of Political and Commercial Science. Nonetheless, in 1918 his father manoeuvred him into a small part in a silent film being produced by a family acquaintance, *Il processo Clémenceau* (*The Clemenceau Affair*), in which De Sica played the French statesman as a young man. Far from transported by this early taste of the limelight, De Sica was ready to embark on a career in accounting after fulfilling his military obligation in the elite Grenadier's Regiment.

A chance meeting with a friend, however, led him to the theatre. Gino Sabbatini had a job as a walk-on with the moderately prestigious company of Tatiana Pavlova, a popular Russian actress who was presenting plays in Rome as well as on tour. He told De Sica that another such position was available and the latter, diffident but encouraged by his father, took the job. Pavlova had been

struck by the handsome appearance, debonair manner, and winning smile that would eventually make De Sica a matinee idol, and as a result he made his début in the legitimate theater in 1923 as a waiter in *Sogno d'amore* (*Dream of Love*). De Sica had no formal training as a actor, but the lot of an itinerant bit player proved an apt apprenticeship. A troupe like Pavlova's had no fixed artistic home but was instead forever on the road performing a bewilderingly wide repertory—everything from local standards to Broadway melodrama and the latest frou-frou from the boulevards of Paris or Budapest, with a bit of Strindberg, Shaw, Schiller, and Chekhov thrown in for good measure. Between 1923 and 1924, De Sica played character parts, mainly old men and clowns, with the Pavlova company.

In 1925, he transferred his allegiance to the theatre troupe of Luigi Almirante, a distinguished actor whom he greatly admired. It was more of the same low pay and grueling tours, but there were compensations: as this was De Sica's apprenticeship period, he was out to learn, and Almirante was the actor to watch; moreover, De Sica learned so well that he was promoted to 'leading young man' in the bourgeois, romantic comedies that formed the spine of this troupe's repertory. In 1927, the company became that of Luigi Almirante-Giuditta Rissone-Sergio Tòfano, and for two years De Sica performed alongside these three established leads, with a romance developing in the process between him and Rissone. (While a conspicuous couple both onstage and off for the next decade, they didn't bother to marry until 1937.) Between tours, De Sica made a few sporadic appearances in silent films without leaving much of an impression. But, then, the local film industry was in such a comatose state in the late 1920s that to be an Italian movie star in those years would have been rather a contradiction in terms. For the time being, De Sica understandably felt that his destiny lay in the theatre.

At the start of the new decade, he and Rissone helped form a new stage company, the *Artisti Associati*, which also included Umberto Melnati. This turned out to be a lateral move, however, rather than the career breakthrough they had hoped for; in those early Depression years audiences were scarce, and in terms of novelty or artistic achievement, the *Artisti Associati* hadn't much to distinguish itself from the other theatre companies struggling through the early 1930s. At this point, an unlikely fairy godfather materialized in the rotund person of Mario Mattòli, an ambitious theatrical

impresario who would later become a prolific director of popular movies. Mattòli invited the Artisti Associati to regroup under his aegis, and between 1931 and 1933 De Sica performed with the 'Za-Bum' company in Milan under Mattòli's direction. The troupe was much noted for its (cautiously) satirical musical revues—a staple at the time of theatrical capitals from New York to London to Berlin, but a relative—and understandable—rarity thus far in Mussolini's Italy. With his innate gift for clowning and crooning not shared by most of the revue's erstwhile dramatic actors (including Miss Rissone), De Sica had become a leading man and popular star.

Over the next ten years, he acted in various companies with Rissone, Tòfano, and Melnati, achieving a number of successes in Italian works from contemporary musicals to the dramas of Luigi Pirandello and Ugo Betti, as well as in international plays like Noel Coward's uncharacteristically serious but well-made *Easy Virtue* (1924) and Sheridan's comic yet finally sentimental *The School for Scandal* (1777). Throughout his stage career, from 1923 to 1949, De Sica was mastering the art of acting, the techniques of stage production, and the subtleties of dramatic interpretation that would become important to his career as a filmmaker. In that twenty-six year span, he appeared in over 125 theatrical productions. Some of those plays became sound films (*Questi ragazzi* [1937, *These Boys*], *L'uomo che sorride* [1936, *The Man with a Smile*], *I nostri sogni* [1943, *Our Dreams*]), and in most of them, De Sica and Rissone played the same roles they had performed in the theatre.

Sound movies were proving something of a boon even to national film industries as shaky as Italy's was in that era, as curious audiences flocked to hear film actors speak their own native idioms. The new technology required new personalities to interpret it, and theatre people with trained voices like De Sica were in great demand. De Sica's first part in the talkies was a supporting role in Amleto Palermi's tearjerker titled *La vecchia signora* (*The Old Lady*, 1931), Italy's second sound film. It starred the great Emma Gramatica, who years later was to find her best screen role in De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*. But it was in the popular movies of Mario Camerini, widely considered the most distinguished director at work in the Italian film industry before the war, that De Sica became a star of the screen. His first encounter with Camerini was in *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* (*What Rascals Men Are!*, 1932), in which De Sica played the leading character of a Milanese chauffeur who pursues a bumpy courtship with a winsome shop-girl. After the

release of this picture, De Sica was a recognizable screen idol and a media personality. (His recording, from *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!*, of “Parlami d’amore, Mariù” [“Talk to Me of Love, Mariù”], became an Italian pop classic, and in the years to come he would record other popular tunes.) Adored by his fans (mainly women), De Sica became known as the Italian Maurice Chevalier; then, as his appeal matured, as the Italian Cary Grant.

Still, considering his stage origins and Camerini’s ‘typing’ him as a light romantic lead, it’s remarkable how anti-rhetorical De Sica’s acting style was from the beginning of his screen career, particularly in contrast to the self-consciously theatrical bombast of so much movie posturing in the early thirties. De Sica’s performing style was well suited to the cinematic style of *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!*, for, unlike most Italian movies of the day, Camerini’s was not studio-bound in an attempt to prove that it could be as sumptuous and ‘international’ in scope as the competition from abroad. *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* was filmed on the streets of Milan, with direct sound and a mobile camera, thus reviving a veristic technique—location shooting—that had first been cultivated in the Italian cinema between 1913 and 1916 (when such films as *Sperduti nel buio* [*Lost in the Dark*, 1914], *Assunta Spina* [1915], and *Cenere* [*Ashes*, 1916], inspired by the writings of Giovanni Verga and others, dealt with human problems in natural settings). Indeed, at times Camerini’s film looked almost like the documentary of a romance: a neorealist comedy, in other words, more than a decade before neorealism ever existed.

During the 1930s, De Sica and Camerini would reunite four times, always in the company of Assia Norris, a platinum-haired, baby-voiced actress of modest talent who nonetheless was one of the most popular local stars of the period—perhaps because she resembled a blurred copy of a far-off luminary named Carole Lombard. Norris’ first teaming with De Sica was their sprightliest, in the 1935 *Darò un milione* (*I’d Give a Million*), where a weary millionaire pretends to be a homeless tramp, falling for a girl who works in the circus and who loves the real him regardless of his wealth. Much more important in retrospect, however, than the initial romantic teaming of De Sica and Norris was the fact that *Darò un milione* marked the first, fleeting encounter between De Sica and the man who would later become his longtime friend and collaborator, forging with him one of the most fruitful writer-director partnerships in the history of cinema: Cesare Zavattini. *Darò un*

millione was based on a short story co-written by Zavattini, then a thirty-three-year-old journalist, critic, and humorist. He was invited to collaborate on the screenplay, his first, and thus began a thriving new *métier* for this young writer. In a film industry filled with superlative screenwriters, Zavattini surely showed himself to be the most lyrical and imaginative—easily the equal of the French screen's resident poet, Jacques Prévert.

In between such other Camerini pictures as *Ma non è una cosa seria* (*But It's Nothing Serious*, 1936), *Il Signor Max* (1937), and *Grandi magazzini* (*Department Stores*, 1939), De Sica starred in a host of additional movies, including five baubles directed by his discoverer, Mario Mattöli. Most of these were up-to-date romantic comedies, like Mattöli's directing début, *Tempo massimo* (*Maximum Tempo*, 1934), plus a few wistful period pieces harking back to the Italian *fin de siècle*, such as Amlcto Palermi's *Napoli d'altri tempi* (*Love in Old Naples*, 1938); there were also occasional descents into sentimental melodrama. With his career established in Italian films, De Sica then began to gain an international reputation. In 1933, for example, he made two movies in Germany: *Das Lied der Sonne* (*The Song of the Sun*), directed by Max Neufeld, and *Das Blumenmädchen vom Grand-Hotel* (*The Flower Girl from the Grand Hotel*). And during the 1939 winter season in New York, four pictures with De Sica were popular with Italian-American audiences: *Il Signor Max* (1937), *Ma non è una cosa seria* (*But It's Nothing Serious*, 1936), *Napoli d'altri tempo*, and Palermi's *Le due madri* (*The Two Mothers*, 1938).

De Sica continued his success as a screen actor into the next decade, appearing in twenty-four films between 1940 and 1949, including the following: Palermi's *La peccatrice* (*The Sinful Woman*, 1940), Vittorio Cottafavi's *I nostri sogni* (for which he collaborated on the screenplay with Zavattini), Camillo Mastrocinque's *Sperduti nel buio* (*Lost in the Dark*, 1947, a remake of the 1914 silent Italian classic), and Maestro Perboni's highly acclaimed adaptation of Edmondo De Amici's novel *Cuore* (*Heart and Soul*, 1948), for which De Sica won a 'Nastro d'argento' (Italy's 'Silver Ribbon,' the equivalent of an American Oscar) as best actor for his performance as the schoolteacher. Throughout his career as a screen actor, De Sica continued his affiliation with the legitimate stage, making frequent radio appearances as well in dramatic sketches and songful cameos. Between 1930 and 1939, he appeared in fifty theatrical productions and twenty-nine films; between 1940 and 1949, he acted

in thirty-one stage shows in addition to the aforementioned twenty-four movies, and in addition he made nine motion pictures as a director.

During his career as a film actor, De Sica appeared in approximately 160 pictures. Even after the start of his career as a prominent director, he kept performing in movies, seven of which he directed himself: *Rose scarlatte* (*Red Roses*, 1940), *Maddalena zero in condotta* (*Maddalena, Zero for Conduct*, 1941), *Teresa Venerdì* (1941), *Un garibaldino al convento* (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*, 1942), *L'oro di Napoli* (*The Gold of Naples*, 1954), *Il giudizio universale* (*The Last Judgment*, 1961), and *Caccia alla volpe* (*After the Fox*, 1966). Well into middle age, De Sica was at his best playing light roles requiring deft irony and flashy charm; but he did prove himself capable of a solid dramatic performance as an amoral poseur-turned-partisan in Rossellini's look back at Italian neorealism, *Il Generale della Rovere* (1959), which was set during the darkest moment of the German occupation of Rome. His first appearance in an American film (for which he was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor) was in Charles Vidor's *A Farewell to Arms* (1958), as Major Rinaldi. In the 1960s, he became familiar to British as well as American audiences for his performances in such English-language films as *It Started in Naples* (1960), *The Millionairess* (1961), *The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders* (1965), *The Biggest Bundle of Them All* (1968), *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (1968), and *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium* (1969). De Sica made his last feature-film appearance in 1974 in *Andy Warhol's Dracula*.

The director claimed that he acted in order to pay his debts. Then, too, the money he received for performing in commercial works helped to finance the kinds of films he wanted to make, but that were considered financial risks by producers—so much so that, again and again during his career, De Sica was trapped into directing the very commercial, escapistly entertaining projects he said he wished to avoid. His first directing venture, however, had far more to do with an actor's *amour propre* than the urge to raise the aesthetic standards of the Italian cinema. During the shooting of Carmine Gallone's 1940 picture *Manon Lescaut*, De Sica had argued with Gallone over his interpretation, and the director won. The result was a sheaf of reviews dubbing the movie a minor debacle and De Sica stilted and corny in the role of des Grieux—judgements De Sica could only share. Thus he realized, like Chaplin

before him (the director he most revered), that the best way in which to protect future performances was to direct them himself. And, indeed, his initial filmmaking efforts were unabashedly vehicles for De Sica the star, in style and substance entirely in keeping with the standard movie entertainment of the day. They were thus influenced by the very conventions of the *telefono bianco*, or 'white telephone,' pictures of the 1930s (the term applied to these trivial romantic comedies set in blatantly artificial studio surroundings, symbolized by the ever-present white telephone) in which he had acted for other directors, as well as by the tastes of contemporary movie audiences.

For his first motion picture, De Sica chose a popular play, *Due dozzine di rose scarlatte* (*Twenty-Four Red Roses*), by the noted writer Aldo De Benedetti. De Sica had directed and starred in this comedy-romance of the mistaken-identity genre on the stage in 1936, and the film version of 1940, simply titled *Rose scarlatte*, featured him in the same role he had performed in the theatre, with a screenplay by De Benedetti himself. De Sica directed only the actors in the movie, however; Giuseppe Amato oversaw the camera work and technical direction of *Red Roses*. In this piece of haute-bourgeois fluff, a wife (played by Alida Valli) who feels neglected is courted by a phantom suitor, who happily turns out to be none other than her husband (De Sica). As a stage play filmed on sets in a studio, with little cinematic merit apart from the sure direction of the youthful, attractive, and trained actors, *Rose Scarlatte* enjoyed a mild success with the public and the reviewers. Bolstered by this success and more confident in his directorial abilities, De Sica turned next to another, somewhat sentimental romance, *Maddalena zero in condotta*.

One of the staples of the Italian screen in the 1930s and early 1940s was the comedy-drama set in a school for teenaged girls, who in between classroom pranks pine chastely for a romance of their own. Adapted from a Hungarian stage play, like so many Italian movies of the time, *Maddalena zero in condotta* fit snugly into the genre, with De Sica in the role of a young Austrian businessman accidentally enmeshed in a romantic correspondence with a wide-eyed schoolgirl played by Carla del Poggio. Seen today, this film cannot transcend the banality of its subject, nor its reluctance—shared with the vast majority of pictures made during the Mussolini years—to reflect even the most trivial aspects of actual, everyday life in the Italy of 1941. Nevertheless, there is no

ignoring De Sica's instinctive gift for filmmaking here: his handling of the actors is once again assured, and the movie's pacing has a verve and smoothness that few of the director's more experienced colleagues could match.

Having found a successful formula, like his mentor Camerini before him, De Sica directed, co-wrote, and acted in two more romantic comedies in what might be called his apprenticeship period. *Teresa Venerdì* (released long after 1941 in the United States as *Doctor Beware*) was based on a Hungarian novel this time, and had all the predictable elements: a wistful ingénue in an orphanage for girls, a handsome bachelor doctor (De Sica, naturally), his cold-blooded fiancée, and the inevitable happy ending. However, the novelty that distinguished this trifle from its predecessors lay in the casting. For to play his unworthy girlfriend, De Sica cast none other than Anna Magnani in her juiciest film role to date. (Although she'd enjoyed considerable success as a music-hall performer, the screen had thus far not been kind to Magnani.) With the director's evident complicity, her deadpan drollery completely stole the picture; and her work in *Teresa Venerdì* led to several comic parts of growing scope over the next few years, until the first neorealist masterpiece, Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, 1945), supplied Magnani with a new, dramatic archetype to incarnate.

De Sica's fourth film at last afforded him a change of pace. *Un garibaldino al convento* was a period piece, set during the turbulent unification of Italy (the Risorgimento, 1750-1870), and hence more dramatic in tone (if at the same time facilely romantic) than comic. Moreover, this time De Sica played only a cameo towards the end of the picture, as the patriotic warrior Nino Bixio. In all other respects, however, this production was show business as usual. Most of *Un garibaldino al convento* is an old lady's reminiscence, told in flashback, about a soldier of the Risorgimento who seeks refuge in a convent boarding school for girls, with Carla del Poggio repeating her role in *Maddalena zero in condotta*—now clad in a hoop skirt instead of a frock. Directed with De Sica's usual energy and benefitting from his decision to shoot as much of it as possible outdoors, *Un garibaldino al convento* was a palatable entertainment in its time, but, still, Visconti's *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963) this movie was not. Happily for De Sica at this stage of the war (1942), Mussolini jingoists and anti-Fascists alike could take heart from its theme of nationalistic liberation from the yoke

of oppressive, opportunistic authority, conducted by the stalwart forces of General Giuseppe Garibaldi.

Like *Rose scarlatte*, *Maddalena zero in condotta*, and *Teresa Venerdì*, then, *Un garibaldino al convento* was a studio-made picture with professional actors and a plot that concerned veiled or mistaken identity, complete with a climactic action and reversal precipitated by an anonymous or misdirected love note. All these early films of De Sica adhere to a derivative theatrical form with ironclad insistence. They are technically competent works, but they share in the antiseptic fluff of the 'white telephone' films; all are essentially dramatic comedies in which the initial complications and obstacles are overcome on the way to a happy ending: young love wins the day in each instance. In *Rose scarlatte*, the husband and wife's marital misunderstanding is simply forgotten at a last-minute railroad-station reunion. In *Maddalena zero in condotta*, the romantic complications caused by an anonymous love-letter bring not only one but two couples together. And in *Teresa Venerdì*, the orphaned heroine marries the handsome young doctor after she has casually solved the problems of indebtedness that have plagued him throughout the film. Although the characters, costumes, and sets vary in degree, De Sica's first motion pictures are fundamentally the same story told four times over. They did, however, permit him to perfect the technical aspects of cinematic production.

While *Un garibaldino al convento*, for its part, had a negligible effect on De Sica's directing career, a chance professional encounter on the film's set radically changed the course of his personal life. To play Carla del Poggio's closest friend and rival in the convent school, the movie's producer had hired one Maria Mercader, a lovely young Spanish-born actress who was gradually finding a niche for herself on the Italian screen as a well-bred, blonde leading lady. By the time filming ended, a serious love affair had developed between De Sica and Mercader—not simply another one of those fleeting, behind-the-scenes flirtations for which this actor-director was notorious in the film world. And as a pretext for spending as much time together as possible, De Sica and Mercader started performing together as a romantic screen team. Divorce from his first wife was not possible in Italy, however, and in any case Giuditta Rissone was determined to retain her status as Signora Vittorio De Sica. Moreover, De Sica himself had no intention of abandoning Emi, his beloved little daughter from his marriage to Rissone. So

within a few years—particularly when Mercader began having her own children by De Sica at the end of the 1940s—he had established two separate and complete domiciles in Rome, in each of which he would try to spend a part of every evening for the sake of the children.

His decision under the circumstances to make his first truly serious film—with the ironic title, no less, of *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children Are Watching Us*, 1943)—may well have been De Sica's way of partially expiating the guilt he felt over his equivocal domestic situation. For with the sexes of the fictional characters reversed and a conclusion far grimmer and more final than either of De Sica's two *ménages* would face, *I bambini ci guardano* basically retells the story the director was living at the time. The film was based on Cesare Giulio Viola's 1928 novel, *Pricò*, and scripted by the author, De Sica, and Zavattini, who thus became an acknowledged member of the De Sica team for the first time. Zavattini's touch is immediately apparent in the extraordinary melancholy with which the story unfolds; there's an intensity of feeling throughout the picture far beyond any of the cozy sentiments displayed in De Sica's prior movies. And it was this that made *I bambini ci guardano* such a radical departure for a film made during the last years of the Fascist regime. Like the fatalism of Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1942), that masterly harbinger of Italian neorealism made around the same time, the frank, undiluted bleakness of this story was nearly unprecedented on the Italian screen. (De Sica didn't even sweeten the bitter pill by casting lovable star personalities like himself in the adult parts; the best-known member of the cast was Isa Pola as the adulterous mother, an actress then considered a has-been who never really quite was.)

In 1942, when *Ossessione* and *I bambini ci guardano* were either being made or released, the idea of the cinema was being transformed in Italy. Influenced by French cinematic realism and prevailing Italian literary trends, Visconti shot *Ossessione* on location in the region of Romagna; the plot and atmosphere (based on James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1934]) were seamy as well as steamy, and did not adhere to the polished, resolved structures of conventional Italian movies. Visconti's film was previewed in the spring of 1943 and quickly censored, not to be appreciated until after the war. Around the same time, Gianni Franciolini's *Fari nella nebbia* (*Headlights in the Fog*, 1941) was portraying infidelity among truck drivers and seamstresses, while

Alessandro Blasetti's *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* (*Four Steps in the Clouds*, 1942)—co-scripted by Zavattini and starring De Sica's wife, Giuditta Rissone—was being praised for its return to realism in a warm-hearted story of peasant life shot in natural settings. De Sica, too, was dissatisfied with the general state of the Italian cinema, and, after the relative success of his formulaic films, he felt it was time for a new challenge. Like Zavattini, who had by now achieved a measure of screenwriting success, De Sica wanted to do some serious work, to express his ideas about human problems and human values.

The title of his new film had already been the heading of one of Zavattini's famous newspaper columns, and the subject matter of the story would be deemed scandalous when it reached the screen. *I bambini ci guardano* examines the impact on a young boy's life of his mother's extramarital affair with a family friend. The five-year-old Pricò becomes painfully aware of the rift in his family life, and his sense of loss is made even more acute when his father sends him away from Rome to live—first in the country with his unreceptive paternal grandmother, then at a Jesuit boarding school. His mother's love affair leads finally to the suicide of Pricò's ego-shattered father, and, at the end of the film, when his mother (draped in mourning dress) comes to the school to reclaim her child, Pricò rejects her. The last time we see him, he is walking away by himself, a small, agonized figure dwarfed by the huge, impersonal lobby of the school. The cause of the marital rift leading to the wife's infidelity is never revealed; the concern of De Sica and his screenwriters is purely with the effect of the rupture on the little boy. And it is this concentration on a child's view of the world—here the world of the petit bourgeois family almost apart from the social, economic, and political forces that combine to influence its workings (a world similarly explored, sans children, in *Ossessione*)—that gives a basically banal, even melodramatic tale a profounder aspect. Except for René Clément's *Forbidden Games* (1952), there has never been such an implacable view of the antagonism and desolation that separate the lives of adult and children.

I bambini ci guardano owes much to the remarkable performance of the boy, Luciano De Ambrosis, himself orphaned just before work on the picture began, and whose acting experience was limited to a walk-on in a Pirandello play. De Sica's uncanny directorial rapport with his five-year-old protagonist would, of course, later prove vital in the making of *Sciucsià* and *Ladri di*

biciclette, which share with *I bambini ci guardano* the theme of childhood innocence in confrontation with adult realities. Arguably, De Sica would become the most eloquent director of children the screen has ever known, with the possible exception only of François Truffaut. And *I bambini ci guardano* gave the first evidence of that extraordinary dual perspective that De Sica conveyed in his films about children. At the same time, he managed both to simulate a child's vantage point on the baffling adult sorrows that surround him and to subtly establish an authorial detachment—expressed in the spare neutrality of his *mise-en-scène*, even the physical distance he so often maintains between the camera and his subject—which somehow makes the predicament of his characters doubly moving. It is as though De Sica's camera eye were a passive witness to tragedy rather than the active force in the shaping of a fictional story—this 'passivity' being one of the grand illusions of the neorealist movement to come, and one fostered by the frequent use of nonprofessional actors photographed in actual locations as opposed to the artificial confines of the movie studio.

As in his subsequent neorealist films, De Sica's cinematographer is not called upon in *I bambini ci guardano* to exhibit striking angles or exhilarating movement: the compositions rarely startle one by their ingenuity; the use of the camera is clear-eyed rather than ingenious. What De Sica focuses on at a given point is more significant than the way in which he focuses his attention. The way is never neglected, it simply isn't exploited; for it is to De Sica's purpose to move with un-elliptical life as closely as he dares without vitiating motion-picture technique altogether. To subordinate the essentially cinematic as he does is itself a technique of ineffable skill; and to efface his signature as a director from the style of a film argues a modest purity of aim that is refreshing.

De Sica tried out such a detached or reserved *mise-en-scène* for the first time in *I bambini ci guardano*, whose simplicity of composition and subdued editing style markedly contrast with the formulaic, studio-dictated cinematic style of his previous four films. The tone of De Sica's fifth picture also strongly differs from that of *Rose scarlatte*, *Maddalena zero in condotta*, *Teresa Venerdì*, and even *Un garibaldino al convento*, for there is no comedy in *I bambini ci guardano*; what relief we get from Pricò's suffering comes only in the form of his own heightened or mature perception and sensitivity—indeed, his name is a shortened form of the Italian word for precocious. Not only is there no comedy in the

movie, there is a tragic ending that signalled a change in De Sica's artistic vision. The alienation evident at the start of *I bambini ci guardano* does not disappear; on the contrary, the gap in communication between the mother and her child widens. After the suicide of his father, moreover, Pricò is not reunited with his remaining parent: instead, he turns his back on her and returns down a long corridor to his tiny dormitory room. The discordant ending is one of the most powerful in all of De Sica's work—challenged only by the final scene of *Sciuscià*—and it contrasts markedly with the comic endings of this director's first four movies, where the strife and confusion of the fictional world are replaced by happy harmony and romantic union.

I bambini ci guardano, then, proved to be a key work, thematically as well as stylistically, in De Sica's directing career: it cemented his collaborative artistic relationship with Cesare Zavattini, and it marked the beginning of his breakthrough as a filmmaker of more than provincial stature. In its thematic attempt to reveal the underside of Italy's moral life, shared with *Ossessione*, this film was indicative of a rising new vision in Italian cinema. In exhibiting semidocumentary qualities by being shot partially on location at the beaches of Alassio and by using nonprofessional actors in some roles, *I bambini ci guardano* was, again along with *Ossessione* as well as the aforementioned pictures by Blasetti, Franciolini, and Camerini, a precursor of the neorealism that would issue forth after the liberation of occupied Rome. De Sica's fifth film was not a financial success, however, and its negative reception was in part engineered by those who saw it as an impudent criticism of Italian morality. The unfavourable reaction to *I bambini ci guardano* was also influenced, of course, by the strictures of the past: during the era of Mussolini's regime and 'white telephone' movies, an insidious censorship had made it almost impossible for artists to deal with—and for audiences to appreciate—the moral, social, political, and spiritual components of actual, everyday life.

Like most of the coddled members of the Italian film industry through 1942–43, the period of the making and release of *I bambini ci guardano*, De Sica had personally been little touched by the alarums of war. Too old to be called up for the Italian army—and in any case too useful to morale as an adornment of the escapist popular cinema—he pursued a wartime career almost indistinguishable from the one he enjoyed in the 1930s. To his credit, De Sica never curried favour with the authorities by making

films that flattered the ambitions of the regime—unlike Rossellini, whose *La nave bianca* (*The White Ship*, 1942) and *L'uomo della croce* (*The Man of the Cross*, 1943), while not Fascist pictures in the most literal sense of the word, were nevertheless propaganda features intended to promote the Axis war effort. De Sica's apolitical idyll ended, however—like everyone else's—in June of 1943 with the collapse of the Mussolini government, which had the side effect of shutting down the film industry for the foreseeable future. The subsequent German occupation brought particular hazards for movie people: the danger of being drafted to serve in the resurgent film industry of Mussolini's Republic of Salò in the north, or the even worse perils that might result from refusing to enlist.

De Sica was naturally approached by the Nazis, even receiving an invitation—or, better, a command—from Hitler's Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, to make a film in Prague. But a simultaneous commission from the Catholic Cinema Centre in Rome supplied a fortuitous alternative to serving under the Nazi banner. Due to the nature of its subject, which concerned the journey during the German occupation by a trainload of pilgrims to the famous shrine of the Blessed Virgin at Loreto (famous for curing the afflicted), the picture had the support of the Vatican, which impressed even the Nazis. Thus it was implied that so long as *La porta del cielo* (*The Gate of Heaven*, 1944) remained in production, the Germans would leave De Sica in peace. As a result, he deliberately prolonged the shooting of the movie for ten full months, until June of 1944, when Rome was liberated by the Allies. After the Americans had taken over, De Sica completed *La porta del cielo* in a week.

For military reasons, this film could not be shot on location at Loreto; instead the Basilica of St. Paul in Rome was substituted, where De Sica had a replica of Loreto built. Between power outages, bombardments and war-related skirmishes in the streets, a lack of film stock, and the distraction of sharing St. Paul's with three thousand homeless refugees, the fact that *La porta del cielo* was completed at all was a miracle worthy of Loreto itself. Despite such adverse circumstances, De Sica later declared himself reasonably pleased with the results, though his account of the pilgrimage to Loreto seems to have lacked the mystical fervour the Vatican had hoped for. The film was barely released after the war in 1946, then resurfaced in Paris two years later, amplified by archival shots intended to give the impression that it concerned a pilgrimage to

Lourdes, in a bid to increase its appeal to French moviegoers. Today, however, no complete copies of the original picture remain.

This is a great pity, for at the very least *La porta del cielo* is a fascinating document of its convulsive age—perhaps almost inadvertently so. Its script is utterly conventional: in various interwoven vignettes, De Sica and his co-scenarists, Zavattini and Diego Fabbri, investigated the stories of some of the travellers, among them a young worker blinded in a factory accident and a concert pianist with a paralyzed hand, who is making the pilgrimage in spite of his atheism, with a hint of romance inevitably thrown in for good measure. But the film's visual atmosphere is something else altogether. Virtually no movie to date had given such a palpable sense of the grinding exhaustion of a war that seems fated never to end. As the train makes its agonizingly halting way to the shrine—literally sidetracked by bombings and trainloads of soldiers retreating from the front—the picture's dank, unembellished cinematography tells its own story of the power of faith. For in *La porta del cielo*, the final destination isn't really the point, although De Sica shoots the climactic scenes at Loreto with the appropriate mixture of awe and humility. What's moving here is the instinct to persevere, in spite of the hardships we witness in each unadorned frame. Not so surprisingly, a review in *L'Écran Français* from October 1948 suggests that, in cinematic style as well as narrative content, this work was firmly in the neorealist mode: "It had a lot of haphazard lighting and framing; the images, often gray, recalled news events recorded under the worst conditions. But much of the film's power stemmed precisely from the manner in which it was shot *La porta del cielo* is rich in marvellously observed details, whether tender, cruel, or ironic."⁶

With the war finally ended, De Sica, like everyone else in the Italian entertainment world, found himself without resources of any kind. The logical path, temporarily at least, remained the theatre, and so during the initial postwar years he participated in some notable stage events—the Italian première of William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* (1939), for instance, and a production of Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* (1778) under the direction of Luchino Visconti. De Sica would gladly have continued working

⁶Jean Thévenot, "La porte du ciel," *L'Écran Français* 171 (5 Oct. 1948): 10. My translation.

on screen had the cinema still existed; at the same time, it gradually became clear to him and many of his contemporaries, however inchoately at first, that something new had to be invented if they were to return to filmmaking. Yet the birth or creation of neorealism was anything but a collective theoretical enterprise—the origins of Italian neorealist cinema were far more complex than that.⁷

Generally stated, its roots were political, in that neorealism reacted ideologically to the control and censorship of the prewar cinema; aesthetic, for the intuitive, imaginative response of neorealist directors coincided with the rise, or resurgence, of realism in Italian literature, particularly the novels of Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Vasco Pratolini; and economic, in that this new realism posed basic solutions to the lack of funds, of functioning studios, and of working equipment. Indeed, what is sometimes overlooked in the growth of the neorealist movement in Italy is the fact that some of its most admired aspects sprang from the dictates of postwar adversity: a shortage of money made shooting in real locations an imperative choice over the use of expensive studio sets, and against such locations any introduction of the phony or the fake would appear glaringly obvious, whether in the appearance of the actors or the style of the acting. It must have been paradoxically exhilarating for neorealist filmmakers to be able to stare unflinchingly at the tragic spectacle of a society in shambles, its values utterly shattered, after years of making nice little movies approved by the powers that were within the walls of Cinecittà.

Indeed, it was the Fascists who, in 1937, opened Cinecittà, the largest and best-equipped movie studio in all of Europe. Like the German Nazis and the Russian Communists, the Italian Fascists realized the power of cinema as a medium of propaganda, and when they came to power, they took over the film industry. Although this meant that those who opposed Fascism could not make movies and that foreign pictures were censored, the Fascists helped to establish the essential requirements for a flourishing postwar film industry. In 1935 they founded the Centro Sperimentale in

⁷On this subject, see Bert Cardullo, *What Is Neorealism? A Critical English-Language Bibliography of Italian Cinematic Neorealism* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1991).

Rome, a film school headed by Luigi Chiarini, which taught all aspects of movie production. Many important neorealist directors attended this school, including Rossellini, Antonioni, Zampa, Germi, and De Santis (but not De Sica); it also produced cameramen, editors, and technicians. Moreover, Chiarini was allowed to publish *Bianco e Nero* (*Black and White*), the film journal that later became the official voice of neorealism. Once Mussolini fell from power, then, the stage was set for a strong left-wing cinema.

The Axis defeat happened to transform the Italian film industry into a close approximation of the ideal market of classical economists: a multitude of small producers engaged in fierce competition. There were no clearly dominant firms among Italian movie producers, and the Italian film industry as a whole exhibited considerable weakness. The very atomization and weakness of a privately owned and profit-oriented motion-picture industry, however, led to a *de facto* tolerance toward the left-wing ideology of neorealism. In addition, the political climate of postwar Italy was favourable to the rise of cinematic neorealism, since this artistic movement was initially a product of the spirit of resistance fostered by the Partisan movement. The presence of Nenni Socialists (Pietro Nenni was Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Communists in the Italian government from 1945 to 1947 contributed to the governmental tolerance of neorealism's left-wing ideology, as did the absence of censorship during the 1945–49 period.

Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* became the landmark film in the promulgation of neorealist ideology. It so completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of its historical moment that this picture alerted both the public and the critics—on the international (including the United States) as well as the national level—to a new direction in Italian cinema. Furthermore, the conditions of its production (relatively little shooting in the studio, film stock bought on the black market and developed without the typical viewing of daily rushes, postsynchronization of sound to avoid laboratory costs, limited financial backing) did much to create many of the myths surrounding neorealism. With a daring combination of styles and tones—from the use of documentary footage to the deployment of the most blatant melodrama, from the juxtaposition of comic relief with the most tragic of human events—Rossellini almost effortlessly captured forever the tension and drama of the Italian experience during the German occupation and the Partisan struggle against the Nazi invasion.

If, practically speaking, Rossellini at once introduced Italian cinematic neorealism to the world, De Sica's collaborator Zavattini eventually became the theoretical spokesman for the neorealists. By his definition, neorealism does not concern itself with superficial themes and synthetic forms; in his famous manifesto "Some Ideas on the Cinema,"⁸ Zavattini declares that the camera has a "hunger for reality," and that the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the historical richness as well as the political importance of actual, everyday life. Although inconsistently or irregularly observed, the basic tenets of this new realism were threefold: to portray real or everyday people (using nonprofessional actors) in actual settings, to examine socially significant themes (the genuine problems of living), and to promote the organic development of situations as opposed to the arbitrary manipulation of events (i.e., the real flow of life, in which complications are seldom resolved by coincidence, contrivance, or miracle). These tenets were clearly opposed to the prewar cinematic style that used polished actors on studio sets, conventional and even fatuous themes, and artificial, gratuitously resolved plots—the very style, of course, that De Sica himself had employed in the four pictures he made from 1940 to 1942.

Unfortunately, this was the cinematic style that the Italian public continued to demand after the war. In 1946, these viewers wanted to spend their hard-earned *lire* on Hollywood movies through which they could escape their everyday lives, not on films that realistically depicted the effects of war—effects that they already knew only too well through direct experience. As a result, De Sica's next and first wholly neorealist picture, *Sciusià*, was a commercial disaster. Mostly negative movie reviewers cited the difficulty of understanding the performers' mixed accents and dialects, and neither the newspapers nor the Italian government appreciated what they called De Sica's capitalizing on the misfortunes of the poor as well as sensationalizing the conditions of prison life. Shot in three months under the primitive circumstances of

⁸Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," trans. Pier Luigi Lanza, *Sight and Sound* 23.2 (Oct.–Dec. 1953): 64–69. Originally published in *Rivista del Cinema Italiano* 2 (Dec. 1952), and reprinted in Richard Dyer MacCann, ed., *Film: A Montage of Theories* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1966) 216–28, from which version I quote the phrase "hunger for reality" (218).

postwar production, *Sciuscià* had a different reception, however, in other countries. It proved an artistic triumph particularly in France and the United States, where it won a 'Special Award' at the 1947 presentations of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (since the Oscar for Best Foreign Film did not yet exist). This was the film, then, that marked the beginning of De Sica's international recognition as a major director, and that stands as a landmark in the professional partnership of De Sica and Zavattini.

Sciuscià was conceived out of the experiences of vagrant orphans in poverty-stricken, postwar Rome, where they organized their enterprises (many of them illegal) in the wake of the Allied liberation. Often these youngsters were seen trailing after American soldiers calling out 'Sciuscià, Gio?'—their phonetic equivalent of 'Shoeshine, Joe?'—for GIs were among the few able to afford even this minor luxury in a country filled with unemployment following the cessation of hostilities. A magazine published a photo spread on two of the shoeshine boys, nicknamed Scimietta ('Little Monkey'), who slept in elevators, and Cappellone ('Big Hat'), who suffered from rickets in addition to having a large head; and their pictures attracted a small-time, American-born producer, Paolo William Tamburella, who suggested to De Sica that a story about such street waifs would make a touching and topical movie. Immediately, Zavattini took up the suggestion, and he and De Sica walked the streets of Rome absorbing the atmosphere, in order to achieve maximum fidelity in the final motion picture. The filmmakers even got to know the two boys, Scimietta and Cappellone, who tried to earn enough money shining GI boots on the Via Veneto so that they could rush to the nearby Villa Borghese stables for an hour of horseback riding. They became the models for Giuseppe and Pasquale of *Sciuscià*, and, for a brief moment, De Sica considered drafting Scimietta and Cappellone to play themselves in the movie, since there were no equivalent Roddy McDowells or Dean Stockwells working at the time in the Italian cinema. He decided, however, that they were too ugly—a decision that tellingly reveals the limits of realism, neo- or otherwise, and that points up yet again that realism is one among a number of artistic styles, not reality itself. Zavattini artfully adopted the shoeshine boys' lives and love of horses to the screen, while Rinaldo Smordoni and Franco Interlenghi were chosen from among the throngs of an open casting-call to play 'Little Monkey' and 'Big Hat.'



Sciusià. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In order to drum up money to realize their dream of owning a horse, the two boys become party—albeit innocently—to a robbery. When they acquire the animal, a white stallion named Bersaglieri, no conditions adhere to its joyful ownership: the horse belongs to both of them, involves each youngster totally, and symbolizes their common pastoral longings for a life of pureness and beauty. They are soon apprehended by the police, however, and, when they refuse to implicate the real thieves, Giuseppe and Pasquale are sent to jail as juvenile delinquents. There they are tricked into turning against each other, and, in *Sciusià's* climax, Giuseppe slips to his death from a bridge in an attempt to escape attack by an angry, vengeful Pasquale. As the latter falls to his knees, screaming, next to his friend's body in the river bed, their beloved horse has long since symbolically galloped off into the darkness.

As was the usual practice in Italian films, the script of *Sciusià* was the joint work of several professionals—Sergio Amidei, Adolfo Franci, and Cesare Giulio Viola—in addition to the team of De

Sica-Zavattini. And although *Sciuscià* was shot in real locations as much as possible (excluding the final bridge scene, which was shot in the studio because the producer didn't have the money to wait for good weather), there was nothing improvised about its script, which was worked out to the smallest detail. There were those in the late 1940s who liked to proclaim that motion pictures like *Sciuscià* were pure, unadulterated Life flung onto the screen—which, of course, is nonsense, and even an unintended insult to De Sica's powers as a great, instinctive movie dramatist. In fact De Sica the director cannily exploits every resource of the cinema in which he'd been working for fifteen years—not hesitating to underscore *Sciuscià*'s pathetic tragedy with heart-tugging music by the redoubtable Alessandro Cicognini—in order to give his audience the emotional *frissons* latent in the story he chose to bring to the screen.

For all its hybridization, however, what endures from *Sciuscià* is De Sica's palpable empathy for these street children and the plight of the entire generation they represent. As an artist with no particular ideological axe to grind, moreover, he manages always to give a human or personal dimension to the abstract forces that frame this drama. The grainy, newsreel quality of Anchise Brizzi's photography, the sharp cutting, and the seemingly spontaneous naturalness of the acting (particularly of Smordoni and Interlenghi as the two boys) all sustain the feel of an exhausted Roman city, bereft of its pride. This same weariness affects the authorities in the prison scenes, which have an almost documentary air of moral as well as physical squalor.

The very title of this film—the Italian-English neologism coined by the shoeshine boys of Rome—is a clue to its all-embracing intentions. *Sciuscià* may be the pathetic story of Giuseppe and Pasquale, but the tragedy of post-World War II Italy is reflected in their sad tale. Even as the American GIs in the film see the image of their own security and prosperity in their shined shoes, so too does Italian society find the image of its own disarray and poverty in the story of these beautifully paired boys. *Sciuscià* is an illumination of reality, a 'shining' of reality's 'shoes,' if you will, an exploration of the basic problems facing a defeated nation in the wake of war: for the ruled, how to survive amidst rampant poverty at the same time as one does not break the law; for the rulers, how to enforce the law without sacrificing one's own humanity or that of the lawbreakers. As with so many of his contemporaries, the con-

vulsive times awakened profound feelings in De Sica of which he may not previously have been aware; without question, he had travelled a huge aesthetic and emotional distance since the making of *Maddalena zero in condotta* only five years before.

Buoyed by the artistic success, if not by the commercial fiasco, of *Sciusià*, De Sica insisted next on making a film about the brutal effects of war on the street urchins of Naples. When the screenplay was half finished, however, the proposed producers refused to finance the picture on the grounds that it was too realistic for them. So De Sica turned to *Immatella Califano*, a story by Michele Prisco about the love between a young Neapolitan girl and a black American soldier. But this project was also rejected because of existing social taboos, although Alberto Lattuada managed to film a similar story in *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity*, 1947), which centred on a black GI who had fallen in love with a white prostitute and deserted the American army. It was Zavattini who found the spark that returned De Sica to directing after he had resumed his acting career in two commercial vehicles: the small-scale melodrama *Roma città libera* (*The Liberated City*, 1946; not to be confused with Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* of 1945) and the typically comic *Abbasso la ricchezza!* (*Down with Wealth!*, 1946).

The spark in question was Luigi Bartolini's minor novel *Ladri di biciclette* (1948). Zavattini thought that the book's central situation, if little else, would appeal to his colleague, and De Sica was indeed seized by it immediately, although very little from Bartolini's original narrative found its way to the screen in the end. This time, constructing the screenplay turned out to be an especially tempestuous process: Sergio Amidei, for one (who had contributed to the script for *Sciusià*), dropped out early because he found the story implausible. Surely, Amidei insisted, the protagonist's comrades, stalwart union members all, would have found him another bicycle after the first one was stolen. Fortunately for posterity, De Sica didn't agree (or care), and neither did Suso Cecchi D'Amico, the woman later responsible as a screenwriter for such notable pictures as Visconti's *Senso* (1954) and Monicelli's *I soliti ignoti* (*Big Deal on Madonna Street*, 1958). The final scenario, as minutely conceived as that for *Sciusià*, was a close collaboration among D'Amico, De Sica, and Zavattini, with assistance from Oreste Biancoli, Adolfo Franci, Gherardo Gherardi, and Gerardo Guerrieri.

Raising the money to produce *Ladri di biciclette* was a predictable struggle, considering *Sciusià*'s financial failure in Italy.

De Sica's French admirers declared that they would be thrilled to distribute the picture once it was completed, and Gabriel Pascal of England passed on the project altogether, while David O. Selznick proclaimed from Hollywood that he would finance *Ladri di biciclette* on the condition that Cary Grant be cast in the lead—De Sica suggested Henry Fonda or Barry Fitzgerald, but neither was considered 'box office' at the time. In the end, De Sica's customary threadbare budget was scraped together from three local producers—Ercole Graziadei, Sergio Bernardi, and Count Cigogna of Milan—and work could begin at last on the casting. For the central role of Ricci, De Sica chose Lamberto Maggiorani, a struggling factory worker from Breda who had brought his sons to Rome to audition for the part of the young Bruno. The role of Bruno went instead to Enzo Staiola, the eight-year-old son of a flower vendor, whom De Sica had noticed in a crowd gathered to watch the shooting of a street scene for *Ladri di biciclette*. And Bruno's mother was played by Lianella Carell, a journalist from a Rome newspaper who had come to interview the filmmaker. The three major parts, then, went to nonprofessionals, although De Sica did use a professional actor to dub the role of Ricci. Actually, the only performer to appear in the movie with previous acting experience was Gino Saltamerenda (Baiocco), who had played "Il panza" in *Sciuscià*.

Ladri di biciclette can only be fully appreciated after being placed in its socio-historical context: that of the traumatic, chaotic postwar years when a defeated Italy was occupied by Allied forces. In Rome after World War II unemployment is rife, and transportation is limited mainly to overcrowded trams. An unemployed workman, Ricci, gets a job as a bill-poster on the condition that he himself provide a bicycle for getting around the city; he therefore retrieves his own bicycle from a pawnshop by pledging his and his wife's bed sheets. But while he is pasting up a glamorous poster of an American pin-up girl during his first day of work, Ricci's bicycle is stolen: an utter disaster, for here we have a man who has thus been deprived of a rare chance to earn tomorrow's bread for his family.

He spends an entire day scouring the city with his little boy, Bruno, hunting for the thief, with the story working continually on two levels: the father's relationship to the world, described in his search for the stolen bicycle; and the son's relationship with his father—for the child, the only one of which he is aware. Indeed, De Sica developed the film's rhythm by a *pas de deux* of man and

boy in their scouting expedition through the city, the boy nervously anxious to keep in time with his father's mood and intention. The adjustments of temper and tempo, the resolution, the haste, anger, and embarrassment, the flanking movements, the frustrations and periodic losses of direction: these constituted a form of situational ballet that gave the picture its lyricism.



Ladri di biciclette. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

When at last Ricci finds the thief, however, he can prove nothing and is even attacked in the street by a gang of the man's supporters, intent on protecting one of their number. At that point, Ricci spots an unattended bicycle outside a house and tries to steal it (hence the use of the communal "ladri," or "thieves," in the Italian title, as opposed to the individualistic "bicycle thief" by which

the film became known in the English language). But he is immediately caught and shamed. In this climactic moment of frustration at committing an act that is fundamentally alien to him, the father commits another alien act by striking his son, who runs away from him. They are temporarily estranged, but nightfall finds the two of them reunited yet powerless—save for the loving bond that sustains them—against the bleak threat that tomorrow holds. At the end of the picture, the tracking camera simply halts and ambivalently observes both Riccis as they walk away into, or are swallowed up by, a Roman throng at dusk.

Ladri di biciclette established beyond any doubt Vittorio De Sica's international reputation as a major director. But once again, the movie received far greater acclaim in France, America, and England than it did in Italy. Like *Sciuscià*, it won a special Academy Award for best foreign film, as well as awards from the New York Film Critics, the British Film Academy, and the Belgian Film Festival. At home, however, *Ladri di biciclette* exacerbated the hostility that De Sica had aroused with *Sciuscià* for promulgating an unflattering view of his country—although, ironically, both films received Silver Ribbons there. Italian critics and politicians railed against the negative image of Italy that was being exposed to the world by neorealist filmmakers like De Sica. Works such as *Sciuscià*, *Ladri di biciclette*, and later *Umberto D.* were labelled in the press “stracci all'estero” (rags for abroad),⁹ the extreme antithesis of the ‘white telephone’ movies produced before the war.

Accordingly, the initial, indifferent reception of *Ladri di biciclette* upon its release in Italy at the end of 1948 was absolutely devastating to De Sica. The international enthusiasm for the picture did prompt its re-release in his native country, however—which at least was successful enough to allow the director to pay off the debts left over from *Sciuscià*. Italian audiences, it seems, were reluctant to respond without prompting to an indigenous neorealist cinema intent on exploring the postwar themes of unemployment, inadequate housing, and neglected children, in alternately open-ended and tragic dramatic structures populated by mundane nonprofessional actors instead of glamorous stars. (In fact, one reason for neorealism's ultimate decline was that its aes-

⁹In daily newspapers such as *Il Messaggero* (Rome) and *Il Corriere della sera* (Milan), and in weekly magazines like *Il Mondo* as well as monthlies like *Sipario*, from 1946 to 1952.

thetic principle of using nonprofessional actors conflicted with the economic interests of the various organizations of professional Italian actors.) It was the unexceptional, not the extraordinary, man in which neorealism was interested—above all in the socioeconomic interaction of that man with his environment, not the exploration of his psychological problems or complexities. And to pursue that interest neorealist cinema had to place him in his own straitened circumstances. Hence no famous monument or other tourist attraction shows that the action of *Ladri di biciclette* and *Sciuscià* takes place in Rome; moreover, instead of the city's ancient ruins, we get contemporary ones: drab, run-down city streets, ugly, dilapidated houses, and dusty, deserted embankments that look out on a sluggish, dirty Tiber.

Zavattini was one of the few who always felt that *Ladri di biciclette* fell somewhat short of perfection, despite its registering of a visually austere rather than a picturesquely lush Rome. The movie's pathos strayed a little too close to pulp fiction for his taste, with De Sica a touch too canny in making his audience cry—aided once again by the mood music of Alessandro Cicognini. Still, Zavattini viewed his work on this project as a present to his good friend and trusted colleague. And De Sica, for his part, felt an immediate urge to reciprocate by turning for their next film to a subject that his collaborator had long held dear. The idea of Zavattini's fable or fairy tale for children and adults alike had gone through many stages: his early story "Let's Give Everyone a Hobbyhorse" (1938), a treatment or outline in 1940 with the actor-director Totò in mind; a novel called *Totò il Buono* (*Totò the Good*) that was published in 1943; a working script titled *I poveri disturbano* (*The Poor Disturb*); and eventually the final screenplay of *Miracolo a Milano* in 1951, which Zavattini prepared in tandem with Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Mario Chiari, Adolfo Franci, and De Sica himself.

The film opens on a painting by Pieter Brueghel over which, as it comes to life, the words "Once upon a time" are superimposed, followed shortly afterward by the discovery by an old woman, Lolotta (played by Emma Gramatica), of a naked child in the cabbage patch of her garden. This is the orphan Totò, and we follow his adventures as he grows up, becoming, through his natural optimism and innocent ability to locate a glimmer of poetry in the harshest reality, a prop to everyone with whom he comes into contact. After his foster mother's death, Totò is living in a shantytown on the outskirts of Milan when oil is discovered on the squatters'

stretch of land. The rich, headed by the industrialist Mobbi, move in to exploit the situation, and the homeless people are forced to fight the police hired to evacuate them. Aided by a symbolic white dove that possesses the power to create miracles—the dove being a gift from the departed Lolotta, who is now her foster son’s guardian angel—Totò had endeavored to improve the earthly life of the poor, if only by making the elusive winter sun appear and beam down on them. But dove or no dove, the squatters are finally no match for the fat cats of this world; so Totò’s only recourse is to have his dispossessed charges snatch up the broomsticks of street cleaners and miraculously fly to a land “where there is only peace, love, and good.”

Miracolo a Milano is understandably regarded as one of the outstanding stylistic contradictions of the neorealist period: neorealist in action—the struggle to found, and maintain, a shantytown for the homeless—this movie undercuts that action at nearly every moment with unabashed clowning both in performance and cinematic technique (special effects abound). However, this blend of stark verism and comic fantasy, which featured a cast that mixed numerous nonprofessionals (culled from the streets of suburban Milan) with professional leads, was not in the end such a thematic departure from De Sica’s earlier neorealist films as it might at first seem: the familiar concern for the underprivileged was strongly there, as were the harsh social realities seen once again through the eyes of a child who grows up yet remains a boy full of wonder and faith; and a seriocomic tension may underlie all of *Miracolo a Milano*, but it can also be found in the ‘teamwork’ between both big daddy Ricci and little boy Bruno in *Ladri di biciclette* as well as between the old man and his small dog in *Umberto D.* As for the leftist criticism that the picture’s use of the fanciful, even the burlesque or farcical, increasingly overshadows its social commentary about the exploitation and disenfranchisement of the underclass in an industrialized nation, one can respond that there is in fact an element of despair or pessimism, of open-ended spiritual quandary, in the fairy-tale happy ending of *Miracolo a Milano*. For this finale implies that the poor-in-body but pure-in-soul have no choice but to soar to the skies and seek their heaven apart from the hopeless earth—which is to say only in their imaginations.

For his part, De Sica (unlike the staunchly leftist, even Communist, Zavattini) liked to downplay the satirical overtones of *Miracolo a Milano*, characteristically maintaining that he wanted to

bring to the screen, apart from any political considerations, a Christian or simply humanist sense of solidarity: i.e., the idea that all men should learn to be good to one another. Not everyone was content to see the movie in such simple terms, however. The Vatican condemned it for depicting the birth of a child from a cabbage, while some right-wing critics, assessing the angle of the squatters' flight at the end over the Cathedral of Milan—not to speak of the clash between the fedora-hatted rich and the grubby but kindly have-nots—figured that they were heading east, that is, towards Moscow. Predictably, from the left came the accusation, as we have already seen, that the excess of whimsy in *Miracolo a Milano* had sweetened the bitter pill of neorealism beyond recognition. Cinephiles from abroad turned out to be less ideologically prickly: *Miracolo a Milano* shared the 1951 Grand Prix at Cannes and also won the New York Film Critics' award for best foreign film of the year.

It's not surprising that *Miracolo a Milano* baffled so many when it was first screened, including those who thought they liked it, for the Italian cinema had never really produced anything remotely like it before. The sheer irrational magic of René Clair in combination with the irrepressibly bittersweet charm of Charlie Chaplin had, up to now, not found its equivalent among indigenous filmmakers. *Miracolo a Milano* consciously springs from the legacy of Clair and Chaplin, but transposes it to a forlorn urban landscape that could only be identified with Italian neorealism. Indeed, for all its look back at earlier film comedy, De Sica's ninth film actually points forward to a new brand of Italian moviemaking: with its grotesque processions of fancily as well as raggedly dressed extras against an almost abstract horizon, *Miracolo a Milano* is 'Fellinian' two or more years before Fellini became so. And for all its undeniable quaintness, the movie now seems more topical than ever with its warring choruses of real-estate speculators and its huddled masses longing to become selfish consumers themselves. Thus Zavattini's social conscience is linked to a sublime anarchy all its own, particularly once the squatters' village is graced by the heavenly dove that can grant any wish. By this means, a black man and a white girl may exchange races out of mutual love, but a tramp tries to satisfy his desire not only for millions of lire, but also for many more millions than anyone else. A glorious, richly meaningful anomaly in De Sica's directorial career, *Miracolo a Milano* remains more miraculous than ever, enhanced by both the con-

summate cinematography of G. R. Aldo (a.k.a. Aldo Graziati) and a melodious score by the canny Alessandro Cicognini.

By now the Zavattini-De Sica team had reached a peak of mutual understanding, whereby the director and his writer could carry their neorealist approach to its most concessionless expression: to insert into a film ninety minutes of a man's life in which nothing happened. This was Zavattini's avowed ambition, and he chose to fulfil it in a picture about the loneliness of old age: *Umberto D.*, which was dedicated to another Umberto, De Sica's father (though the content of the movie has little to do with his father's biography). De Sica endured considerable sacrifice to make *Umberto D.*, which as usual nobody wanted to finance; he supplied part of the budget himself, while turning down an offer from Rizzoli to direct Giovannino Guareschi's 1948 novel *Il piccolo mondo di Don Camillo* (*The Little World of Don Camillo*, filmed in 1952 by Julien Duvivier), which would have earned him a small fortune. In the title role, De Sica cast another of his inspired non-professionals, this time a celebrated philologist from the University of Florence, Carlo Battisti, whom he had encountered walking along a Roman street on his way to a lecture (after searching in vain for an actor in homes for the aged and organizations for the retired). And for the first time on a De Sica film, Zavattini wrote the script all by himself. *Umberto D.* would turn out to be the director's favourite among his works, as well as the film that many critics consider to be his finest.

The titular character of *Umberto D.* is a retired government clerk, whose struggle against loneliness, destitution, and humiliation is the movie's subject. This isolated old man, subsisting on his meagre pension, is seen shuffling around his shabby room—where an entire reel is devoted to his preparations for bed. The only other human character of importance is the housemaid, Maria, illiterate and pregnant out of wedlock but for a while the companion of Umberto in his misery. She is observed preparing for yet another eventless day, in detail similar to that found in the scene where the elderly pensioner gets ready to go to sleep. The minutiae of drab, everyday lives are penetratingly depicted, and they exert a powerful fascination. And then there is the old man's closest companion—his dog named Flick, in reality the only steady companion this pensioner can find. Although the film's tone is decidedly more austere than that of *Ladri di biciclette*—partly because De Sica and Zavattini shifted their attention here from the poor who are young to the poor who are old—there are many parallels to be drawn in

the portrayal of the central friendship: Ricci loses and then refinds his son, Bruno, even as Umberto loses his dog but eventually discovers it in the pound, destined for the gas chamber; Ricci hits his son and as a result is temporarily estranged from him, while Umberto loses his dog's trust when, having failed to find it a better home, he contemplates their double suicide under a passing train rather than have them resort to a life of beggary.

All the incidents of *Umberto D.* are seamlessly woven into a beautifully observed texture of simple, indeed marginal existence, which nonetheless is never guilty of a calculated, sentimental onslaught on the senses. Umberto, after all, is not an immediately lovable or charming old cuss; and the servant girl is almost shameless in her lack of regret over, or aspiration for, her life. Moreover, De Sica and Zavattini eliminate any moment of false drama, of false climax, that the conveniences or contrivances of fiction might have tempted them to impose on their subject. It was Zavattini's intention, especially, to find dramatic relevance in 'undramatic' detail—in things, facts, and people so delicately registered as to be imperceptible save to that second awareness evoked from most spectators without their being able to define it. The moment when Umberto has taken a taxi to the animal shelter to search for his dog is an excellent example of this. He has no change with which to pay the driver and therefore must ask some stallholders in the market outside the pound to break his bill; but they refuse and he has to buy a tumbler he doesn't want in order to get the requisite coins. Umberto then tosses the tumbler into the gutter and pays the taxi driver. This is a trivial but agonizing interruption, and the filmmakers were right to emphasize or dramatize it, for in trying to find his dog, Umberto is doing something on which his whole life appears to depend.

So rehearsed, the film may easily be construed as an artless and unbuttered slice of life, a testimony to 'naturalism': ostensibly a method of expressing reality without inhibition, without overtones, and as far as possible without style. Nothing could be further from the case, however. Like *Sciuscià* or *Ladri di biciclette*, and with justification even more subtle, De Sica's *Umberto D.*—a masterpiece of compassion—might be termed *super-naturalism* if this compound had not been pre-empted for another kind of experience entirely. Indeed, De Sica's balance between the lifelike and the cinematic is tenuous; if he had actors less responsive to the naked untheatricality he is commonly after, his muted formalism

might suffer from the risks he takes. But he can afford to dwell at length on the faces and motions of Umberto D. and Maria precisely because Carlo Battisti and Maria Pia Casilio are sentimentally, gravely, *inside* life.

Maria, while subordinate to Umberto D., is by an inspired implication complementary: she is neglected youth; he, discarded old age. The girl has her involuntary burden-to-be; the man, his voluntarily assumed burden, Flick. Girl and man are further subservient to the loud concerns of society, as exemplified by the middle-aged landlady, who is handsome in a brassy way, venal, pseudo-respectable, and heartless—living in a world of opera and ormolù, broken-down technology and broken promises. In *Sciusià* the horse was a symbol, if you like, of the unattainable, a dream of freedom and empowerment. The bicycle in *Ladri di biciclette* was an occupational necessity that became a projection of man's self-respect. Flick, neither ideal necessity nor economic one, may be felt to represent the last thing a man will surrender: his love for a fellow living creature.

After the release of *Umberto D.* in January 1952, Giulio Andreotti, State Undersecretary and head of the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo (a powerful position that had direct influence on government grants as well as censorship, and that led ultimately to the right-wing Andreotti's own corruption, exposure, and disgrace), published an open letter in *Libertas* (a Christian-Democrat weekly) bitterly deploring the neorealist trend in the Italian cinema and its negative image of the country—a letter that was quickly reprinted in other journals. Andreotti took direct aim at De Sica, who was castigated for exhibiting a subversively “pessimistic vision” and exhorted to be more “constructively optimistic.”¹⁰ (De Sica later stated that if he had to do *Umberto D.* again, he would change nothing except to remove the ‘uplifting’ final shots of children playing—ironically, precisely the kind of ‘positive’ conclusion Andreotti seemed to be calling for.) It was this atmosphere of interventionist government criticism that hampered the exportation of neorealist films during the 1950s; indeed, the ‘Andreotti Law’ of 1949 had established wide government control over the financing and cen-

¹⁰Giulio Andreotti, “Piaghe sociale e necessità de redenzione,” *Libertas* 7 (Feb. 1952). Excerpted, in English translation, in Gavin Lambert, “Italian Notes: The Signs of a Predicament,” *Sight and Sound* 24.3 (Jan.–March 1955): 147–66.

sorship of films, including a right to ban the export of any Italian movie that Andreotti himself judged “might give an erroneous view of the true nature of our country.” In November 1955 the “Manifesto of Italian Cinema” was published in response to Andreotti’s *Libertas* letter by the French journal *Positif*¹¹—a manifesto that spoke out against movie censorship and was signed by the leaders of Italian neorealism, with the names of De Sica and Zavattini prominent among the signatures. By this time, however, postwar neorealism was rapidly waning as the burning social and political causes that had stimulated the movement were to some extent alleviated or glossed over by increasing prosperity. In a society becoming ever more economically as well as politically conservative, nobody wanted to throw away his capital on yet another tale of hardship and heartbreak on the side streets of Rome.

To be sure, neither De Sica nor Zavattini harboured any illusions that a film as intimate and melancholy as *Umberto D.* would be universally admired; still, the complete indifference to its release on the part of the Italian public, together with the howls of contempt from the cultural bureaucrats, left them dumbstruck and furious. Although De Sica managed to get *Umberto D.* screened out of competition at Cannes in 1952, the Italian government did its best to keep the picture a secret on foreign shores: at a prestigious London showcase of new Italian cinema inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth, for example, *Umberto D.* was conspicuous by its absence. Andreotti and other Italian officials to the contrary, however, what’s really subversive about *Umberto D.* has nothing to do with politics, at least not in the literal sense of the word. The insuperable tragedy of the film’s elderly hero lies not in his material poverty, grave though it is, but rather in his spiritual poverty, in the utter silence that defines his solitary days and nights. *Umberto D.* tells of a hunger of the soul far more devastating, in the end, than any deprivations of the body, for they at least kill relatively quickly. And for all the specificity of its Roman setting, this story could take place virtually anywhere, in any time period.

As in the case of *Miracolo a Milano* vis-à-vis Fellini, De Sica exerted a profound influence on the next generation of filmmakers

¹¹Umberto Barbaro, Luigi Chiarini, Cesare Zavattini, Vittorio De Sica, et al., “Manifeste du cinéma italien,” *Positif* 14–15 (Nov. 1955): 169–72. Excerpted, in English translation, in George Huaco, *The Sociology of Film Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1965) 198–99.

with his unembellished portrait of modern-day alienation; without the example of *Umberto D.*, later portraits of alienation such as Antonioni's *La notte* (*The Night*, 1960) and Bergman's *Tystnaden* (*The Silence*, 1963) seem almost inconceivable. De Sica's astringent detachment, his strict avoidance of sentimentalism, is another sign of things to come in the cinema: throughout he nobly resists the temptation to turn this slightly rigid, forbidding old man into a grizzled darling for the ages. (Even De Sica, however, is powerless before Signor Umberto's little spotted dog as his master agonizingly teaches him the tricks of the begging trade.) Yet, despite the fact that De Sica's own active career lasted another two decades, this was his last indisputable masterpiece, which may make the most poignant aspect of *Umberto D.* the discreet little professional drama beginning to unfold off-screen. Moreover, it was the complete commercial failure of this movie—despite winning an award from the New York Film Critics upon its release in America in 1955—that sounded the first death knell for the content and style of neorealist cinema, even if the dauntless De Sica would attempt to return to the aims and means of neorealism for the last time with *Il tetto* (*The Roof*, 1956).

After *Umberto D.*, De Sica was off to Hollywood for his first American visit and meetings at the major film studios. There had been faint nibblings from the States as far back as the mid-1930s, in particular a 1936 screen test shot in Rome after Fox bought the remake rights to *Darò un milione*. Now, however, it was no longer De Sica the actor who intrigued Hollywood—in fact, very few movies in which he appeared had been seen in the United States—but rather the neorealist master, whom Howard Hughes was apparently ready to back in this Italian director's first English-language picture. De Sica was installed in a luxurious hotel in Bel Air, where, deprived of his habitual contact with the life of the streets, he fretted and waited in vain for three months for a summons to meet the mysterious and elusive Hughes. Eventually, David Selznick offered him something concrete—an Italo-American love story to star his wife, Jennifer Jones, and to be shot entirely in Rome in English. An original story by Zavattini was decided upon, dealing with the parlous nature of divorce in Italy; and the English dialogue was provided by Truman Capote, who had just written Jones's previous project, the funny satire *Beat the Devil* (not released until 1954). The result was *Stazione Termini* (*Terminal Station*), or *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953).

Like so many hybrid co-productions of the day, *Stazione Termini* was a bizarre, ill-fated marriage of contrasting elements—a kind of Italian-American *Brief Encounter* (to which 1954 film it was unfavourably compared), with an American woman obliged to return to her husband and child in the States and her Italian lover desperate to keep her in Italy. The entire ninety-minute drama of separation was set inside and just outside Rome's magnificent central railway station, Stazione Termini, but the plight of the principal characters (Jennifer Jones as the respectably wed tourist, costumed and be-tipped by Christian Dior, and an uneasy Montgomery Clift as her Roman boyfriend) failed to merge with the interspersed cameos pulled from the swirling life around them. De Sica even got to use two first-class, if divergent cinematographers on this picture—G. R. Aldo, who had shot *Miracolo a Milano* and *Umberto D.*, for post-neorealist grit, and the Briton Oswald Morris, drafted by Selznick to make sure that Jennifer Jones wasn't transformed into something out of *Roma, città aperta*. The director himself was attracted by the prospect of working with such American stars after all the Maggioranis and Battistis of his previous films—so much so that he recklessly invested some of his own money in *Stazione Termini*.

Shooting *Stazione Termini* proved to be one of the most memorably trying ordeals of De Sica's career as, for sixty-five nights in a row, he directed his American actors in approximate English, and in freezing temperatures as well, from midnight to dawn. For Jones and Clift in particular, this was a tough regime far from the studio comforts and sensible hours of home, one made even more difficult because of the language difficulties between them and the Italian production crew. And although its creator always retained a certain affection for this movie, at the time *Stazione Termini* hardly seemed worth all the trouble it took to make. Predictably, in Europe it was contemptuously dismissed as a sellout to Hoolywood glamour and cash. Dubious of its box-office fortunes, Jennifer Jones's presence notwithstanding, Selznick cut almost one-third (or half an hour) of 'atmosphere' out of the picture, including a festive marriage scene featuring Maria Pia Casilio, who had given such an effective performance as the servant girl in *Umberto D.* It was also the producer who saddled the movie with the unwieldy title *Indiscretion of an American Wife*, and who attached a ten-minute musical sequence (shot in Hollywood by James Wong Howe) as the picture's opening. De Sica's version of *Stazione Termini* was never

seen in the United States, while *Indiscretion of an American Wife* was unanimously panned upon its release in New York in June 1954. Still, there were no hard feelings between Selznick the fading mogul and De Sica his foreign genius, who had managed to forge a warm personal relationship. A few years later, Selznick's swansong, *A Farewell to Arms*, contained a substantial part for his erstwhile director.

De Sica lost his entire investment on *Stazione Termini*, but providentially there was still his career in front of the camera. During the previous years, the offers for De Sica the actor had dwindled somewhat in his transition from leading man to unabashed character actor. With his robust cameo in Alessandro Blasetti's 1952 anthology film *Altri tempi (Times Gone By)*, however, De Sica's star was once more in the ascendant. In this picture he played Naples' most histrionic lawyer, who wins a triumphant acquittal for his curvacious client (Gina Lollobrigida) accused of killing her husband. Shortly thereafter, De Sica acted in French for the first time, as the suave Italian diplomat Baron Fabrizio Donati in Max Ophüls' exquisite *Madame de ... (The Earrings of Madame de, 1953)*. Then came his genuine consecration as a newly popular movie star in Luigi Comencini's 1953 movie *Pane, amore e fantasia (Bread, Love, and Dreams)*, a frolicsome comic pastoral with Lollobrigida playing opposite De Sica as a courtly carabinieri officer of a certain age. Confected on a budget worthy of its title, *Pane, amore e fantasia* was the sleeper smash of its day—so much so that De Sica was subsequently involved in three consecutive sequels.

With the Italian intelligentsia, it was another story. Many found it tragic that one of the founders of neorealism would thus put another nail in the movement's coffin. Playing lovable rogues and starchy bourgeois, De Sica lent his name to an unbelievable number of movies over the next few years. Some were pleasantly sardonic comedies (like Blasetti's *Amore e chiacchiere [Love and Nonsense, 1957]* and Zampa's *Il vigile [The Traffic Cop, 1960]*, with De Sica playing opposite the irrepressibly comic star Alberto Sordi in the latter picture); there were a few stillborn white elephants conceived in Hollywood and entombed abroad (with Marlene Dietrich for *The Monte Carlo Story [1958]* and Ava Gardner in *The Angel Wore Red [1960]*); and still others were simply stupefying: several local equivalents of beach-party movies, plus a farce in togas called *Mia figlio Nerone (My Son Nero, 1956)* featuring what has to be the

weirdest cast ever assembled (De Sica, Sordi, Gloria Swanson, and Brigitte Bardot).

It seemed that De Sica would accept virtually any acting job that was thrown at him, and he was abjectly frank as to why. For by the middle of the 1950s he was absolutely desperate for money; quite apart from the debts on his commercially failed films, together with his heavy personal or familial liabilities, he had long since turned into a hopelessly compulsive gambler who routinely dropped several thousand dollars at a time at the gaming tables. This malady shadowed De Sica for the rest of his life, though it occasionally had its darkly comic side—as in *The Monte Carlo Story*, which was shot on location in Monaco. Still, there remained a few compensations for the director during this period. One of these was the chance to pay tribute to his quasi-native city of Naples, as well as to return to his origins after his American debacle, with his own anthology film of the sort that was so prevalent on Italian screens during the 1950s.

Based on the bittersweet Neapolitan short stories of Giuseppe Marotta, shot on location, and seeded with an all-star cast of professionals to insure some box-office success, *L'oro di Napoli* was flavourful entertainment without undue compromise—though the picture's examination of social mores was no doubt light or superficial compared with the thematic investigations found in *Sciuscià*, *Ladri di biciclette*, and *Umberto D.* There were pungent vignettes for Totò and Naples' beloved actor-playwright, Eduardo De Filippo, plus an effectively sentimental episode featuring Silvana Mangano as a former kept woman lured into a loveless marriage under pretense. De Sica even reserved a tongue-in-cheek yarn for himself, which intimates claimed was the closest thing to autobiography he ever committed to celluloid; in it he played an inveterate gambler challenged by a savvy street kid of eight years to new heights of folly—believing himself lucky even after squandering his family's fortune. The final episode of *L'oro di Napoli*, depicting a religious procession for a dead child, was deleted, and the remaining five episodes have seldom been shown in their entirety. Under the title *Every Day's a Holiday*, the film was released in Britain with only three episodes, whereas in the United States it contained four sketches: those featuring, in turn, Totò, Mangano, De Sica, and a twenty-year-old Sophia Loren. The movie nonetheless enjoyed a considerable box-office success, although the fa-

mous Italian critic Guido Aristarco believed that both the writer Marotta (adapted here by Zavattini) and the director De Sica were guilty of perpetuating Neapolitan stereotypes, of lives lived out in a ferment of sunlight and high spirits.

The most memorable sketch—and perhaps the one most responsible for the movie's financial return—turned out to be the one about an adulterous pizza vendor, played by an irresistibly voluptuous Loren. Until then, she had been displayed as an object of epidermal wonder and nothing else in a string of rather sleazy movies. In *L'oro di Napoli*, however, De Sica revealed something unexpectedly delightful about Loren—an explosive *joie de vivre*, let us call it. And from that point on, she was on her way to major stardom instead of remaining a mere pinup in motion. Loren also began acting with De Sica as well, with the latter usually playing her father, surrogate or otherwise, or else a dubiously hopeful elder suitor. Some of these teamings, particularly in such otherwise unimportant pictures as Dino Risi's *Il segno di Venere* (*The Sign of Venus*, 1955) and Alessandro Blasetti's *Peccato che sia una canaglia* (*Too Bad She's Bad*, 1954), remain among the more likeable from De Sica's endless array of film-acting jobs during this period.

Two years after *L'oro di Napoli*, with *Il tetto*, De Sica attempted to recapture the full flavour of postwar neo-realism not only by shooting on location in Rome, but also by using a (photogenic) nonprofessional cast and treating the socially significant theme of inadequate or insufficient housing versus the primal human need for shelter. He chose for his leading characters Gabriella Pallotta, a seventeen-year-old salesgirl from a children's clothing store in the capital, and Giorgio Listuzzi, a former soccer player from Trieste. In *Il tetto*—regarded by many as the last strictly neorealist film—they appear as impoverished newlyweds who, to escape from the two-room apartment they share with a swarm of relatives, decide to take advantage of a loophole in the city housing code by building their own shanty on a patch of wasteland: if it goes up in a day and the roof holds, the land is theirs and the Roman police are powerless either to evict them or to demolish their makeshift dwelling. Based on a true story, the script was written by Zavattini, and, like *Miracolo a Milano*, *Il tetto* takes root from his belief in the solidarity as well as the essential goodness of humble people—a theme that De Sica is careful to flesh out with a wealth of behavioural detail placed amidst the austere beauty of Carlo Montuori's black-and-white cinematography.

Il tetto earned a respectful reception just about everywhere it was shown, but what pleasantly surprised De Sica was its reasonable success at the Italian box office. The picture's faint note of optimism managed for once to silence the Andreottis of the right, though its sympathies were obvious. *Il tetto* even boasted something like a happy ending for a change, reflecting the changing economic times and the rising expectations of the movie audience. Moreover, there *are* memorable sequences in the film, as genuinely compassionate and moving as any in De Sica's earlier works: for example, the scene in which the couple have to share a bedroom with the husband's parents and young sister. Still, although neatly executed, *Il tetto* couldn't help but have a faint air of *déjà vu* clinging to it, in addition to featuring a husband and wife whose plight lacks a consistent intensity. As Arlene Croce pointed out from the United States, in spite of its honourable intentions, the script's "descent from poetry to journalism proves almost fatal; [De Sica] is unable to lift the level of *Il tetto* above that of a human-interest editorial [The] human beings are never seen in their uniqueness, only in their generality."¹² Writing after the film's first showing at the Cannes Festival, Lindsay Anderson, for his part, felt that De Sica and Zavattini had "reached a point in their works in which they are exploiting rather than exploring the effects of poverty."¹³

After *Il tetto*, De Sica resumed his acting career in such previously mentioned films as *Amore e chiacchiere*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Il Generale della Rovere*. Then, to open the new decade, he followed his performance in Rossellini's movie of the Italian occupation and resistance with a war picture of his own: *La ciociara* (*Two Women*, 1960), based on Alberto Moravia's novel (1957) and filmed in De Sica's birthplace of Sora. The story tells of a resilient, middle-aged woman who tries to protect her young daughter from the dangers of wartime Rome by returning to the hills of her native Ciociara—a plan that tragically backfires when the girl is gang-raped by marauding Moroccan troops. The mother's role was originally intended for Anna Magnani, with Sophia Loren as her daughter, in an English-language script to be co-produced by Carlo Ponti

¹²Arlene Croce, "Il tetto," *Film Quarterly* 13.2 (Winter 1959): 49–50.

¹³See Lindsay Anderson, "Panorama at Cannes," *Sight and Sound* 26.1 (Summer 1956): 16–21.

(Loren's off-screen consort) and Paramount and directed by George Cukor, who had worked with both actresses in Hollywood. But Magnani adamantly refused this casting, touchy as she had become about the increasing eminence of her prospective co-star and the palpable decline of her own career. So De Sica took over and the roles were adapted to allow a deglamorized Loren to play the mother, with a much younger daughter acted by Eleonora Brown. Under De Sica's sensitive direction, the tirelessly hardworking Loren rose superbly to the dramatic challenge (as fellow Neapolitans and previous collaborators they had an exceptionally strong rapport) and won an Oscar for her performance—the first one ever awarded for a role in a foreign-language film, and the true sign of her international consecration. However, apart from Loren's compelling interpretation and certain scenes of undeniable emotional impact, *La ciociara* was more marketably vivid melodrama than a complete return to form for its director, whose sober tactfulness in his best previous work was not on display here.

During the 1960s, De Sica's filmmaking witnessed a number of starts and stops as he entered his most commercial period (one that was interspersed with numerous, trilingual guest cameos and some less-than-exceptional lead acting roles). He had contracted to make a number of movies with Hollywood financing, and he had also begun a series of co-national productions, most of them Italo-French collaborations—conceived when, in 1968, he became a citizen of France to secure a divorce from Giuditta Rissone that would enable him to marry his longtime companion and the mother of his sons, Maria Mercader. To many commentators, this was a time of increasing artistic decline, marked by slick derivativeness, for De Sica, while others saw it as an unsuccessful attempt on his part to adapt to social, political, and cultural change. Still others looked upon De Sica's films during this period as an expression of his ability to work in a variety of styles, mixed with remnants of neorealism's thematic concerns. In comparison to his pictures of the immediate postwar era, however, none was quite impressive enough: not the commercially viable offerings and certainly not the financial failures and near-failures.

Il giudizio universale, for example—a project that De Sica had worked on for four years but interrupted to make *La ciociara*—was a satirical fable with an international cast about the behaviour of people upon the announcement of the Last Judgement, and then their reactions to its postponement. Shot in CinemaScope as

well as partly in colour (De Sica's first use of this medium), *Il giudizio universale* aimed at transposing the fantastic spirit of *Miracolo a Milano* to Naples but woefully misfired, in addition to never being released in the United States. "The Raffle" episode in a four-part film, *Boccaccio '70* (1962)—the other three directed, respectively, by Fellini, Visconti, and Monicelli—did little more than provide Sophia Loren with a bravura role as the proprietress of a country-fair shooting gallery who wriggles her way out of a lottery in return for her favours. This was followed by a ponderous adaptation (written by Abby Mann) of Jean-Paul Sartre's play *I sequestrati di Altona* (*The Condemned of Altona*, 1962), about the Nazi past of Hamburg ship barons, with the incongruous cast of Fredric March, Maximilian Schell, Robert Wagner, and a less-than-Teutonic Loren. For all its highflown ambition to depict postwar guilt and regeneration, this was international movie packaging at its most lifeless, and in which it is almost impossible to detect the hand of De Sica.

By contrast, the 1963 satire *Il Boom*—referring not to the atomic bomb but to the materialist excess of Italy's economic revival—was somewhat underestimated at the time as just another excuse for the star Alberto Sordi to replay his familiar, acidic sketch of the archetypal Italian loser. The script featured Zavattini in fine sardonic form, however, after the debacle of *Il giudizio universale*, as he once again lampooned real-estate speculation in particular and Italian greed in general with this tale of a bankrupt building contractor tempted to sell one of his eyes to pay off all his debts. Moreover, De Sica's vision of the sterile if prosperous urban landscape, as interpreted by the cinematographer Armando Nannuzzi, was his most visually bracing achievement in some time. In the same year, he revitalized his professional fortunes, if not his artistic credibility, with the anthology film *Ieri, oggi, domani* (*Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 1963), which featured Sophia Loren alongside her favourite co-star, Marcello Mastroianni. Zavattini here concocted three episodes set respectively in the widely differing cities of Naples, Milan, and Rome, thereby permitting Loren comically to scamper up and down the social scale from black-marketeer to bourgeois matron to kept woman, in addition to traversing the geographic one from south to central to northern Italy. Surprisingly, this commercially successful trifle earned its director his third Oscar for Best Foreign Film.

The trio of De Sica, Loren, and Mastroianni then quickly reassembled for something more substantial under the shrewd title

Matrimonio all'Italiana (*Marriage Italian Style*, 1964), adapted by Eduardo De Filippo from his classic Neapolitan comedy-with-tears called *Filumena Marturano* (1946). Here Loren triumphantly got to dispense both defiance and pathos while ageing disgracefully as the mother of three illegitimate sons who manipulates her ex-lover Mastroianni into adopting the entire brood rather than just the one he spawned. Within Italy at least, diehard De Filippo fans resented the substitution of Loren gloss (for which she received the Best Actress award in Moscow, of all places) for the grit of the original play, whose leading female role was played first onstage and then in a modest screen version by De Filippo's sister Titina. Nonetheless, for millions of Loren fans worldwide, *Matrimonio all'Italiana* was a bountiful banquet in which she, her co-star, and her director ebulliently evoked the raffish yet warm Neapolitan spirit that was so much a part of them all. This movie, like *Ieri, oggi, domani* before it, found an appreciative international audience despite what some critics found to be its brash salaciousness, and can be considered a small crest in the wave of De Sica's career.

Not even his most dogged admirers could say as much for a trio of Hollywood hybrids conceived for profit in foreign markets and unsuccessful even at that endeavour. The opulent *Woman Times Seven* (*Sept fois femmes / Sette volte donna*, 1967), filmed in Paris, vainly attempted to glorify Shirley MacLaine in the manner of a De Sica-Loren anthology by surrounding her with a disparate assortment of leading men and affording her the chance to romp through seven roles. The boisterous Peter Sellers-vehicle *Caccia alla volpe* had some farcical moments, but De Sica and his screenwriter here, Neil Simon, made for an ill-fated odd couple in the end. Unintentionally funnier, and arguably the nadir of De Sica's movie-making career, was *Amanti* (*A Place for Lovers*, 1968), in which Faye Dunaway found love in an Italian villa with Marcello Mastroianni at the same time as her hollow cheekbones bespoke a fatal illness too glamorous for words. Amidst all this frantic if fruitless activity, De Sica managed at least to find a measure of domestic harmony in late middle-age. It was at this time, with his daughter grown and married, and his sons Manuel and Christian well into their teens, that he moved to France and settled down with his wife-to-be, the steadfast Maria Mercader. (Manuel, the elder of their sons, composed the music for some of his father's films.)

De Sica's first French-language movie, *Un monde nouveau* (*A New World / Un mondo nuovo*, 1966), had been a bit more ambi-

tious than the three star-packaged deals to follow it. Updating the themes of his neo-realistic period, the director's concern here was to examine the social values of the generation that came of age in the sixties. But this story of a young unmarried couple, pursuing separate careers and coping with an unwanted pregnancy, emerged as curiously old-fashioned, as an 'old man's' vision of youth that was out of touch with the times. With its obtrusive camera movements combined with socially relevant material, *Un monde nouveau* was generally regarded as a failed attempt to measure up to the fresh approach of the New Wave of French filmmakers. At least this picture had the virtue of modesty, something that cannot be said for the movie that followed, *I girasoli* (*Sunflower*, 1970). One of the first big Western-produced films to be shot in the former Soviet Union, specifically Moscow, this turned out to be another Ponti package in search of a valid reason to exist. *I girasoli* followed putative war widow Sophia Loren to the erstwhile Eastern front, where she finds her amnesiac mate Marcello Mastroianni in the arms of a second spouse. A Russo-Italian soap opera realized with a lot of money to move large audiences, this picture did not attract an audience, and it seemed as if directorial rot had irretrievably set in for Vittorio De Sica.

Just as it appeared that his filmmaking career might conclude on this dispiriting note, however, something remarkable took place. For in the final years of his life, De Sica rediscovered his creative energy with a pair of compelling movies. Undeniably a far more conventional brand of filmmaking than his postwar masterpieces, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* nevertheless found De Sica at the autumnal peak of his powers as a humanist storyteller. Adapted from Giorgio Bassani's basically autobiographical novel (but, for once, not by Zavattini, from whom De Sica became temporarily estranged after *I girasoli*), shot mainly on location in Ferrara, and set in the years just before and during World War II, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* is a melancholy evocation of Ferrara's Jewish aristocracy doomed by the onslaught of Fascism. Locked in their false Eden—the garden is almost never sullied even by the eyes of strangers—the children of the Finzi-Contini family indulge in their amorous intrigues, almost wantonly unaware of the threat mounting outside to their decorous, fastidious way of life, which is ultimately to be shattered brutally by the family's arrest prior to deportation. With its depiction of the fate of Italian Jews under the Fascists, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* thus returned De Sica to one of his

neorealist themes: the effect of war or its aftermath on innocent people.

The director's sure guidance of his actors was once more in evidence in this picture, with Dominique Sanda particularly effective as the aristocratic girl whose relationship with the son of a middle-class Jewish family is spoiled by her jealously incestuous feelings for her brother. The movie proved to be De Sica's first big international success in years, winning him his fourth and last Oscar for best foreign-language film, as well as the first prize at the Berlin Festival. The subsequent *Lo chiameremo Andrea* (*We'll Call Him Andrew*, 1972) seemed somewhat anticlimactic by contrast, despite its up-to-date allusions to industrial pollution and infertility, together with a likeable star team: Nino Manfredi and Mariangela Melato, who play schoolteachers whose marriage is seriocomically threatened by their inability to have a child.

De Sica's next picture, however, showed him and Zavattini (with whom he had reunited to make *Lo chiameremo Andrea*) touchingly harking back to their neorealist concern for the plight of the poor. Confronting the theme of illness-and-mortality, *Una breve vacanza* told the story of a Milanese factory worker diagnosed with tuberculosis, whose stay in a sanatorium provides the woman with a short, relatively pleasant respite from the difficulties that mark her life—among them a terrible job, despicable in-laws, and a callous husband. Although vaguely reminiscent of the ignoble *Amanti* in subject outline, *Una breve vacanza* is an emotionally satisfying work of great skill and conviction that reinstitutes the tragicomic tension to be found in the immediate postwar pictures, and that features a knowing performance by Florinda Bolkan in the leading role of the consumptive worker-wife.

Sadly, the heretofore indomitable De Sica soon had his own health to worry about. In August of 1973, while preparing *Il viaggio* (*The Voyage*, 1974) for production—a picture adapted from a Pirandello novella and again featuring a heroine in the throes of a fatal malady—the director was diagnosed with lung cancer. Determined to complete *Il viaggio* at any cost, De Sica spent several grueling months shooting this, his last film, on location in Sicily, Naples, Venice, and Milan—with an understandably distracted Sophia Loren and a zombie-like Richard Burton in the throes of his own personal problems. Starting in a Sicilian village in the early 1900s, the narrative spanned the years up to the declaration of World War I in 1914. Adriana (Loren), a young woman of the upper

middle class, is constrained to marry a son from an aristocratic family (out of deference to his dying father's last wishes), even though she is in love with his brother (Burton). When the husband suddenly dies, the brother takes charge of the now ailing Adriana and her son, thereby offending Sicilian sensibilities regarding widowhood. He also becomes her lover, and the journey of the title is one undertaken by the couple to Naples and eventually Venice, where Adriana, stricken with an incurable heart disease, dies. (Her climactic death was filmed in the Hotel Milan in the very room where Giuseppe Verdi had died in 1901.)

A lavishly decorated and photographed costume drama on the twin themes of love and death, *Il viaggio* seemed anachronistic to many critics and was not a success. Loren had no real part to play in the picture, and Burton was ill-suited to his role as a Sicilian brother-cum-lover, whether aristocratic or not. *Il viaggio* had its Italian première in March 1974, around which time De Sica also made his last screen appearance in a gallant cameo as himself at the height of his neorealist glory, in Ettore Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amati* (*We All Loved Each Other So Much*, 1974). *Il viaggio* had its French première in Paris on 13 November 1974—the same day on which, and the same city where, Vittorio De Sica died of cancer at the age of seventy-three.

A tall and handsome man with an infectious smile and the elegant manners of an aristocrat, De Sica was always a romantic figure—indeed, the proverbial Latin lover. A devoted father as well, he delighted in playing the piano, singing Neapolitan songs, and telling Neapolitan jokes. Moreover, he was an avid reader and a serious collector of art (the work of Renoir, Modigliani, and Utrillo, for example) in addition to being a compulsive gambler. In short Vittorio De Sica had a lust for life that expressed itself in many forms. Working behind the camera and on the screen in a career of unique breadth, he left much that will endure, including a handful of the greatest moving pictures any director has ever made.

"To explain De Sica," André Bazin believed, "we must go back to the source of his art, namely his tenderness, his love. The quality shared in common by [his best films] is De Sica's inexhaustible affection for his characters. This tenderness is of a special kind and for this reason does not easily lend itself to any moral, religious, or political generalization 'I am like a painter standing before a field, who asks himself which blade of grass he should begin with.' De Sica is the ideal director for a declaration of faith

such as this. To paint every blade of grass one must be the Douanier Rousseau. In the world of cinema one must have the love of a De Sica for all creation itself.¹⁴ This seems like a more sentimental statement than it is. What Bazin means, I think, is that no subject or character becomes truly important or remarkable until awakened by art. And, for this reason, De Sica's love isn't greater than art; his art *is* the love.

¹⁴André Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scène," *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971) 2: 69, 75–76.