

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in De Sica's Films

SOCIETY

Introduction Arguably the most prominent theme in De Sica's work is that of social inequality. As a neo-realist, he was keen to depict the living reality of Italy in the aftermath of its defeat in World War II. Mostly he chose the lives of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy—the dispossessed (*Miracle in Milan*) and the homeless (*Shoeshine*). But he also told stories working-class people (*Bicycle Thieves*, *The Roof*) and even that of an upper middle-class civil servant (*Umberto D*). Their lives are described with precision, especially financial details. Social institutions and authority figures are often shown to be indifferent and incompetent, but De Sica rarely condemns them outright. That ire is reserved for greedy individuals.

Miracle in Milan This film exposes the social injustice and economic inequality in the midst of the economic boom from which Milan prospered after the war. That boom was the real-life 'miracle of Milan,' which De Sica so cleverly subverted with this depiction of an army of poor and hopeless people. They are allowed to occupy the barren land on the outskirts of the prosperous city because it is worthless. There are no social services, no schemes to alleviate their poverty, no attempt to help this lowest strata of the population. Their only joy is to huddle in the sunshine, when it breaks through the cold, grey sky, and warm themselves. With that single scene, at the beginning of the film, De Sica condemns the society that tolerates such inequality. The gap between the 'tramps' and the wealthy is also displayed when Toto and his friends go into the shiny offices of Mr Mobbi, the landowner. Here is affluence on a grand, even arrogant, scale. The supplicants from the shantytown stand to attention and gratefully receive tea and cakes, while Mobbi smiles at them indulgently.

Bicycle Thieves The story in this classic and much-loved film is not about a theft or about a bicycle. It is about a man who needs a bicycle because he needs a job. Post-war Italy had recovered its industrial output, especially in the private sector, but hordes of men remained unemployed. This is where the film begins, with a group of jobless men gathering on the steps of a government office to find out if they have secured employment. Antonio is lucky, but he and his family tetter on the edge of poverty caused by long-term unemployment. The fragile state of his family finances is exposed when his wife has to pawn their bed linen in order to repossess his bicycle. All around him, we see poverty, people just getting by, some of them by crime. This is especially evident in the scene in the flea markets, where people scarp a living by selling old and broken items, which resemble the people themselves. The welfare state had not yet emerged, so there was no social safety net to save these people. No institutions to alleviate their suffering, none except the pawn shop, clairvoyants and, of course, the church. It is to the church that the poor and unemployed come for a free haircut and meal. Among them is the thief's accomplice, an old man dressed in worn clothes, with a face that speaks of suffering. He joins with the other homeless men in the church in repeating a prayer: 'We, your poor souls, yearn for sanctity. We embrace the trials of our lives and tread the path of sorrow.' Antonio is not like them. He has a family and a flat and wears decent clothes. But the line between them is thin. And, at the end of the film, when he has become a thief and has no prospects, we wonder if he might soon join the desperate men in the church.

Shoeshine This, the first of De Sica's neo-realist films, exposes the factors that contributed to a large cohort of street children, particularly in Rome. Immediately after the opening scene showing the boys' love of a horse, the film takes us into the reality of street life for the shoeshine boys. When Giuseppe's mother needs more money, Giuseppe says money has lost its value, a reference to the inflation of the time. Having to make money, both for the horse and themselves, the boys get entangled in crime and end up in prison. The prison is overcrowded and infected with lice; the food is poor; and the guards are corrupt. The boys are held for months, while the wheels of justice grind on, and they do not receive adequate medical care. It is not that the prison system is evil or cruel—the boys are taught rudimentary maths, allowed to exercise and entertained with movies. Instead, it is indifference and lack of compassion that destroys the boys. IN one scene, the prison director dismisses the unhygienic cell

conditions by saying that the boys 'are always complaining.' He then reviews the case of a boy who committed armed robbery because his father is still a POW in Germany and he has younger siblings to feed. 'No doubt, he'll start complaining, too,' the director says. The legal system is similarly indifferent. The judge wants to know if the boys had a written document to cover potential disputes concerning the 'ownership' of the horse. Pasquale is dumbfounded by this legalistic questioning, an example of how society is unable to understand the lives of the shoeshine boys. That gap is then highlighted visually when a group of the street children enter the enormous building that houses the courtroom. They stand and gape at the huge statues and high walls that surround them. Measured by those monumental, cold marble surfaces, their lives are negligible. Then the scruffy gang of kids forces its way to the door of the court itself, where the justice system is determining the fate of the two boys. The lawyer hired by Giuseppe's family says some impressive things but ultimately blames Pasquale for the crime. Pasquale's court-appointed lawyer can't be bothered to argue a case and says he will rely on the mercy of the court. When the sentences are announced, a little girl, who is a friend of the boys, denounces the court. 'Bastards! Villains!' she cries. If her verdict is extreme, it only reflects the anger the society's indifference has bred in the street children.

Umberto D As with De Sica's other great films, the central theme here is money and indifference. Whereas the earlier films focused on the destitute, the joblessness and the homeless, *Umberto D* tells the story of a retired middle-class man whose pension is not enough to cover his rent. The problem of a stingy government is compounded by a greedy landlady. The film opens with a demonstration of retirees, including Umberto, demanding an increase in their meagre monthly allowance. Then, in the first five minutes, we get the financial details of his problem. He owes money to his landlady. 'With only a 20% increase, I could clear my debts,' he says to a fellow retiree. His pension is 18,000 per month, of which 10,000 goes on rent for his single room. And now the landlady is putting up the rent. Having said all this, he tries in vain to sell a watch to his companion. Later, he does get 3,000 for the watch and then another 2,000 for some books. But his landlady is adamant that she wants the entire 15,000 that he owes her. Otherwise, he'll be evicted. These numbers tell the story. Umberto is up against a wall. He simply cannot get enough money to avoid eviction and he is too proud to live on the street. There is only one solution.