

Ricci (in Vittorio de Sica, *The Bicycle Thief*) determined

Overview In the tough streets of his working man's area of Rome, shortly after WW 2, Ricci is one many unemployed. Looking desperately for work, he is finally offered a job putting up posters on city streets—a job he desperately wants, and for which he needs a bicycle. His wife instantly pawns her wedding bed-sheets, a large chunk of her diary, so that the family can get Ricci's own bicycle out of hock. On the first day of work Ricci's bike is stolen, and this harrowing film, which in 1950 won an Honorary Academy Award, and which has been thought one of the ten best films in history, tracks Ricci's determined search through the streets of Rome for his bicycle and his living.

Character Ricci is a family man above all, determined to provide for his wife and two small children, one of whom, Bruno, a constant reminder of this obligation, follows him through the streets of Rome in search of the lost bicycle. His quest is driven by his insecurity—jobs are scarce and job-seekers are swarming the streets—and by his inner fantasies of the life he and his family could lead, if a new income source were available to them. He is ultimately driven to steal a bike by his desperation, and by the set backs in all his personal searches for his lost possession, and yet we feel, at the end when Ricci is walking through the streets with his son, that his determination has helped him hold onto his human dignity, while making no inroads on his insecurity.

Parallels Steve Martin, in *The Father of the Bride* (1991) is everything Ricci is not—upper middle class, optimistic, first world—except for the matter of insecurity, which is a strong link between the two guys. Steve is losing his daughter to a marriage which is costing him an arm and a leg, and which seems to be cutting him away from all that defines him, and yet, like Ricci, he has a certain dignity of perspective, which sustains his unusual quality of sympathetic loser. Interesting how 'pathetic' and 'comic' characters converge in this matter! Tom Hanks, in *Forrest Gump* (1994), plays a low IQ underachiever, a loser by nature, who draws our attention and friendship through his propensity for stunts, for being at the right place to witness history, and for charm. A 'pathetic,' not a 'comic' character, but a loser who finally wins us over, as Ricci, stumbling along the streets with little Bruno, at the end of the film wins our hearts as well as our sympathy.

Illustrative moments

Determination Ricci's emotional-insecure temper is put to a sharp test early in the film. We know that he has everything at stake in succeeding with his new poster-pasting job; thus when he sees, from the ladder he is climbing, a guy stealing his bike, and riding away, he is horrified. He half-senses the immensity of the loss involved, and hurtles down into the street to chase the thief. He is still in the first moment of dealing with the implications of the event, and he rushes like a madman through traffic and crowds. Everything in him is determined to recover this essential vehicle.

Hope Ricci's determination leads him to cling to the only suggestion offered him, for recovering his bicycle; it is the suggestion of a friend that they should go, the next morning, to the bicycle parts market, where the stolen bike will likely have ended up. Ricci, his son Bruno, and the helpful friend spend the morning combing the bike parts in the market, but in the end give up. Ricci's hope, however, has been revived, and he starts looking everywhere, in the streets and down alleyways, for any sign of his bicycle or its thief. His faithful, half-understanding son follows at his side, exhausted. We are left breathless, watching for any trace of discovery.

Discovery At last Ricci sees the thief, ahead on the street. There is a wild chase in which Ricci finally catches up with the guy, who has escaped into a whore house, then been thrown out, and is then physically grabbed by Ricci. Ricci recovers from his fury, forces the guy to take him to his home, and then—the bicycle of course having been carefully hidden away—threatens to take him to the police. This second attempt, of the insecure Ricci, to invoke police assistance fails, and Ricci gives in, convinced that without witnesses, to the initial theft, he will never be able to sustain charges against the thief.

Downfall Ricci escapes from the angry partisans of the thief, who form a gang in the guy's tough corner of the *quartier*, and makes it back into the streets, his totally confused little son at his side. Ricci is beside himself, his life crumbling, when he sees an unattended bike leaning against a wall. On an impulse he jumps on it, and starts away, but at just that moment the owner comes down his stairs, and observes the theft. He sets up a hue and cry, crowds gather, and Ricci is thrown off the bike and beaten. He is about to be taken to the police when the bike's owner, taking pity on the rider's little boy, decides not to press charges. The beaten Ricci and his son walk away through the streets of Rome.

Discussion questions

The Bicycle Thief is considered a masterpiece of 'Italian neorealism.' How does 'neorealism,' taken from this example, seem to differ from the more poetic *auteur* style of Fellini or Bergman?

The events of *The Bicycle Thief* all occur on a single day—including the morning robbery, the long scene in the church, lunch, and Ricci's own bicycle theft. How does this compaction of events underline the emotional/insecure condition of Ricci?

How does the Director, De Sica, view the events of *The Bicycle Thief*? Is he emotively on the side of Ricci? Or does he strive for a neutral, 'godlike' perception of the whole story?