

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## MIRACLE IN MILAN (Miracolo a Milano) 1951

Vittorio De Sica

**OVERVIEW** Set in a post-war shantytown, yet beginning with the words 'once upon a time', *Miracle in Milan* could be described as a neo-realist fairy tale. De Sica is reported as saying that the film shows how ordinary people manage to eek out a life in dire conditions; in fact, those who are destitute, he said, gain more pleasure from simple pleasures than others do. The story addresses social issues but with a light touch, employing fantasy and magic, all of which suit its upbeat message that hope and camaraderie can defeat corporate greed. The film was adapted from a novel (*Toto il Buono, Toto, the Good*) by Cesare Zavattini, who also wrote the screenplay and worked with De Sica on three other films, though none of them contain the element of fantasy. *Miracle in Milan* won a slew of prizes, including Grand Prize at Cannes and Best Foreign Language Film at the New York Film Critics Circle,

**SYNOPSIS** Toto is an orphan raised by a kindly old lady. When he emerges from an orphanage, after the lady's death, he is given shelter in a shack in a shantytown. Toto then transforms the miserable lives of its inhabitants, until oil is discovered and the land is bought by a greedy industrialist, Mr Mobbi. Backed by the police and army, Mobbi fights a battle to evict the desperate residents, who are saved when Toto is given a magic white dove by the ghost of the lady who raised him. More problems and comedy intervene before the shantytown is cleared. But, at the end, Toto and his sweetheart ride off into the sky above Milan Cathedral, leading the other residents to a place where people are 'honest and kind'.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Lolotta	The old woman who adopts Toto.
Toto	The young man at the heart of the story.
Rappi	A member of the shantytown who betrays it.
Mobbi	The landowner
Edvige	Toto's sweetheart.

### STORY

*Baby in the garden* The film opens with a serene shot of a flowing river, with the words 'Once upon a time' shown on screen. As the camera widens, out we see that this is a canal, probably polluted, on the outskirts of Milan. An old lady comes out of her cottage and goes to water her cabbage patch, where she finds a new-born child.

*An old lady dies* Years pass and the baby is a young boy, named Toto. The old lady, Lolotta, clearly dotes on him and shares with him a child-like playfulness. One day, as she lies ill in bed, two dour doctors arrive and take her pulse, and in the next scene, Toto follows a hearse as it travels through the grimy and rainy streets.

*Toto as a young man* We see Toto being taken into an orphanage and, the next movement, leaving it as a young man. He walks about town, saying hello to everyone and helping others, even when he isn't needed. He gets a taste of reality when, while applauding rich opera-goers, someone steals his valise, with all his meagre possessions. When he catches up with the thief, he is stricken with compassion for the desperate old fellow and lets him keep the valise.

*Shantytown* With no place to sleep in the middle of a cold winter, he accepts a bed in the old man's shelter in a shantytown. In the morning, the homeless residents of the shantytown cram together and warm themselves in a shaft of sunlight that breaks through the clouds. They scramble for a bottle that is thrown by a rich man from a passing train.

*Toto the helper* Toto looks after an orphaned girl and makes himself useful to everyone, improving their makeshift structures, helping the children to acquire rudimentary math skills and fostering

harmony between the desperate residents. Soon, he becomes the de facto mayor of the shantytown, welcoming new arrivals and assigning them to the appropriate shack. One family includes a maid, named Edvige, who becomes Toto's girlfriend.

*Mr Mobbi* A group of businessmen arrive in limousines and argue over the purchase price for the land. Mr Mobbi buys the land and makes an effort to please the squatters, whom he would like to remove but can't.

*Oil discovered* Led by Toto and Edvige, the squatters parade around their shantytown signing songs that celebrate their poverty. The parade ends at a makeshift fair ground decorated with balloons, lottery prizes and fortune-telling. When a hole is dug to erect a maypole, the squatters strike oil, which makes everyone happy. Through Rabi, a traitor in the shantytown, Mr Mobbi hears about the oil and tries to evict the people with the help of the police and various officials. Toto prevents a riot by getting the officials to agree to a meeting with Mr Mobbi. Toto heads a delegation of squatters to Mobbi's palatial office, where the wealthy businessman serves them tea and cakes.

*Eviction* But when they return, the people are being forced out of the shantytown. Toto rallies them, drives the police away and the people reoccupy the barren ground. Then, a full platoon of soldiers marches toward the shantytown and the people put up barricades. Mr Mobbi arrives and tosses a smoke bomb at the barricades, while the army fires on the crowd, forcing the people to disperse. Toto climbs to the top of the maypole and waves a white handkerchief in surrender.

*White dove* While high up in the air, the ghost of Lolotta sails through the clouds and gives him a magic white dove. Back on the ground and clutching the bird, all his wishes come true. He says two fried eggs and they miraculously appear in a frying pan. Now, Toto tells everyone to blow, and the smoke is blown from the shantytown and toward the soldiers, who retreat. Next, the soldiers attempt to drive them out using water, but umbrellas appear everywhere.

*Victory* As a last resort, the army officer gives them ten seconds to surrender, and when they refuse, he draws his sword and opens his mouth to order his men forward. But he sings an operatic song, instead. The same happens to everyone else who tries to issue an order. Finally, the traitor Rappi loses his top hat and runs away in shame.

*Wishes granted* Using the magic dove, Toto grants everyone their wishes—a fur coat, a sewing machine, a new sofa. Soon, they become greedy and request millions and millions of lira. The only black man in the camp gets his wish and becomes white, but his girl friend then becomes black. The women of the shantytown walk around discussing whether ocelot or mink is the best fur coat. The old men wear fancy dress and carry a cane. A chipped old statue comes to life as a scantily clad beautiful woman and the men lust after her.

*Magic lost* Edvige bows to Toto as if he's a saint, but he says he's still just Toto. 'Would you like the moon?' he asks. She hesitates and says she wants shoes, instead. A second later, she's wearing a fancy black pump on one foot. Unseen, two sprites take back the dove and Toto's magic vanishes but they kiss and dance around happily.

*Happy ending* The army returns, and this time the people are evicted and put into police wagons. Edvige, accompanied by the ghostly Lolotta, gives Toto an ordinary white dove and all the police wagons fall open, allowing the people to escape. Grabbing a broom from street sweepers, everyone flies away 'toward a kingdom where good morning really means good morning.'

## THEMES

1. *Family* One of the key themes of this delightful early film is the definition of family. Toto, the hero, is found in a cabbage patch (a similar idea to the stork who brings babies) and has no biological family. But no mother could love him more than Lolotta, the old woman who raises him. When she dies, Toto is taken into an orphanage, an institution of the state, and when he emerges as a young man, he has no one. Then the first miracle happens: he makes friends with an old man, who takes him into his shack in the shantytown. From that moment onward, Toto creates his family by helping others and ends up with an enormous extended family. The same could be said for most of the other occupants of the shantytown. Many are single, only a few have a proper family, but they all derive support from the community at large. This assortment of the dispossessed rabble form a family that is more cohesive than most biological groups.

2. *Society* The deeper objective of the film is to expose the social injustice and economic inequality in the midst of the economic boom from which Milan prospered after the war. That 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.

3. *Greed* The driving force behind the drama of the film is the greed of the wealthy business class of Milan. First, we see them arrive on location and haggle over the price of the land occupied by the shantytown. The whole scene is acted out as a farce, with enormous black limousines, men in fur coats and top hats, and an impossibly large map that is unfurled before Mr Mobbi, the buyer. Then they begin to haggle over the price. Millions of lira are thrown around like party confetti in a parody of how affluent men behave. One says 12 million, the other 25, and they continue to bark out numbers until they are speaking nonsense, only grunting like aggressive apes. Mobbi gets his land and tolerates the occupants until his lust for money is aroused by the discovery of oil. Now, the people, whom he had condescendingly treated like fellow humans, are scum who must be removed. But the villainous Mobbi is not the only one afflicted by greed. De Sica is wise enough to show that the 'tramps' are neither saints nor socialists. Many of them set up booths to make money during the fair, and when the magic dove grants wishes, their desire for money matches that of the businessmen.

4. *Compassion* Counterbalancing the pernicious effects of greed is the healing property of compassion. It all begins with the action of the old woman who scoops up the abandoned baby and takes it into her house. Her love is then transfused into the child, Toto, who is a shining beacon of sympathy to everyone he meets. We see this quality in the scene when Toto leaves the orphanage and encounters the man who steals his valise. Toto realises the man's destitution and offers to let him have the valise, and the man, seeing that Toto has no place to sleep, invites him to lie down in his shack. Once inside the shantytown, Toto shows empathy to many of the occupants and improves their lot. Touched by his compassion, the others then follow suit and become generous towards their fellow shantytown residents. The film ends by saying that the evicted residents, flying on broomsticks above a cathedral, are going to a place 'where good morning really means good morning.' This harks back to the early scene when Toto, just out of the orphanage, greets everyone on the street with 'good morning' only to hear insincere replies or worse. This is the essence of the film—the simple instinct to treat others with kindness is the greatest thing on earth.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Toto** Toto is the star of the story. An orphan raised by an old lady, he is cheerfully optimistic and unfailingly compassionate toward everyone, especially his fellow residents of the shantytown. In addition, the ever-smiling Toto can be practical in taking steps to improve the lives of the people in his community. He never once falters in the struggle against the landowner and the police, even winning them over with his kindness.

**Empathetic** From the moment we see him walk out of the orphanage, Toto shows empathy toward everyone who crosses his path, even the poor old man who steals his valise. But the most memorable illustration occurs once he's in the camp. Walking down between rows of shacks, he helps a short man hammer a nail into a window frame. When the man says he'd love to be taller, Toto says he himself is really not very tall. 'We're both small, and life is beautiful for us, too,' he says. Then he crouches down to the man's height and walks away in that position in order to make him feel better. When another man complains of rheumatism, Toto fakes pain in his back, and when he meets a man with a twisted face, he screws up his own features in imitation. The sequence ends when he stops a man from lying down in front of a train and teaches him to cheer himself up by just singing, 'La, la, la la!' Toto's method is to imitate everyone and eliminate any visible differences as part of a programme of social solidarity. But solidarity requires empathy, which he has in abundance.

**Practical** Toto possesses more than just good intentions. Soon after arriving at the shantytown, he becomes a sort of community leader and encourages everyone to improve their shacks and plant

gardens. His major innovation, though, is to name every street with a multiplication exercise. For example, 'Six-times-six street'. This way, he gets people, including the illiterate children, to at least gain a basic skill in mathematics. More than just having a good idea, he is thorough in implementing it. At various points in the film, we see him hammering up another street sign ('Three-times-four street'). Toto has imbibed practical skills from his adoptive mother, Lolotta, who is long dead, but her legacy lives on in him.

*Happy* 'Happy' is insufficient as a description of Toto's character, but it is the single most accurate word for that task. Nowhere is his joy more transcendent than in a scene that occurs in the middle of the eviction battle. It is night. Toto has granted wishes to dozens of people. Toto asks Edvige, his sweetheart, what she wants, and she says shoes. She gets one, but not two, because he has lost the magic dove. He is then kissed by the statue-become-woman, making Edvige jealous. They make up and kiss for the first time. Now, with faces glowing, they run out into the night and swing on poles. They slide down and Toto says, 'Would you like the sun?' She hesitates but says yes. And they stand side by side and watch a glorious sunrise. Toto's happiness is compounded now by the happiness of the girl he loves.

*Rappi* Rappi stalks the shantytown like an evil spirit, clad in black with a perpetual scowl. As a selfish person, he is the odd man out, the one who doesn't fit into the communal spirit of the slum. He is always alone, disgruntled and disaffected. His true nature is exposed when he seizes the opportunity to make some money by telling Mr Mobbi about the oil discovered in the shantytown. He betrays his fellow residents.

*Uncooperative* Rappi is exposed many times as the rotten apple in the barrel, but a good example occurs during the fair. One of the (less kind) ladies sets up chairs from which to view the sunset and charges 1 lira for each seat. She is doing a good business when the scowling Rappi shows up, dressed like a gentleman except that his hat and coat are ragged and dirty. He has brought his own chair, which he places in front, and refuses to pay the ticket price. 'The seat's mine so I'm not paying,' he says defiantly. She won't have it and he leaves in a huff, taking his battered chair with him. Nothing could illustrate his singularity more than this scene in which he refuses to act like the others and tries to avoid paying for a ticket. Selfish and uncooperative, he is the exact opposite of Toto.

*Traitor* Rappi goes from bad to worse when the oil is discovered. While the others are celebrating their unexpected source of communal wealth, Rappi gets an idea. Collecting a sample of the 'black gold' in a used tin, he skulks off to Mobbi's office. The camera closes in on his scheming face as he walks out of the shantytown, in the opposite direction of everyone else who is streaming into the centre to join in the party. That shot tells the whole story. Rappi goes against the communal grain of the shantytown. We don't see him actually visit Mobbi, but we know he has because he has taken out Mobbi's card with his address on it. And, if more proof were necessary, Mobbi's cronies soon show up with their eviction notice.

*Mr. Mobbi* Mr Mobbi is an older, wealthy businessman, who buys the land occupied by the shantytown. He is a money-obsessed opportunist and also a hypocrite, who parrots nice phrases about human solidarity, while later cruelly evicting the poor residents from their shacks. He is smug and two-faced, but at least we get to laugh at his pompous talk and comical behaviour.

*Hard-hearted* Mr Mobbi is a businessman who drives a hard bargain, as illustrated by his initial appearance in the film. We watch as a line of sleek, black cars draw up and a man in a top hat and heavy fur coat emerges. This is Mr Mobbi, who strides up onto a small rise, where he is joined by another man, the one selling the land. Mobbi makes an offer, which is rejected, and then proceeds to up his offer incrementally, little by little, until the bargain is completed. Although the scene is shot through with satire, Mr Mobbi is not laughing. From start to finish, he wears a severe expression.

*Hypocritical* If Mr Mobbi were simply a greedy capitalist, he might be a little less loathsome. After all, the people in the shantytown also dream of becoming rich and enjoying the pleasures of wealth. No, what condemns Mobbi is not his desire for money but his hypocrisy. When Mobbi first appears, in the scene where he buys the property, he tolerates the tramps because he doesn't know how to evict them and, more important, he doesn't yet know there is oil underground. When Toto invites Mobbi to warm his hands from an outdoor fire, the overdressed businessman accepts and launches into a pompous speech about how 'we are all the same. My nose might be a little smaller or a little larger than yours, but it's still a nose.' One of the residents asks what he means, and he is unable to answer because he doesn't believe his own words. But he rambles on, with more nice-sounding phrases

about brotherhood and unity. His words resemble Toto's heartfelt empathy with others, but they are revealed as empty rhetoric when oil is discovered. Later, his hypocrisy is revealed when he invites Toto and his friends to his huge office and offers them tea. Grateful, Toto says, 'A nose is a nose,' reminding the powerful man of his commitment to equality. Mobbi nods, but at that moment we hear the ranks of police marching in the street below, on their way to destroy the shantytown. He says one thing and does another.



(Toto and Edvige fly off at the end)



(Edvige and Toto)



(Edvige)



(Mr Mobbi, left, views the rabble at the shantytown)