

## COMMUNISM AND THE IRONIC VALUE OF PROPERTY IN ITALIAN NEO-REALIST CINEMA

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WHILE POST-WAR ITALIAN Neo-Realist filmmakers are known for their leftist sympathies, in the wake of their experiences with Fascism, there are some surprises lurking beneath the surface. Whether in Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* or Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema*, the ownership of private property as the means of production and prosperity is clear.

This paper will explore in depth the issues raised in *La Terra Trema* ("The Earth Trembles," 1948). Director Visconti, raised in an aristocratic life of privilege, sets out to give an exposé of the poor working conditions of Sicilian fisherman. But, in a turn of ideology, one family mortgages their meager house and buys their own boat to get out from under the oppressive capitalists, and voila, they become owners themselves. Of course, they are crushed by the system and mocked, never to be hired again once their boat smashes up in a storm. Nevertheless, just as the father in *Bicycle Thieves* had to have his own transportation in order to hold down a job, so here the possession of a tool of commerce is the key to self-sufficiency and upward mobility.

The films of this cinematic movement are considered to have begun with Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*, in 1945, shortly after the Liberation, and are known for a sparse style of shooting on actual locations, with mostly nonprofessional players, and emphasizing themes of basic human problems and issues. They are gritty and realistic, often unsentimental. Their stories vary from the tale of an underground Resistance priest in *Rome, Open City*, to that of a lonely pensioner and his dog in *Umberto D* (1952). There is usually a

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poignant, if not bitter, implicit critique of the “system,” with communism waiting in the wings as the likely panacea.

The political commitments of the Neo-Realist movement are bimodal, with both Communist and Catholic filmmakers contributing to the corpus. Both were anti-Fascist, and eventually opposed each other once the struggle had ended. In *Rome, Open City*, the Germans try to divide the Resistance by arguing to the priest that the Communists are the sworn enemies of the church. But he retorts that all men who fight for justice and liberty walk in the paths of the Lord.

And while generally leftist in their orientation, the Neo-Realist films do not make an easy distinction between poor and rich, as if that meant good and bad. In his 1952 film, *The Machine to Kill Bad People*, Rossellini develops the idea that the camera, and we, cannot really separate good from evil, or reality from appearance. Even wealthy people are not all reprehensible, nor the poor all virtuous. In *Miracle in Milan* (1951), De Sica’s shantytown dwellers desire only to acquire wealth themselves, as they discover oil on their land.

First let us examine that classic of Italian Neo-Realism, *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948).<sup>1</sup> In *Bicycle Thieves*, a man, Antonio, is desperately seeking work. Finally at the daily choosing of laborers he is offered employment pasting movie posters around Rome. There is one hitch: he must have a swift and reliable means of transportation, a bicycle. His wife, Maria, pawns her dowry bedsheets for money in order to get his bike out of hock. They smile broadly at the prospect of a steady source of income, as he picks up his battered old *Fides*<sup>2</sup> bicycle. And a hint of trouble to come may be seen in the huge piles of linens pawned by countless others whose hopes have been dashed before.

Rome at this time has a thriving black market, and Antonio’s bike is stolen on his very first day on the job, as he helplessly watches while up on a ladder with his glue pot and brush. Not only are constituted authorities such as the police indifferent to his pleas and complaints, but so is the communist cell whose meeting he interrupts in his pursuit of justice.

The church is largely absent as well. Only the nuclear family provides the support and refuge one needs. Antonio and his son, Bruno,

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<sup>1</sup>Note that the English title, *The Bicycle Thief*, does not properly translate the Italian plural, *thieves*, which accurately observes that there are at least two thieves in the film, not just the father.

<sup>2</sup>The brand name of the bicycle is perhaps an ironic jab at religion and the church.

trail the thief's accomplice into a church service, where the congregation is reciting rotely, "We embrace the trials of our lives." The man had gone there in order to get the free soup offered afterwards. They cause a commotion, and the priest throws all three of them out, smacking Bruno on the head.

Taking a break from their search for the bicycle, Antonio and little Bruno have some pizza and try to be optimistic. "There's a cure for everything, except death," says the father. Bruno eyes a rich kid living it up at another table, and the possibility of class envy is present. Antonio gets a pen and paper and starts to figure out what he could earn if only he had his bike, the employer's family allowance, plus overtime. Clearly the ownership of private property is the key to the production of wealth here.

"Your mother and her prayers can't help us," he tells Bruno, but perhaps the saints can. So off he goes to the Santora, a fortune-telling woman who earlier predicted that he would get a job. Indeed he finds the thief after this pilgrimage, but a crowd gathers around him, and the thief's mother shows Antonio her crude little one-room house. The local policeman says to him, "Look, his neighbors will testify for him, and you have no proof, no witnesses. The bike was long ago sold for parts." Spirits broken, the father and son wander off.

The huge bicycle parking lot at a soccer game is envied, and finally Antonio grabs a bike leaning against a doorway, after first making sure Bruno isn't looking. In short order the father is nabbed and humiliated in front of his son, although mercifully, charges are not pressed. The chagrined father walks off, and Bruno, having no other place to turn, takes his tearful father's hand.

What could have been an opportunity to promote collectivism as a solution falls flat in *Bicycle Thieves*, as the state, the Mafia-controlled black market, the church, and the police one by one fail us. The comparison of the underground communist cell with a vaudeville troupe rehearsing nearby suggests that both are jokes. Crowds and masses of people are always threatening to Antonio, never helpful. "Hardly the proper iconography for a work depicting proletarian solidarity or class consciousness" (Bondanella 2001).

*La famiglia* is still the core institution upon which we can rely. The philosophical views of some Neo-Realists, especially as articulated by Andre Bazin and Roberto Rossellini, were along the lines of Christian personalism, and so, despite the tenor of the times and the lure of communist utopia, De Sica does not allow his protagonist to find solace there. There is no resolution to *Bicycle Thieves* other than family ties, the one factor that remains in Italian society.

The responsibility of families, and of adults as role models for their children, was earlier explored in De Sica's 1946 film, *Shoeshine*. The world should be a safe and happy place for children, but they are out on the streets, involved in criminal theft. At their trial, the boys' defense attorney argues that we adults are to blame. "In pursuing our passion, we have abandoned our children to themselves, alone."

*Shoeshine* also exhibits the ironic value of property as the means of production. The boys must have shoeshine boxes and other equipment in order to make their livelihood.

The necessity of ownership is explored in *The Mill on the Po*, Alberto Lattuada's 1949 Neo-Realist film. Here, however, the filmmaker suggests that private ownership is selfish and antisocial, and the small mill's owner is portrayed as callous toward the local peasants who are trying to thwart the introduction of modern wheat production machinery by land barons. The mill's proprietor rejects both "peasant solidarity" and the big land owners. In the end such individualism leads to tragedy and suicide, when the owner chooses to torch the mill rather than pay taxes on it or see it impounded.

Such reliance on capital equipment is the underlying, if unintended, theme of Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema*, to which we now turn.

The film's opening titles and voiceover, in part done by Visconti himself, say that the picture is "starring Sicilian fishermen." No actors are used. We will witness the "same age-old story of man's exploitation of man." Also, the people "speak in their dialect, to express their suffering and hope," as Italian is not spoken by the poor of Sicily.

The beauty of the film's cinematography belies the "realist" moniker of the movement. Orson Welles quipped that in Visconti's work he had never seen such artistic compositions of poverty. Neo-Realist films were "a conscious artifact," as one critic put it, and De Sica himself wrote of the careful planning and the poetry of the aesthetics in his films. His nonprofessional actors were painstakingly cast, and crowd scenes were virtually choreographed.

The very first shot after the titles is a beautifully composed line of sails at dawn, each boat with its lantern lights, all framed between two triangular-shaped rocks in the harbor of Acitrezza, a village near the larger city of Catania. A full catch of four days at sea is coming in. The significance of the boats is underscored, as the men call aloud toward the shore of their success, as church bells peal.

The fishermen are tired and anxious to sell the fish, as the narrator sympathizes, "for whatever pittance they'll get from the

wholesalers and boat owners." They will then rush home to their families and the women who wait for them. The fishermen must pay all their expenses, mend the nets, repair the boats, and pay the day laborers' wages, "while the wholesalers enrich themselves without effort." We see a wide shot of dozens of men on the rocky beach, mending the nets spread out before them.

A young man, 'Ntoni Valastro, complains of the low price they get, and suggests they sell the fish in Catania themselves, thereby cutting out the middleman. The problem, he opines, is the lack of collective action. Under the current system, "it's each man for himself." The wholesalers, who are organized, carry on with their standard ruse. "This is the worst mackerel I've seen in years. I'll be lucky if I can sell it to the canneries in Catania."

There is shouting and arguing, accompanied by plenty of hand gestures as we learn of the inexorable laws of supply and demand. "That's the most I can give you. City ladies don't like octopus." The narrator tells us that they return home with not even enough to keep them from starving, even though their nets were full. All they can afford is some wine, bread, and salted herring. The thought of not earning enough to support their families poisons with anguish even their few hours of rest.

'Ntoni continues to rage about the injustice once he gets home. He got these radical ideas from being in the military on the mainland. They divide 7,500 lire 15 ways for the extended family living in their house. Grandfather tells 'Ntoni that it's been like this for seventy years—don't rock the boat.

Soon it is back to sea again. "Slavery without escape," the subtitle informs us, as they trudge out again with their nets over their shoulders. They go out at night and shine lamps into the water to attract fish at a place where they are known to be plentiful. "We'll catch God's bounty tonight!" one exclaims. All night long the nets go up and down, loaded with silvery fish.

Our narrator remarks, maybe the older men are resigned to being exploited, but the younger ones like 'Ntoni think, Why not cut out the wholesalers, do it yourself with some friends, and *set your own price?*

As the catch is brought in for sale, they think, Yes, God gave us this bit of sea by Trezza, and the boats to rent, but He didn't give us the connivers who take advantage of the fishermen. So the younger men try to negotiate the selling this time, but the wholesalers are engaged in price fixing, and none will pay one lire more.

Disgusted, 'Ntoni grabs some weighing scales and throws them into the water. Other fishermen follow his lead, and a brawl breaks

out. The police are called. He and his comrades are arrested and taken to jail in Catania. This action harms both the fishermen's families in the village and the wholesalers, who are now losing half their income with all the best fishermen arrested. The leading wholesaler, Raimondo, decides it's in their best interests to drop the charges. Economic thinking in action!

The townspeople in Acitrezza give the rebel fishermen a hero's welcome when they return from jail. 'Ntoni realizes the wholesalers need them. So far, so good.

Grandfather warns the youth against change. After all, their father worked hard and never complained. Yeah, and what did it get him?, says younger brother, Cola. He died at sea, still never protesting. "We're just beasts of burden. We need to *get our own boats*, our own fish, and the women can salt them."

But where to get the money for a boat, this essential item of property which they must own? Mortgage the house. 'Ntoni explains the rationale to all his friends. The wholesalers *risk* nothing. The fishermen are risking their rented boats, their gear, their lives. Now they must risk mortgaging the house so they can own their own boat and enjoy all the rewards of the catch they bring in. He predicts other fishermen will follow once they set the example and prosper.

The whole family, uncle, baby, the women, grandpa, all get dressed up to take the bus to Catania to mortgage the house for cash. "Our only hope for the future." But none of the others from the village follow suit, "for the poor never imagine that anything can change," says the morose narrator, and "the worst is always yet to come."

But first we have an optimistic, entrepreneurial interlude, as 'Ntoni is back with his money and on top of the world, hoping for a real future as a boat owner, dare we say a capitalist. He can even think of marrying his girlfriend now. "No more working for others." Now "all the money we earn is ours. . . . With God's will and hard work, now we'll get ahead."

His new song is, "I'm happy, because I work for myself!" A neighbor lady mocks his euphoria and yells that life is like a staircase, some go up and some go down. Don't be arrogant. He sits and laughs.

The Valastro's boat goes out to sea, all smiling. "Now we control our own destiny." They catch a boatload of anchovies the first night, an unprecedented quantity. The narrator acknowledges, "Providence has smiled on 'Ntoni in the dark."

Their first expense now is salt. Sister Mara buys it and loads 300 kilos on a cart, pushed with the help of local children. Her burden is analogous to the exorbitant price they must pay for the salt under a

state monopoly. There is no choice but to buy it, for the fish must be preserved if they are to sell anchovies in the winter in Catania, keeping their income up through the cold season.

The political commentary here is not to be missed. Visconti strongly implies that socialism is not so good, with state control of a vital element as a way to oppress the poor who can least afford it.

The whole extended family helps with the salting, barrels everywhere. They are happy, laughing, the home a beehive of activity. All are optimistic that now they'll have money for the winter.

Following a buoyant romp by the sea with his girlfriend, 'Ntoni and crew must go out again, risking bad weather, high winds, and menacing waves, because they have so many expenses to cover. An alarm bell sounds the storm warning. The women watch and pray, three of them and a child silhouetted on the rocks, their capes blowing in the wind. The sea and sky threaten above; the surf pounds the rocky shore beneath.

Their boat is destroyed. Days pass before they are found by a friend, way out on calm seas, and towed back to port. Everything is lost: nets, mast, oars, sail. The boat's side is split apart. It was bad enough that their fellow men were enemies, but now nature too, wiping them out in a single night.

Now the wholesalers will have their revenge; 'Ntoni will pay dearly for his rebellion. The entire fishing community stands along the docks and watches him, Grandpa and Cola, being towed in, as they mock and deride him. Now how can they pay their debts? His boat sits at the caulkers, but he has no money for repairs. He is forced to look for work on someone else's boat, but even his uncle Angelo has "no work" for the Valastros. The wholesalers have blacklisted the family; no one will hire him.

When they go to sell their last thirty barrels of anchovies to get some money, the buyers complain the fish are tiny and shriveled from clotting with too much salt, and even some rust in the barrel. As the Valastro family looks on, from grandpa to the crying, hungry babies, the wholesalers' low offer of 80 lire is rejected as unfair. But finally they do sell, to stave off hunger a little longer.

A strange man in a black-collared raincoat approaches Cola and other out-of-work young men on the beach. We never see his face, as his collar is pulled up nearly to his hat. He offers them Lucky Strike American cigarettes and propositions them to enter the smuggling trade for him, as they have been out of work for a month. The anchovies they caught that one night were to be the start of their future, but now, "The devil's got us where he wants us," says 'Ntoni to Cola, "and there's no hope."

Cola wants to leave, for he can't believe that people in other parts of the world are as mean as in Trezza. 'Ntoni says, No, we were born in Trezza; we must die in Trezza, even if we must suffer. He tearfully tells him *the sea* is the same everywhere. Outside our village are strong currents and disaster, you've seen that. Our struggle is here.

Later 'Ntoni looks in the windows of a little coffee shop, and sees his brother Cola with smugglers and wholesalers. He is about to go inside when news comes to him that men are at his house to foreclose the mortgage. Meanwhile at the house an engineer pokes at the walls with an umbrella, noting their condition and strength. The women stand by helplessly, as the children play obliviously on the floor.

In the early morning Cola leaves the house to join the smugglers. The camera shot starts on a picture of Jesus on the wall. Cola talks quietly to his family portrait and asks their forgiveness, promising to be home soon so that they can be a happy family once again. As he leaves, a rooster crows.

Grandpa becomes ill upon hearing of Cola's departure, and he must go to a hospital in Catania. They carry him out of the house, and one of his sisters complains that 'Ntoni got them all into this mess. Now he's out carousing all night, they're losing their home, Cola's run away, and Grandpa's in the hospital.

One of the wholesalers comes to invite 'Ntoni back. "You're a good fisherman. You'll forget how if you quit." But 'Ntoni is angry, and they fight.

The eviction day comes, and Visconti gives us a night shot looking down a narrow street through a railing, as the family carries their things down toward the water. It is bleak indeed, as a bell tolls.

Ironically, it is not really the collective effort of the fishermen that finally brings prosperity. It is the infusion of capital, trickling down from a wealthy benefactor, a "baroness," who helps the village get 10 new boats, providing more work for everyone. At a boat christening ceremony, the clueless mayor mocks those fools who try to go their own way.

One day 'Ntoni goes to visit his old boat, at the caulkers. He talks to a little girl and says the village didn't understand that all he did wasn't just for himself, but for all of them. He then looks directly at the camera and says that one day they'll see it was for good, that we all have to care for each other, and unite for the common good. But if he eschews rugged individualism for the collective, why does Visconti show him getting pummeled in the process? He tried valiantly to get others riled up, but no one joined him. So, like the Little Red Hen of the children's fable, he reluctantly goes it alone. The others are not risk takers.



'Ntoni's end is sorrowful, as his experiment in property ownership and entrepreneurial management fails and the cycle of oppression repeats. He changes into his most raggedy fisherman's shirt and goes to the wholesalers. They mock him mercilessly. "Old starvation face." "The lost lamb has returned to the fold." "You see now that your ideas don't work." (Was it that, or just bad weather?)

He is offered a crew job, and is able to get his two little brothers hired on as helpers. We see a tight close up of one hungry little boy's face, and realize that it was starvation that drove him back to swallow his pride and work for them. A wall poster of Mussolini seems to mock, as the men say to him, "We only want to give each man a chance to earn his daily bread."

As he goes out the next day, his sister ties his scarf and gives him his lunch. He is actually optimistic, "Sister, it's good weather for anchovies," and he asks his mother's blessing.

Our dour narrator concludes, "And so the Valastros return to the sea, starting all over again. The bitter sea, where men die." Is this utopian Marxism or Greek tragedy? Like De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, it is the Christian *family* here which provides the solace and support, rather than the collective.

Luchino Visconti was an aristocrat, a count actually, who had been introduced to the famous French filmmaker Jean Renoir by fashion designer Coco Chanel. Such was the pampered milieu of our director of motion pictures, theatre, and opera. So naturally he would turn to Karl Marx to assuage his bourgeois guilt. *La Terra Trema* was originally funded by the Communist party, and was meant to be the first of a trilogy on a peasant uprising. This background of the film is all the more fascinating when one perceives the unintended and ironic undermining of its polemical roots.

The "peasant uprising" falls flat. Not because the Valastro family members weren't proper collectivists, but because of human nature. Their fellow villagers were too timid, torpid, and complacent to join them in taking economic and social risks. The protagonist, 'Ntoni, sees clearly that it is private ownership of property, namely the boat as a means of production and independence, that is the foundation of his hopes for success. His failure was as much due to the vicissitudes of the weather as to any flaw in his economic or political thinking.

#### REFERENCE

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