

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Vittorio De Sica (1901-1974)

Life

Born into poverty in Naples, De Sica found his professional feet as an actor in the early 1920s with the theatre company founded by the famous dancer Tatania Pavlova. A decade later, he started his own company with the actress Giuditta Rissone, whom he later married in 1937, and Luchino Visconti, who went on to become another stalwart of neo-realist cinema.

In his youth, De Sica spent years on stage and screen, acting in more than 150 films, beginning with a silent in 1917. During the 1930s, he became Italy's biggest male star, often as the lead romantic role in light comedies. Even at the height of his reputation as a director, he appeared in films, notably in *A Farewell to Arms* (1957) and Rossellini's *General Della Rovere* (1959).

His well-known addiction to gambling contributed to his precarious financial situation in the years before his international reputation was established in the 1960s. As he said in a 1971 interview, 'All my good films, which I financed myself, made nothing. Only my bad films made money. Money has been my ruin.'

He made his directorial debut in 1940, continuing the comedies that had made him a matinee idol as an actor. His professional breakthrough came with his fifth film, *Shoeshine* in 1948, which became a cornerstone of Italy's neo-realist cinema. Two years later came what many consider his greatest film, *Bicycle Thieves*, about which one critic wrote: 'No more story, no more sets...in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality, there is no more cinema, only pure cinema.' Four years later, he directed *Umberto D*, a heart-breaking story of old age. Thus, in the short space of six years, he directed three films that established him on the international stage.

De Sica, along with Roberto Rossellini and Luchino Visconti, put Italian cinema on the map with their 'neo-realist' filmmaking. But neo-realism was not just a commitment to depict reality; it was motivated as well by a desire to expose the socio and political problems of post-war Italy. While De Sica himself was never a signed-up member, it is noteworthy that his long-time friend and collaborator, the screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, was active in the Communist Party of Italy. Zavattini's method was not to start with a narrative (as in Hollywood) and then make it look authentic. Instead, films needed to start with a real-life plot, after which the other elements would fall in place.

By the early 1960s, though, neo-realism was dead. Some critics claim that De Sica abandoned his old creed and sold out to soulless commercialism, knocking out romantic comedies with Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni. A more nuanced approach, however, would find threads of continuity between his early and his later films. Comedy is one such thread, satire is another and so is his exploration of gender roles, sexuality and marriage. While it is true that the majority of his best films were done in that magical period in the 1940s and 1950s, some of the later films, for example, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, is of high quality and won many awards.

If overt social commentary is muted in his later films, we might remember what he said about all his work: '...film makers, when they depict human social problems, instinctively seek the causes and effects of the disequilibrium in human relationships. They are led to conclusions, a sort of commentary in images, which are more or less partisan. There is none of this in my work.'

De Sica's marriage to Rissone lasted seventeen years, until 1954, when he met Maria Mercader (cousin of the man who assassinated Leon Trotsky). After divorcing Rissone, De Sica married Mercader in Mexico in 1959, though he had to marry her again in Paris in 1962 since the first was not considered legal under Italian law (the peculiarities of Italy's legal system often feature in his films). He had a daughter with Rissone, and two sons with Mercader, one of whom, Christian, became an actor and director.

Achievements

De Sica won many awards during his career, including the Palme D'Or at Cannes for *Miracle in Milan* in 1951. He won an Oscar in 1949 for *Bicycle Thieves* and a BAFTA the following year for the same film. In 1971, he won the Interfilm Grand Prix at Berlin, where *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* also won the Golden Bear. The same film won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1972. That same award was given to *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* in 1965.

FILMOGRAPHY (as sole director of feature films)

Maddalena, Zero for Conduct	1940
Do You Like Women, Doctor Beware	1941
A Garibaldian in the Convent	1942
The Children Are Watching Us	1944
Shoeshine	1946
Bicycle Thieves	1948
Miracle in Milan	1951
Umberto D	1952
Indiscretion of an American Wife	1953
The Gold of Naples	1954
The Roof	1956
Two Women	1960
The Last Judgment	1961
The Condemned of Altona	1962
The Boom	1963
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow	1963
Marriage Italian-Style	1964
A New World	1966
After the Fox	1966
Woman Times Seven	1967
A Place for Lovers	1968
Sunflower	1970
The Garden of the Finzi-Continis	1970
We'll Call Him Andrea	1972
A Brief Vacation	1973
The Voyage	1974

THEMES

Contents (Society-Family-Loss-Gender-Friendship-Politics)

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 scrap 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.

FAMILY

Introduction The theme of family is closely related to that of social inequality: when society fails to provide a safety net for the unfortunate, the family steps in. The 'family' in De Sica's films can take various forms. The traditional family can be large, with married siblings and their children (*The Roof*). It can be nuclear (*Bicycle Thieves*). And relatives can be replaced by friends (*Miracle in Milan*). These families, whatever their composition, can both create and solve problems.

The Roof In a traditional society such as 1950s Italy, marriage did not just bind two individuals together; it merged two whole families, often with friction. The family problem is presented early on in the film, when someone notes the conspicuous absence of the bride's father at the wedding. Later, we hear that he is angry, and we watch as Luisa tries in vain to communicate with him. The reason for his anger is never clarified, but it appears that he disapproves of his son-in-law. Another kind of problem emerges when the couple move in with his parents, his younger brother, his sister and her husband and their several children. Cesare, the sister's husband, resents the extra burden on the family budget, the longer wait to use the toilet and the threat to his authority over the household. His resentment boils over into an argument that prompts Natale and Luisa to leave. Cesare appears to be the main cause that this joint-family arrangement broke down. At the end, though, he becomes the hero, riding (on his bicycle) to the rescue when he gets the shack (nearly) completed before the police arrive. Although the family set-up caused the problem in the first place, it was a family member who solved it in the end.

Bicycle Thieves Support for Antonio does not come from society but from his family. His wife Maria is not only understanding but also practical. At the crucial moment when he is about to lose his job opportunity because he has no bicycle, she marches off to the pawn shop with her good quality bed sheets, given to her as a wedding gift. She also alters the size of his company cap so that it fits ('You look like a cop' she jokes). In that scene, before his first day on the new job, husband and wife revel in marital bliss. Their young son, Bruno, who works at a petrol station, is also part of the family team. In that same early morning scene, he oils his father's bicycle, sees that the window in the baby's room is shut and departs with his father. Later, Bruno will prove invaluable in catching the thief by jumping the queue at the clairvoyant's place and spotting the man on the street. Antonio's family is all that stand between him and the destitute men around him. That is why, at the end, his humiliation in front of his son is so shattering. Yet, little Bruno will not desert his father. In the final shot, he takes the hand of his tearful father and offers his support.

Miracle in Milan The most destitute people, such as orphans and the homeless, often have no family. As this delightful film illustrates, however, they can get support from groups who form themselves in order to provide that cohesion and strength. For example, Toto, the hero, is found in a cabbage patch (a concept similar 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 shelter 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. Most are single, and 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.

LOSS

Introduction As we can see from the themes described above, many characters in De Sica's films suffer from loss, loss of money, jobs and homes. An equally poignant in three very different films is the loss of youth. The hopes of the young can be ruined by a mixture of political and personal factors (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*), or by an indifferent adult society (*Shoeshine*) or by death (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*). Those who suffer this loss can come from any strata of society, from the wealthy on an estate to waifs on the street.

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis While the plot of this late film focuses on the rise of fascism, a deeper psychological theme is the loss of youth. Depicting events that occurred three decades before it was made, the film is bathed in the soft colours of nostalgia. The key relationship between Giorgio and Micol is further distanced in time through the use of flashbacks into their teenage years. All the

characters experience loss of one kind or another. For Giorgio, it is the loss of his childhood infatuation with Micol, which began in fairy tale fashion when he glimpsed the golden-haired damsel kept behind castle walls. Young love is transient and so it proves for Giorgio when Micol is attracted to a stranger. She doesn't want to remain a girl any more; she wants to feel herself to be a woman. Giorgio also loses his childhood friend Alberto to illness and his more recent friend Giampiero to gunfire. Micol wants to grow up and leave the garden of her youth. She does lose her sexual innocence but still retreats into her pre-fascist youth through her memories, which are visualised on screen. It is Giorgio's father who articulates the film's underlying elegy for the past when he comforts his son for the loss of Micol's love. 'In order to really understand the world,' he says, 'you must die at least once. So, it's better to die young, when there's time to recover and live again.' As a middle-aged man, he regrets the mistakes he and his generation made because now he has no time to recover. This theme of loss—of love, innocence and youth—is captured brilliantly by the tennis party, which both begins and ends the story. Those young and beautiful faces symbolise a carefree time before the horrors of fascism and war ruined their hopes.

Shoeshine An important theme of the film is the destruction of the dreams of youth. That dream is made flesh in the opening scene when the two boys experience pure joy as they gallop along on horses. They are thrilled to be so free, to be able to move so effortlessly and to be close to such a beautiful animal. When the ride is over, they are still ecstatic and run toward each other, claiming that the horse called Bersagliere ('Sharp-shooter') is the 'best in the world.' Their dream to own the horse comes true when they buy it and ride triumphantly down the street like military heroes on parade. Even in prison, their first thoughts are for their horse, not Giuseppe's family. That horse is the only thing in their world that is not broken, sullied or compromised. And at the very end, when their entanglements in crime and prison lead to one boy accidentally killing the other, the horse trots away and out of sight: the dream that appeared in the first scene has been destroyed. The horse even figures prominently in the boy's trial. A lawyer points out that 'a Roman Emperor made his horse a senator...so why be surprised when two poor kids put all their love in a horse?' Later, in a fiery speech, he says, 'This [love of a horse] is no crime. If you think they are guilty, then this court must condemn all of us, too, the people who in pursuit of our passions abandon our children to fend for themselves.' In that speech, De Sica seems to express his own views.

A Garibaldian in the Convent In this very early film, the theme of loss is found more in the storytelling technique than in the story itself. While the plot centres on a love triangle, involving two young convent girls and a soldier, it is told by one of those girls, Caterinetta, when she is an old lady. Introducing her tale to her granddaughters, she describes it 'as a beautiful love story.' Thus, the entire film is suffused with the remembrance of love, the recollection of tender feelings that were frustrated and ended in tragedy for the soldier and for the other girl whom he loved. The old lady, who also loved the soldier but was not his choice, weeps at the end when she tells her granddaughters that the soldier died before he could marry his fiancé, the other girl. Everything is made material when she shows them the soldier's uniform, with the hole made by the lethal bullet. The film ends when the fiancé, Mariella, now also a grandmother, enters the room and joins Caterinetta. Two old ladies can now reminisce about the loss of love in their past.

GENDER

Introduction In some of his later films, De Sica takes aim at traditional Italian views of gender. The satire is sometimes light-hearted, with its barbs blunted by comic exaggeration, but the sting is felt, nevertheless. He is especially good at ridiculing men's delusions about themselves, while also exposing their mistreatment of women. There is the double-standard, for example, that men can have mistresses and guilt-free sex because 'boys will be boys.' Women, on the other hand, are either wives or prostitutes. At the same time, De Sica also makes fun of the stereotype of the Italian 'mama', the sensual mother of the earth figure.

Marriage Italian Style Threaded through these somewhat comical shenanigans about marriage is a sharp satire on conventional Italian attitudes about women and sex. At the time of the film, and to a certain extent now, a clear double-standard existed: men could enjoy guilt-free sex with any woman, whereas respectable women should be virgins until marriage and remain faithful to her husband afterward. In this respect, the film enlarges on a similar theme in the third segment of De Sica's previous film (*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*). Domenico takes his sexual pleasure with Filumena but does not allow her to enter his public or family life. She does move up the ladder from whore to mistress to nurse and manager, but, for him, she remains a woman whom you pay for services. After she pulls off the first marriage by deceit, she explains his sexist behaviour to him. Widespread sexist

attitudes have branded her immoral, while he escaped all social ostracism. Sex-workers are tolerated but not acknowledged in upper-class society, which has meant that she couldn't tell her sons that she was their mother. What son would want to know that his mother was a prostitute? She fell into prostitution as a young girl in the slums, with no other way to make money. In this largely light-hearted film, De Sica asks Italians to look at themselves in the mirror and own up to their deeply rooted sexist attitudes.

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow The only theme that runs through all three episodes of the film is that of gender. Overall, the film satirises, very gently, the cult of Italian macho men, unmasking them as ineffectual (episode 1), dispensable (episode 2) and childish (episode 3). In each case, moreover, the man is dominated by a woman (Sophia Loren), who is either stronger, more confident or more mature, or all three. Poor Carmine, the exhausted husband of Adelina who cannot cope with her energy and sexual power, has to resort to medicine to fire up his depleted libido, and even that fails. He is a good parent to the brood of kids, but seems more like a mother than a masculine father. Renzo, the equally effeminate writer in tow to Anna, shows some independent thinking, but his inferior class and financial position means that he is (literally) left behind to lick his wounds. Augusto, the client in the last section, has enough sexual energy, all right, but he is exposed as a childish prat, who answers to 'Daddy' and prays piously with Mara. Although the brunt of the satire is aimed at men, the women do not escape unscathed. Adelina, for example, is a caricature of the Italian 'earth mother,' whose fecundity is celebrated even by schoolchildren dancing in the streets. She is the goddess whose maternal and sexual powers are unlimited. Anna is pilloried as a selfish, upper-class hypocrite whom Renzo should be glad to see the back of. Mara, perhaps the most well-rounded of the female characters, is defensive and too much in thrall to her ritual candles. As a romantic comedy, the film mocks Italian stereotypes of both men and women.

The Indiscretion of an American Wife Mary suffers because she is unable to reconcile her conflicting roles as wife and lover. She is caught in this conflict because she is a woman; by contrast, a married man in Italy would not be tormented by the guilt that torments her from beginning to end. In fact, she feels guilt toward both the men in her romantic triangle, toward her lover, Giovanni, and her husband, Howard. Her regret toward her lover is shown in the first shots when we read her letter to Giovanni asking him to 'forgive' her for not saying goodbye and running off at the last moment. And when they meet for the first time (in the film), she says she's sorry for mistreating him. Later, when they talk in the restaurant, she feels her love for Giovanni return, only to remember what she thought about the night before: the face of her young daughter, 'her sweet neck, and most of all her eyes.' Her roller coaster of emotions trundles on throughout the film as she is torn between family and lover, and feeling guilt on both accounts. In fact, guilt turns from an internal indictment to a potential public humiliation when she and Giovanni are caught kissing in an empty compartment in a standing train. Now, she is disgraced as well as guilty, although the police commissioner shows compassion and releases her without a trial. Still, she has been condemned in her own mind, especially when she encounters the sick woman who is presented as a model mother. She knows that she is not that woman, even if her husband does not. While she does, in the end, return to her husband, she will live with her guilt forever.

Two Women This is the story of two women (the English title is more descriptive than the Italian), a mother and her daughter, in Italy during World War II. But it is also the story of many women in many times and places, who are mothers who fear for and protect their children. And the many women who endure sexism and, even, violent rape. All of this is dramatised through the experiences of Cesira, the young and sensual widow. When she asks Giovanni to look after her shop in her absence, he agrees but only after she submits to his love-making, despite the fact that he expresses contempt for women ('they're stupid'). He also implies that, as a widow of an old man, she is hungry for sex. That slow developing scene, in which a man takes advantage of her, is a microcosm of the entire film. Later, men ogle Cesira on the street and give wolf-whistles. The Italian fascist soldiers nearly force her to come with them to headquarters, 'to help' them. Then comes the rape in the church, with all its brutality and wild abandon. The soldiers chase Cesira and Rosetta like children laughing and screaming on the playground. But they are violent, knocking out Cesira and gang raping her and her daughter. Afterwards, no one seems to care, neither the army officers nor the others they meet on the road. At the end, when Rosetta comes back from a dance with a pair of stockings given to her by a boy, Cesira is furious, afraid Rosetta might become a prostitute. She is also saddened. 'Michelle was right,' she says, with a voice of defeat. 'Escape, escape. But you can't escape from yourself.' She might have said, escape from the plight of women. Cesira fears that her daughter, already traumatised by the rape, will imitate her mother and fall into the role assigned to her by society.

FRIENDSHIP

Introduction When society fails to protect vulnerable people, and family support is either insufficient or absent, friends often provide the necessary assistance. Friendships are formed between two boys (*Shoeshine*), between two girls (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*), between an old man and a young girl (*Umberto D*) and between men (*Bicycle Thieves*).

Bicycle Thieves Although family is the central theme of this film, a parallel theme is that of friendship, or support given by people outside the family. When Antonio's spirits are at their lowest point, when his bicycle has been stolen and he has no clue about how to find it, he turns to his friend, Baiocco. Too ashamed to tell Maria or Bruno what has happened, he knows that Baiocco, his burly, gregarious friend will not judge him harshly. More than that, Baiocco, who works as a municipal garbage collector, knows the lay of the land when it comes to street crime in the city. He is able to point Antonio to the flea-markets where stolen bicycles (among other things) are bought and sold. Not only that, Baiocco enlists a few co-workers to help Antonio and Bruno comb the stalls to find the missing bicycle. Another, very different, example of friendship is the solidarity shown by the thief's neighbours. When Antonio confronts the young man with the German army hat, his friends gather around and stand up for him. In the world depicted in the film, people cannot rely on government institutions, not even the police, or political parties to solve their problems. The church and the clairvoyants are useful, but more fundamental support comes their families and their friends.

Umberto D The poignancy in the film is created by balancing this isolation with brief and infrequent moments of friendship. Most of these scenes of friendship involve Maria, the young maid in the rooming house where Umberto rents a room. She, too, is isolated. Living in Rome, far from her village, she has become pregnant. She can't tell her landlady (who will fire her) and she can't go back home ('they'll beat me'), so she confides in the kind Umberto. She looks after him like a daughter, fetching a thermometer and hot water, visiting him in hospital and bringing him food. By the end, she has become very attached to the old man, who also gives her some good advice about her complicated situation with the unknown father of her unborn child. In the end, as he steals away in the early hours, suitcase in hand, she is sad and asks in a wistful voice, 'Can't we see each now and then, Mr Umberto?' An even deeper affection is evident between the old man and his dog. Flike has become his family, his constant companion, his only enduring bond with another being and his only source of dignity. Umberto's relationship with Flike reveals that isolation is the other side of the friendship coin. Without Flike, Umberto would have nothing and would probably have ended his life earlier.

A Garibaldian in the Convent One way to view this film is as a study in female friendship. Mariella and Caterinetta grow up as neighbours, separated only by the width of a street, but also by three years in age and by a deep gulf in class. Mariella's family is wealthy, whereas Caterinetta's family boasts an aristocratic heritage. At first, the relationship between the two young girls is defined by this social divide between their families, which generates bickering and mild insults. This changes when the girls are taken out of the family context and meet as students in a convent. Here, too, at first, they sneer at each other, and their enmity is sowed even deeper by the gossipy Gertrude, but eventually they form a strong bond of friendship. The shift occurs when Caterinetta lies to protect Mariella from the anger of the Mother Superior by claiming that the romantic novel in her possession was hers (it actually belonged to Mariella). Mariella is grateful for this act of kindness, but even then two girls pretend they still dislike each other. Their bond is finally sealed by their shared love/respect for the wounded soldier (Amidei) who takes refuge in the convent. A hiccup occurs when Caterinetta, who had fancied Amidei, discovers that he loves Mariella. But when Amidei is threatened with capture by the Royalist soldiers and Mariella despairs, Caterinetta rises above her jealousy and helps her to save his life. Strengthened by their bond, both girls show tremendous courage in the end. And the film ends when they meet, now as old women and still strong friends.

Shoeshine The key relationship in this film is the friendship between the two boys, Giuseppe and Pasquale. We see them in the opening scene, delighting in their horse ride, and we see them at the end, with one crying over the other's dead body, and in between, their friendship is subjected to many crises. Pasquale is the older boy who treats Giuseppe as his younger brother, although Pasquale is himself an orphan and lives with Giuseppe's family. Their close bond has its first challenge when the two boys are separated and put in different cells. From there, it is easy to see how the prison and legal systems prise the friends farther and farther apart. When Pasquale is tricked into betraying Giuseppe's older brother (Attilio), he does so only because he can't bear to see his friend suffer. Later, Giuseppe has a hard time believing that Pasquale actually betrayed him and tries to patch up

their argument. More treachery, involving their beloved horse, separates the two boys again, but when Giuseppe accidentally dies at the end, Pasquale weeps over him as if they were as close as they had been while riding horses in the opening scene.

POLITICS

Introduction Despite his leftist (even communist) sympathies, De Sica never made an explicitly political film. The closest he came to conveying that kind of message is in his two films set during the Second World War. And those films are very different, one from the other. Fascism is the political theme of one, while refugees and rape is depicted in the other. They also take place in dissimilar physical and social settings, one in the town of Ferrara among cultivated Jewish families (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*), and the other in a mountainous village among the local peasants and urban refugees (*Two Women*). A similar message of support for radical politics is smuggled into an early film about Italy's 19th-century wars of liberation (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*).

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis The film depicts the destruction of the sizable Jewish community in Ferrara during World War Two. Although Italian Jews did not die in the same numbers that Jews did in other parts of Europe, they suffered the same intimidation, discrimination and humiliation. And thousands died in the concentration camps. The film focuses on two very different families. Micol and Alberto's family, the Finzi-Continis, are wealthy intellectuals, who live in their vast estate, behind walls and inside their garden. Giorgio's family are also well-off, but they are forced to engage with the world and its political reality of the rise of fascism. Giorgio's father has become a member of Mussolini's ruling party, a sort of pact with the devil. When the anti-Jewish laws are passed, one after the other, the Finzi-Continis take no notice, whereas Giorgio's family have to adjust. When it is forbidden to have non-Jewish house servants, for example, they do so in secret. The difference between the two families is summed up by Giorgio's father when he says, 'They're different. They don't even seem to be Jewish.' In the end, however, the political reality of fascism breaks down the garden walls. Even the Finzi-Continis cannot remain separate from the world outside their estate. They, too, are rounded up and await transit to a concentration camp. It is a grim ending that is only softened by the final shots of the young people enjoying themselves at the tennis party, oblivious of what is to come. The film offers no judgement, no message, because none is necessary. There is only a depiction of the political reality in one town and the choices made by two families.

Two Women This film, like *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, is set during the Second World War. And like it, it does not actually feature any fighting, although it does show bombing, refugees and the horrors of war, including the rape of a mother and her daughter by soldiers. In 1943, Allied troops invaded Italy and began to sweep north up the peninsula, unleashing a chaotic series of events. Mussolini was arrested and then freed by the Germans, who continued to fight alongside Italian fascist troops, who did not accept Italy's surrender. This political and military confusion is shown in some detail in the film by a series of vignettes involving Italian fascist, German, British, Russian and Moroccan troops. The fast-breaking news about Mussolini and the Pope is relayed through newspaper headlines and radio announcers. Political arguments are carried on between Michelle and anyone he meets, vowing to kill himself if the Germans win. Most of the rural population are apolitical, only wanting peace and safety. They cheer the arrival of the Americans but only because that means a halt to the war, the bombing and high food prices. The hardship of war is dramatised also by the refugees, like Cesira and Rosetta, who flee to the countryside. Some of the refugees are children; many are desperate, undernourished and terrified. We do not see any of the more than two hundred thousand soldiers killed in Italy. Instead, we see the war as experienced by the general population, many of whom also died. A young mother is so traumatised after the soldiers killed her baby that she wanders around offering to 'sell' her breastmilk. And the scene when an old man on his bicycle is riddled with machine-gun fire from a plane is unforgettable.

A Garibaldian in the Convent Lurking within this melodramatic historical comedy is a serious political message. De Sica made the film when Mussolini's fascist government was protecting Italy from the foreigners, which meant that the censors were pleased by the generous helpings of Italian nationalism on display. However, the hero is a radical, an underground rebel who fights with a renegade army against the official government of the day. By placing the story in the context of the wars for Italian freedom from French and Austrian domination, De Sica is able to express support for resistance to oppressive political authority (i.e., Mussolini). The entire last quarter of the film shows the Garibaldian movement in a positive light while undermining the credibility of the Royalists. When the Royalist soldiers enter the convent, the Mother Superior objects to such an intrusion. We also wonder why a hundred men are needed to capture a single, wounded man, a question that is asked

by the visiting government dignitary at the school graduation. That same Royalist politician is also shown to be hypocritical when he actually congratulates the commander of the Garibaldian soldiers on his excellent performance in rescuing Amidei. Finally, we are treated to a rousing rendition of the Garibaldian movement's song ('Brothers of Italy, Italy has awoken...') sung by Tiepolo and Amidei. Much like the hero hidden in shed, the film's message of resistance is cleverly concealed in the love story and silly goings-on at a girls' boarding school.

CHARACTERS

Contents

Open or closed to new experiences

Agreeable or Disagreeable in social Relations

Conscientious or Unconscientious

Rational or Emotional in their psychological world

1. Open

a) Mara (*Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*) is a spirited woman, with high energy but also a kind heart. Although she is proud, she is unpretentious. Given her piety, she feels guilty, but only a little, about her trade as a prostitute. At the same time, she has fierce self-respect and submits to no one. A subtle blend of sensuality and morality, she embodies the complex social commentary hidden beneath the comic surface of her episode.

b) Micol (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*) is the young daughter of the family. She, is an independent-minded character, both as a child and a young woman. When one young man is asked about her, he says, 'Very beautiful. She's tall and blond. But unpredictable.' That is an apt description of the young woman who is also well-educated, writing a thesis on Emily Dickinson (an appropriate topic since the American poet's verse explores intense feelings of love and pain). She loves her brother and she loves her garden, especially the tall, exotic palms. She is ambiguous and difficult to read at times, but in the end, she shows her loyalty to Giorgio.

c) Giuseppe (*Shoeshine*) is a young boy, full of enthusiasm and the capacity to dream. Less mature, and less able to control his emotions, he is more vulnerable than Pasquale and more likely to worry about possible problems. In short, he is a sweet, delicate boy, which makes his loss of innocence all the more tragic.

2. Closed

a) Domenico (*Marriage Italian Style*) is domineering, flippant, self-assured and arrogant. A good-looking and successful businessman, he treats people as his servants and the world as his fiefdom. He may show kindness, and even affection, but only when it is convenient. If he were aware of his insensitivity, he might regret it, but even that is not certain. At the end, he does display some tenderness towards the boys who might be his son.

b) Giorgio's father (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*) remains unnamed and his profession unidentified. He is a pragmatic person, who attempts to shield himself and his family from the worst of the worsening political situation. He doesn't have a walled garden, like the Finzi-Continis, so he arms himself with justifications and keeps his head down. Whatever his shortcomings, possibly too passive in his accommodation with fascism, he proves his worth in the final act of the story.

3. Agreeable

a) Natale (*The Roof*) Natale is an uncomplicated young man, attractive, polite, affectionate and hard-working. He is also practical, wary of quick schemes and ambitious for his future with his new wife. Although easy-going, he has a pride that will not allow him to take insults from his bossy brother-in-law. His love for Luisa is tender and constant.

b) Luisa (*The Roof*) Luisa is a strong person, but she is also sensitive (like Natale) and considerate of others. As a young and new wife living with her in-laws, she wisely keeps a low profile and tries to adjust herself to the household routine. That kind of maturity for such a young person is matched by her practicality and confidence. She never becomes despondent, never raises her voice in anger, always shows kindness and always seems to make the right decision.

c) Rosetta (*Two Women*) Rosetta is a sweet young girl, devoted to her mother and to the church. She shows kindness to everyone, even soldiers in the dangerous context of the war. Her life is changed when she is subjected to a brutal rape, which leaves her numb and speechless. Whether she has the inner strength, like her mother, to survive is left uncertain.

d) Adelina (*Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*) is an exuberant character, large in every sense, powerful, belligerent and impulsive. A resident of a poor neighbourhood in Naples, she embodies the independent spirit of ordinary people, especially when interacting with institutions and officers of the government. She is also an attractive, and alluring, woman, oozing sensuality with every move.

e) Carmine (*Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*) is Adelina's jobless husband. He is a meek person, easily dominated by his spirited wife. He appears feckless, uncertain and reliant on support from his 'mama,' but later on he does show some strength of character and helps free Adelina from prison. He is certainly devoted to her, and also shows good qualities in his role as the father of a large family.

4. Disagreeable

a) Anna (*Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*) is easily the least likable character in the entire film. Wife of an affluent businessman, she realises that her life is stagnant and wants to escape. She chooses a car and lover Renzo to take herself away from her empty existence. Unfortunately, she is also shallow, self-serving, hypocritical and cruel.

b) Arcangeli (*Shoeshine*). The leader of the boys in Giuseppe's prison cell is named Arcangeli. He is an older boy, a bully with a smirk, who manipulates others to satisfy his needs. It is he who organises planting the file in Pasquale's cell to make sure he is punished by the guards. And it is he who plans their escape. He is a cocky and devious character, who shows his true colours when, in the final scene, he runs away.

5. Conscientious

a) Cesare (*The Roof*) Like the other men in the story (Luisa's angry father, and Natale's silent father), Cesare is difficult. He is a large, burly and proud man, an experienced bricklayer who taught the trade to Natale. As the senior man in the joint-family (the father-in-law is all but absent), he has a lot of responsibility. That might explain his quick-fire anger and bullying behaviour. Underneath that belligerent exterior, he has more positive qualities of kindness and loyalty.

b) Pasquale (*Shoeshine*) At twelve years old, Pasquale is somewhat older than Giuseppe, and taller, as well. He acts in the role of an older brother, advising and guiding the younger boy, until they enter prison and their bond is broken. He is also a character with principles, who is adamant that they should never snitch on the others (Panza and Attilio) involved in the robbery. Ironically, though, it is he who is tricked into confessing and earning the disrespect among his fellow-prisoners, especially Giuseppe, as a 'grass.'

6. Unconscientious

a) Augusto (*Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*) The son of a powerful politician, Augusto has little motivation except his libido. He is a comic figure, bumbling in his childish devotion to Mara and, especially, to her sexuality. Like a child, he is impatient to satisfy his needs, but he also has the depth of character to cooperate with Mara in helping the grandmother.

7. Emotional

a) Cesira (*Two Women*) The Italian title of the film identifies Cesira as 'the woman from Ciociaria'. Later, she goes to Rome, but she is still a product of that isolated village in the mountains, with its peasant-based cooperative spirit, lack of pretension and resignation to hardship. Cesira is, however, somewhat unusual in that she is a fiery and sensual woman, outspoken and fiercely maternal. She is a very powerful presence that dominates the film.

b) Filumena (*Marriage Italian Style*) is a complex character, with different qualities revealed at different points in her story as she shifts from young prostitute to middle-aged mistress. She was born in the slums and took to prostitution out of necessity, engendering in her a life-long desire to gain social respectability. She is vulnerable but also shrewd and resourceful. In the end, she shows powerful emotions of love, revenge and forgiveness.

e) Giorgio (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*) is the young man who loves Micol and is easily hurt. As a lover, he is somewhat passive and adoring rather than active and sexual. He has a poetic nature, quiet, contemplative and deeply emotional in matters of romance. As regards politics, he shows more awareness and is angered by the rise of fascism. Throughout, he is a sensitive and kind person.

8. Rational

a) Michelle (*Two Women*) The young rebel Michelle stands out among the villagers as an intellectual, or at least a literate person. He is also thoughtful, opinionated, idealistic and honest. Although crystal-clear about his political principles, he is confused about romance. Throughout the story, he shows tenderness to both Cesira and Rosetta. And in the end, he makes a decision that protects others and costs him his life.



(De Sica on location with Sophia Loren in *Marriage Italian Style*)



(again with Loren on location)