

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE ROOF (Il Tetto) 1956

Vittorio De Sica

OVERVIEW Although *The Roof* is not considered one of De Sica's best films, it marked a satisfying return (after two experiments) to his neo-realist roots, with non-professional actors playing believable characters who face hardships in post-war Italy. The story itself is slight, though it is filled with precise financial details and well-observed living conditions that give it the stamp of authenticity. More in the optimistic mood of *Miracle in Milan* than the grim despair of *Bicycle Thieves*, the film is a successful combination of social message and romantic fulfilment. And it has a clock-ticking suspense that grips until the very end. Once again, the script was written by Cesare Zavattini, the cinematography is excellent and the two lead actors (both in their debut film) produced affecting performances. The film demonstrates De Sica's genius for conveying a strong social message inside a heart-warming story.

SYNOPSIS The setting is Rome in the 1950s, when the construction business was booming, but not everyone could find a place of their own. Natale, an apprentice bricklayer, marries Luisa, an attractive young woman from the countryside. When they move in with Natale's family, the overcrowded arrangement leads to an argument with his brother-in-law and they leave. Now, they don't have a roof over their heads and have to search for a place to live. When Luisa confirms that she's pregnant, the search becomes more intense. After they run into obstacles, they decide to build a one-room brick house on unused land near the railway tracks. The problem is that such structures ('squats') are illegal and must be put up in one night in order to avoid the police. However, if they can build it, complete with a roof, the law says that they cannot be evicted. Natale borrows money for materials, gathers friends, and starts to build after dark. In the end, with the help of the quarrelsome brother-in-law and the indulgence of a sympathetic policeman, the little house is completed and they cannot be evicted. The couple achieve their dream and await the birth of their child.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Natale	A young, apprentice bricklayer.
Luisa	His wife.
Cesare	His brother-in-law, his sister's husband.
Ginny	Luisa's friend.

STORY

Booming industry In the opening shots, we see workers on top of a tall building, with panoramic and wide-angle views of Rome. The construction industry is booming, with high-rise apartment buildings springing up everywhere. Cranes tower over head, cement mixers grind away and pallets of cement blocks are on the move.

Newly-weds A newly-wed couple emerge from a church and pose for photographs. They are Natale and Luisa, surrounded by their families and friends. They leave in a taxi with his parents, amid felicitations and smiling faces. Inside the taxi, reality begins to poke its head through the glittering surface of the occasion. Luisa takes off her rented wedding dress (because it has to be returned) and puts on a dull suit. She also feels a pang of regret about her father, who doesn't approve of the marriage and didn't attend. Natale complains about the high fare he has to pay to the driver.

Luisa's family The couple climb on a bus and go to her native village, some distance away. Luisa's mother receives them without enthusiasm but agrees that they can stay one night, while also warning Luisa that her father is angry. She races to the seashore and waves to him, at work in a fishing boat, but he does not acknowledge her. Luisa and Natale are given a nice room for the night. Luisa's mother asks about Natale's work and is told he's a bricklayer, paid a small wage as an apprentice. They talk about old age pensions, family debts and the need to delay children in their marriage, after which Luisa's mother accepts Natale as a son-in-law.

Return to Rome In the morning, still without meeting Luisa's father, the couple return by bus to Rome, where they will live with Natale's family, in a house with eight others. Luisa tells her mother that they'll find a house of their own after a year or so. When they reach the outskirts of Rome, where the high-rises are going up, Natale explains that before the war it was a meadow. The building sites fill them both with optimism that he will soon become a senior bricklayer, get better pay and allow them to have their own home.

Natale's family They reach Natale's house, where the welcome is warm but the rooms are crowded. They must sleep in a room with two other beds. Luisa suggests a screen or curtain of some kind to give them privacy, but that's not possible. Despite the inconvenience (they have to go outside at night to embrace), the couple are happy.

Cracks in the surface When Natale comes back from work one day, Luisa tells him that his brother-in-law, Cesare, yelled at her for no reason. She is beginning to find the arrangement unpleasant. They go for a walk in the hills above Rome and regain their happiness. They also view a rental apartment, but it has cracked walls, peeling plaster and sits next to railway tracks. She wants it anyway because she has to stay home all day in the crowded house, while he's out at work. He says it's too risky, with unstable walls, and that they need to save money.

The last straw Cesare, the brother-in-law, blames Luisa for wasting money on electricity and gets into an argument with Natale. Fed up, Natale and Luisa decide they can't stay any longer. Only his mother shows any regret when they load everything onto a push cart and leave. Natale will sleep on his construction site, and Luisa will stay with a friend, Ginny. During the day, Luisa searches for a permanent place.

House without a roof She has no success she happens upon the police knocking down a shack built on a waste land. 'He didn't finish it in time,' a stranger explains. It didn't have a roof, so it wasn't a house and could be demolished. When she meets Natale at the end of the day, she takes him to the site and urges him to build a house there. Natale is unsure because he will need money for materials and a crew of bricklayers. Natale says he'll decide in the morning. Luisa thinks she's pregnant but won't tell Natale until she is certain.

A plan In the morning, she visits him at work and tells him that she can earn a decent salary plus meals working as a maid. When she says she's pregnant, Natale is thrilled and begins to plan their little house. He borrows money from his mother, and Luisa gives him money she got for the wedding.

Foiled When his workmates celebrate the news of his wife's pregnancy, he asks them to help him build a squatter's shack on private property. They work at night, after the police have gone, everyone pitching in with their separate skills. Tipped off by a 'squealer', though, a patrolman arrives, Natale is fined and everyone leaves. He and Luisa are devastated.

Cesare to the rescue Undeterred, Natale guides them to another site, beside the railway tracks, and they get to work again. Halfway through, a wall collapses and it's clear that the men aren't skilled enough for the job. Other men turn up but they want too much in wages. Luisa goes to Natale's house and summons Cesare, who is a skilled bricklayer. He arrives at the site, where he takes over and the shack is nearly finished in the morning.

Sympathetic police When the police approach, they are stalled by a staged fight, but the roof is still not completed. Luisa 'borrows' a child and goes inside, with Natale. While the policeman has a look around, the locals say the structure is legal because it has a roof, though it isn't quite finished. The policeman begins to take down Natale's name, but has a change of heart when he sees the young mother and child. He issues a fine only and does not order demolition or eviction.

Dream come true In the final scene, Natale and the pregnant Luisa stand side by side and admire their tiny hovel, the place where their dream begins.

THEMES

1. Poverty and Money In keeping with the principles of neo-realism, the story in this film is shaped largely by money. That is to say, a lack of money. When Luisa takes her new husband, Natale, home to meet her family, Luisa's mother does not beat around the bush. 'What's he make?' is her first question. \$1.50 as an apprentice is the answer. 'Old age pension?' is her next question. Yes, but only if he keeps up payments. 'What if it rains?' she wants to know. She is not interested in her son-in-law's character or his family—all that can come later. She needs to know the nuts and bolts of her

daughter's financial situation. A similar focus on financial details is evident in a scene when Luisa spends the night with her friend. Ginny, the friend, works as a maid for a middle-class family. Ginny talks about taking another job, with a richer family who would give her five more dollars a month, but, as Luisa points out, there'd be more floors to polish. Luisa asks if her employer would loan her some money, but Ginny says she is tight herself since soldiers (like her husband) 'don't earn much if there's no war.' Next, Luisa asks about her employer's brother, but he's only a teacher and earns what she does. 'We need \$30 to eat and sleep. Work it out. They pay us only \$18.' Later, Luisa asks her friend to lend her money, in exchange for silk stockings (presumably a wedding present). Ginny thinks about it and asks for perfume, instead. In other scenes, Natale complains of an excessive tax charge; bricklayers who might help Natale build his shack are turned away after they want \$1 each; Luisa offers a boy a 'dime' to help her. And so on. The film thus provides us with the information we need to understand what money they have and what they need for essentials. De Sica brings us into the lives of his characters with such precise details. As Ginny says, 'Work it out.'

2. *Marriage* Everyone in the film has money problems, but the story focuses on a newly-married couple because their needs are special. Even before the church bells stop ringing, we have given a hint of what is ahead. Once inside the taxi, the bride strips off her rented wedding gown and reverts to a standard skirt and jacket. Then they enter Natale's family's house, where they have no privacy with the horde of relatives living in cramped quarters. They want a home of their own, which is a special requirement for newly-weds that kickstarts the drama. Their desire for more space becomes an absolute necessity once Luisa discovers that she is pregnant. Luisa has found a job and Natale has steady work, but as a new couple they must have privacy, especially with a baby on the way. In this respect, the film exposes the paradox of marriage for lower middle-class people in post-war Italy. It is a time of great joy that also contains the seeds of sorrow. The financial woes of the newly-weds is made more ironic since their story unfolds against the backdrop of a construction boom in 1950s Italy. This, of course, is the genius to De Sica's films, to nest a personal story within a larger social context.

3. *Family* Completing the trio of themes typical of De Sica's early films, the family is a source of both trouble and hope. 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.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Natale 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.

Sensitive One of his finest qualities is his sensitivity to others, to their moods and situations. This awareness is illustrated when he is taken by Luisa to her native village immediately after the wedding. He has not met her parents and knows that the father is not happy with the marriage. As they approach the house, they see her mother outside, washing clothes. Sensing Luisa tense up, he says quietly, 'Relax.' During the awkward meeting between mother and daughter, Natale wisely takes a backseat, supporting his wife but not obtruding into this delicate interaction. When he is introduced, he shakes her hand with a winning smile. And when the mother explains that the father is angry, he opens his arms wide and says, 'It's done.' When Luisa runs off to find her father, Natale says, 'Ma'am, your husband should at least see that I'm human.' Again, the genial smile appears as he hands her a palmful of sweets from the wedding. A small gift it might seem, but after he has gone, she eats one and puts the rest in her pocket for later. Then he runs to catch up with Luisa and to support her when she meets her father. She has no luck with him, but her sympathetic husband has

already won over her mother.

Self-respect Although Natale is always polite and softly spoken, he is not so meek as to lack self-respect. That aspect of his character emerges in the key scene of the argument with Cesare that prompts him and Luisa to leave the house. Natale listens to his brother-in-law complain about Luisa using the electric iron too much and replies that he (Cesare) uses the lamp when reading late. Natale is calm, drying the dishes, and does not get agitated by the other man's histrionics. Until Cesare reminds him that he taught him a trade and that he is the 'master' of the house. These derogatory comments about Natale's inferior status cross the line and injures his pride. 'Master?' he replies with mockery. Seconds later, he and Luisa have packed their things and left the house. Natale is not argumentative or nasty, but he will not stand for someone, especially his brother-in-law, insulting his wife and him.

Determined Once he sees that they need a place of their own, Natale is determined to find one. He encounters several obstacles—money, government regulations, greedy landowners, a police snitch and the police themselves. But he will not give up. We appreciate his determination especially when he, and Luisa, reach the lowest point of their descent into despair. They have found a location to build a shack, scrounged together enough money for materials and rounded up fellow labourers to help build it. Then the police come and their dream is ruined. As they ride away in a lorry filled with the building materials, the night is dark and cold, and their eyes downcast. Luisa cries and says she needs a home for their baby. The next minute, Natale guides the truck down to a spot near the railway tracks. He has found another location and gets the men to start building again. This time (after Cesare comes to the rescue and a kind policeman ignores regulations), they succeed. Natale perseveres after the heart-breaking failure of the first attempt. He is spurred on by Luisa, but the impetus comes from him.

Luisa 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 accommodate herself to their 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.

Kind-hearted Luisa's character is revealed most clearly in the delicate scene when Natale decides that they can no longer live under the same roof as his family. He has just had a row with his brother-in-law, in which Cesare spoke ill of Luisa, but Luisa did not rise to the bait. Yes, she did defend herself, but not with anger. And when Natale tells her to gather up their things and leave, Luisa complies, but she is not happy. For weeks she has tried to fit into his family as the new daughter-in-law. Although it hasn't been easy because of the cramped quarters and lack of money, she has been extremely flexible, putting up with a lack of privacy in order not to create tensions. Now, she leaves the family with regret. She doesn't say anything, but she shows affection by patting the head of one of the children and by giving her silent father-in-law a long look of goodbye. Altogether, it is a strangely moving scene, with no words and little action, but it shows her kind-hearted nature.

Confident Moments later, we see another side of Luisa. Soft and accommodating, she is also confident and self-reliant. She and Natale are on the street, with their possessions piled on a pushcart, and no where to sleep that night. They find an empty, bombed-out building, but it's going to be demolished and no one can enter. Natale has to go to work, so they must decide what to do. He doesn't want her looking for a place on her own because he fears she might be 'tricked'. She says she'd tell anyone that she would have to wait for him to decide. They consider looking in the newspaper for ads, but they'd be too expensive. As Natale hangs his head in despair, she puts a hand on his chest and smiles. 'Trust me,' she says brightly. 'I'll find something.' And she does.

Practical As described above, Natale has the confidence to do what is necessary to find them a place to sleep for the night. Along with that self-assurance comes a pragmatic side, as well. That quality is well illustrated in the desperate moments when Natale's plan to put up a little house is about to fail. Having gathered the men and materials, they begin to build at night, but soon discover that they lack the skills to complete the job. Luisa then runs up to Natale and says, 'I've got an idea.' She will call Cesare, who is an experienced bricklayer. 'Don't say no,' she says to Natale, knowing of their enmity. He dismisses the idea, but she sneaks away and goes back to the house to fetch the difficult brother-in-law. She brings him to the building site and he manages to get the job done in time. Without her clear-eyed practicality, their house would have never materialised.

Cesare 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 (Natale's father is all but absent), he has a lot of responsibility. That might explain his quick-fire anger and bullying behaviour. Underneath that belligerent exterior, though, he has more positive qualities of kindness and loyalty.

Irascible Cesare literally bursts on the scene when he has to thrust himself through the front door of the house because it is blocked by children playing on the other side. 'What the hell?' he screams and forces it open, scattering the children like bowling pins. 'Is this a home or a dormitory?' he yells at Luisa, who has come out to see what the commotion is about. 'Next, I'll be asking permission to enter my own house,' he says with a sarcastic sneer. This is Cesare, belligerent, nasty and foul-mouthed. He does quickly show concern for his wife, who has gone into labour, but unprovoked irascibility is what he displays first.

Loyal Cesare's tetchiness is what later leads to the family schism and the departure of Natale and Luisa. Still, when the chips are down, Cesare does not fail his in-laws. He is roused in the middle of the night by Luisa and told of the failing project to build the shack. Without hesitation, he gets dressed and rides on his bicycle to the building site. He doesn't ask what happened or why. His only words are 'where is it?' Then he's off. Despite the rift between him and Natale, he will not reject a plea to help his brother-in-law in the hour of need. This unconditional loyalty, displayed by Cesare, is what enables families to manage their difficulties.



(Natale, far right, with his bride, Luisa, and her brother, Cesare, and his wife)



(Natale and Luisa admire their hovel)



(The cramped quarters in Natale's family home)