

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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BICYCLE THIEVES (Ladri di Bicilette) 1948

Vittorio De Sica

OVERVIEW *Bicycle Thieves*, De Sica's sixth film, launched his career and brought him international fame, winning awards shortly after release. As early as 1952, it was named the 'greatest film of all time' by *Sight and Sound* magazine. Since then, it has remained firmly in the neo-realist canon, with its use of non-professional actors to tell a story of suffering among ordinary people. The film, however, is much more than that. Its genius lies in its storytelling, which neatly unfolds a personal tragedy within a broader social context of unemployment and poverty. Something similar was achieved three years later with the director's *Miracle in Milan*, but that film focused on group solidarity and employed elements of fantasy. *Bicycle Thieves*, in contrast, clings to the shoulders of the main characters and discredits superstition as a solution for real-life problems. Despite its glittering international reception, the film did attract considerable criticism within Italy. Several critics felt it presented the country in a negative light, while the author of the novel from which it was adapted claimed that it distorted his book, and neo-realist director Luchino Visconti said it was wrong to use a professional actor's voice to dub over the amateur actor who played Antonio. Nevertheless, it remains stubbornly on most lists of the best films ever made. Not just for the brilliance of the plot but also for the achingly poignant presentation of the characters' suffering.

SYNOPSIS Antonio, an unemployed man with a wife and two children, gets a lifeline when he is given a job putting up posters. The problem of needing a bicycle is solved only when his wife pawns their best linen and he uses that money to repossess his bicycle. However, disaster strikes on the first day when a thief runs off with the bicycle. The rest of the film follows Antonio and his young son, helped by a friend, as they search for the missing bike, without which he cannot work. After a series of disappointments, the father and son finally track the thief down, but Antonio is persuaded not to press charges since he is the only witness to the alleged crime. Now, at his wits' end, Antonio steals a bicycle himself and is caught immediately. Fortunately, the owner senses his plight and lets him go. Antonio is back where he started, but now he has lost his dignity, too.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Antonio	Antonio Ricci is a jobless man (probably in his thirties).
Maria	Maria is his wife.
Bruno	Their young son.
Baiocco	His friend.
Thief	The thief, a young man, is unnamed.

STORY

Bright prospects In post-war Italy, on a dusty housing project outside Rome, a crowd of unemployed men stand at the steps of a government office. An official calls out the name of 'Antonio Ricci', but that man is dozing out of earshot. A friend fetches him and he is given a job of putting up posters. Antonio is overwhelmed by his good fortune, while the others are left in despair. As he leaves, the official points out that he needs a bicycle for the job. Antonio says his is broken (in fact, it's been pawned to get money for food). The official is about to offer the job to someone else in the crowd, when Antonio says he'll get it. 'Ok, no bike, no job,' says the official.

Pawn shop When he tells his wife Maria about the problem, she pawns her wedding gift—a nice set of bed linen—which enables Antonio to repossess his bike from the pawn shop. Antonio reports for work at the printing company, where he is put on the books, given his uniform and told to start work the following morning. He and Maria are overjoyed at the good salary and prospects for their young family of two children.

Family life Happy Antonio discovers that Maria is paying a clairvoyant, but he merely scolds her for wasting money on such fanciful nonsense. Maria replies that the clairvoyant predicted that he would get a job and she feels obliged to pay her. Early next morning, his young son, Bruno, dressed like a mechanic, helps his father prepare for work by oiling his bicycle. Maria has altered his cap to fit properly, and they share a joke about his 'looking like a cop.' Father and son ride the bike into the city centre, where Bruno works at a petrol station, and Antonio continues to his new job.

Theft Carrying a long ladder on his shoulder, a stack of cinema posters and a pot of glue, Antonio pedals off to a large wall and sets to work. His co-worker explains that you only need to work fast and make sure there are no wrinkles on the poster. Preoccupied with doing a good job, and at the top of a ladder, Antonio does not keep an eye on his bicycle, leaning up against the wall. A man, wearing a German army cap, steals it and his accomplice cleverly misleads Antonio when he chases after him. A distraught Antonio files a complaint with the overworked police. 'Go look for it yourself,' the inspector tells him. 'Look in a pawn shop.' The police, he says, have bigger fish to fry. Antonio has to take a bus to the petrol station to pick up his son, who wants to know where the bike is. 'Is it broken?' the boy asks and Antonio accepts this explanation.

Baiocco Dropping Bruno at home, Antonio goes back to town and finds his friend, Baiocco, who is directing a rehearsal for an amateur music-hall show. In the next room, a political activist speaks to a meeting about the terrible unemployment situation and the humiliation of a welfare cheque. Baiocco tells Antonio to look for the stolen bike at a certain flea market, where thieves sell their stuff. As they speak, Maria arrives, crestfallen and tearful. Baiocco is optimistic and tells them not to worry. They'll search for it first thing in the morning.

Disappointment Antonio, Bruno, Baiocco and a few friends hunt for the bike, a Fides model, frame number 12033. Because stolen bikes are taken apart for sale, each person looks for a separate part: frame, tires, pump and bell. There are hundreds of bikes for sale, and they have to pretend to be buyers. Antonio finds a Fides bike being repainted and summons the police, but it turns out to have a different serial number.

Getting closer The search shifts to another market, where a rain storm drives the stall-holders away. Antonio and Bruno seek shelter beside a building and spot the thief by his tell-tale hat. After a chase, they lose him, but they find the old man the thief was talking to, but he says he doesn't know the man. Still, father and son follow the old man inside a church that is hosting a food bank supervised by a lady bountiful. Antonio again confronts the man, and this time, in the middle of a church service, he manages to force him to tell him where the thief lives. He also demands that the man come with him to the address. In the crowded church, Antonio loses sight of the old man.

Father and son When Bruno asks why he let him go, Antonio slaps him in frustration. He tells the boy to wait for him by a bridge so that he can move more quickly on his own. When he goes off, he hears a crowd shouting that a boy is drowning and runs back. When he sees that it is not Bruno, he realises he's been too obsessed with the bike and takes Bruno to a restaurant to treat them both to a good meal. They are both happy until Antonio notices a wealthy family eating a feast at the next table. Reminded of the good salary he just lost, he is even more desperate to find his bike.

Clairvoyant Having run out of ideas, he decides to visit his wife's clairvoyant. He and Bruno join a long queue waiting to see the spiritualist, but Bruno cuts in front and they are interviewed by the lady in a robe. She makes them a prediction that they were fearing: find it today, or your bike is lost forever.

Thief found After paying her, they step onto the pavement, where they again spot the man in the distinctive cap. The man flees into a brothel, but Antonio forces his way in and manhandles him out to the street. Antonio demands his bicycle, the man professes his innocence, and in the ensuing argument, the neighbours rally around the thief. One man tells Antonio to get the police if he's so sure their friend stole a bike, which is what Bruno does. The police officer arrives and inspects the small apartment where the thief lives with his mother and other children. Finding no evidence and with no other witnesses, the police officer advises Antonio that he would lose the case in court because the neighbours would testify for the thief.

Another theft Antonio and Bruno leave the scene downhearted and pass by a football stadium where they see bikes parked outside. Realising it's his only chance, Antonio steals one but is soon chased down and held for the police. The owner is moved by Bruno's tears and lets Antonio go. He is free but has degraded himself by becoming a thief; he has also been humiliated in front of his son. In the final shot, Antonio walks away in tears, with Bruno beside him, holding his hand. They disappear into a crowd and we are left to imagine what happens next.

THEMES

1. *Society* The story in this classic and much-loved film is not about a theft or about a bicycle. It is about a man who happens to need 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 still 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 at the flea markets, where people scrape a living by selling old, broken items, which resemble the people themselves. The welfare state had not yet emerged, so there was no social safety net to protect 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 Antonio might soon join the desperate men in the church.

2. *Family* 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 stations, 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.

3. *Friendship* A parallel theme is that of friendship, or support given by people outside the family. When Antonio's sprits 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.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Antonio As an unemployed (but not destitute) man in his thirties, Antonio has a lot of worries. He is supported by his wife and young son, but he has lost any optimism he may have once possessed. He doesn't talk much, but his face (which is on screen for most of the film) tells us a great deal about him. Still, it is difficult to pin down any constants in this character since he is so much at the mercy of his changing circumstances, swinging back and forth from despair to happiness. He is certainly an honest person, without pretence, although he does tell a white lie to Bruno about what happened to his bicycle.

Sincere If we are forced to identify one fundamental aspect of his character, it would be his sincerity. This open-hearted quality of his is illustrated in the very first scene when he receives his employment slip to start a new job. When the official says, almost as an after-thought, that he needs a bicycle, Antonio wrinkles his face and says, 'I have one, but it's broken.' He answers honestly, without thinking of the consequences. The official pushes him to confirm if he has a bicycle or not, and Antonio then promises to have it ready to start work the next morning. In this brief exchange, we sense that Antonio does not dissemble or make excuses. He is an ordinary, decent man, hard up, but sincere.

Cursed A minute, later, though, we see that Antonio is afflicted by a sense of doom. And it does seem that he is caught in a Kafkaesque circle of bad luck. Having been lucky to get the job, he is desperately unlucky that he cannot keep it because his bicycle is in the pawn shop. It's there because he needed to get money to feed his family. And now he needs it to make money, but he can't repossess the bike because he has no money. He feels dejected because of his 'rotten luck.' Explaining the situation to his wife, he says, 'I've been cursed since the day I was born. I feel like a man in chains.' Having lived a life on the margins of society, he believes he is the victim of a cruel plot.

Determined Still, Antonio has a measure of self-belief, which he draws on to propel himself forward. Perhaps it is his sense of victimhood, his need for revenge for an injustice, but he does persist in his search for the thief despite repeated setbacks. The most sustained example of his determination is his dogged refusal to let the thief go once he has found him in his house. Dragging him outside, he demands the bike, and repeats his demand even after a large crowd of the thief's supporters surrounds him. When the thief says he's innocent and starts to walk away, Antonio grabs him by the shirt and shouts that he's 'not leaving.' His actions and words express a desperate determination, which is understandable since his future depends on retrieving his bicycle.

Fragile One of the most revealing scenes in the film takes place in a restaurant. Reunited with his son, who he feared had drowned, Antonio realises that all is not lost. Even without the bicycle and job, he has his family. He decides to treat himself and Bruno to a good meal. Sitting in the restaurant, entertained by musicians and enjoying a beer, he grows optimistic and forgets his sorrow. However, the wide smile on his face disappears when he notices an affluent family eating a sumptuous meal at a nearby table. 'To eat like them you'd have to make a million a month,' he says and then calculates the monthly salary he'd earn from hanging posters. He sinks once again into despair and wonders how he can get his bike. This scene illustrates his fragility, how quickly he shifts from despair to happiness and back again.

Humiliated The final shot of the film is the most poignant of all. Antonio has degraded himself by stealing a bicycle, gotten caught and been released by the sympathetic owner. The men who had chased and caught him send him off with jeers and insults, all of which is seen and heard by little Bruno. Bruno hands him his hat, which had fallen off in a shuffle. Antonio brushes it off and walks away with Bruno at his side. But he can't brush away his humiliation and begins to cry.

Bruno Bruno is a young child, perhaps nine or ten (the actor was nine at the time). But he is also much more than a child. He works in a petrol station and he plays an important role in supporting his father emotionally throughout the story. In fact, he seems to be Antonio's alter ego, with his face reflecting his father's otherwise hidden moods. He can still be boyish, in his petulance and mood swings, but in the end, he is the boy every man would want for a son.

Mature Bruno shows his maturity in the scene where father and son are getting ready to go to work in the early morning. It is still dark, when the little boy is cleaning his father's bicycle, something he's good at since he works at a petrol station himself. Wearing workman's overalls, he looks like a twenty-year-old mechanic, an image that is reinforced when he points out new dents made in the recently-repaired bike. Antonio suggests that the dents might have been there before, but sagacious Bruno shakes his head. 'Who knows how they [at the pawn shop] take care of bikes,' he declares. 'They don't pay for the repairs.' In this brief scene, Bruno shows that he might be more savvy than his somewhat naïve father.

Affectionate From first to last, Bruno is shown to be a sympathetic character. In his opening scene, he not only helps his father get ready for work, but he also carefully closes the shutters so that the noise outside will not wake the sleeping baby. His most affectionate scene, though, is the final one, when he looks up at his father, now humiliated and defeated. Bruno has wiped away his own tears, but sees them form in his father's eyes. Instinctively, he reaches up and takes his hand. Few scenes in the history of cinema are as tender.

Maria Maria is Antonio's young wife. If they had a little more money, you suspect that she could be very pretty. As it is, she toils in ragged clothes, hauling heavy pails of water from a communal pump into her apartment. Maria is clear-headed and appears to be less naïve than her husband, to whom she is loyal and supportive. Like many people in dire circumstances, she also seeks help from spiritual sources.

Decisive Not just pragmatic, Maria is also quick to take important decisions. When she hears from Antonio about the stolen bicycle, she is walking home with him. Once inside their little flat, she starts to act. She yanks him up from the bed, where he is sitting, and strips it of sheets. He wants to know what's going on and she says, 'You can sleep without sheets, can't you?' She takes all the linen she has—the used sheets and a set of unused ones—to the pawn shop and gets the money necessary to buy back the all-important bicycle from another pawn shop. That nice linen was her wedding gift, but she knows where priorities lie. And she does not hesitate to make the right decision.

Superstitious Maria, the practical, hard-working housewife, shows another side of her character when Antonio finds her waiting in line to see a clairvoyant. He has just repossessed his bicycle and everything is looking rosy, but Maria owes the woman 50 lira. 'How can a woman with her feet on the ground and two children turn to such superstitious nonsense?' Antonio asks, concerned about the 'waste' of money. 'She predicted you'd get a job,' Maria explains to her husband. 'And you did.' Maria, it appears, has been just as desperate as her husband about their financial future. With no ordinary means of support, she turned to the paranormal. We should note that, later, at his wit's end, Antonio does the same thing and gets good advice.



(Antonio confronts the thief)



(Antonio and Maria in a brief moment of happiness)



(Bruno and Antonio contemplate their options)



(The final shot, a disgraced father is comforted by his son)