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**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

Our topic today is the influential movement called Italian neorealism, a movement of filmmakers that arose in Italy at the end of the Second World War and had-- although it was a very short lived movement, lasted only six or seven years before it kind of dissolved of its own way. In part, incidentally, because although the films were very successful with critics and several of the neorealist films won Academy Awards as the best foreign film of the year in 1946 and then again in 1948 when the film you're going to see tonight, *Bicycle Thieves*, won the reward. Despite that acclaim and even global success, the movement sort of petered out, although its influence as I've suggested was very great.

One reason the movement petered out was that forces in Italian society, chambers of commerce types, people who are interested in encouraging the rebuilding of the devastated cities of Italy, a function, a consequence of the Second World War, those folks began to feel that the messages coming from neorealist films were too negative and were discouraging foreign investors. So although it was a very remarkable movement, it lasted only, as I say, a short time.

But its influence ramified very, very, very broadly. We can trace its influence to virtually every national cinema that came after it, and there are certain very particular influences that one can trace from the neorealist movement to certain American directors of film noir in the '40s and early '50s, to certain very interesting and historically curious forms of television that emerged in the early years of American television that were deeply imitative of and influenced by Italian neorealist movies.

The man that many would identify as the greatest of all Indian directors, Satyajit Ray, was directly inspired to make movies by *The Bicycle Thief*, and he made a series of three films that are essentially a form of Italian neorealism moved to India, a wonderful trilogy of films, some of them actually about the untouchable classes in India, called *The Apu Trilogy*. And they remain among the most treasured forms of Indian film.

The Italian neorealist had a profound influence on other European cinemas as well, and most

particularly can be said to be the originating movement behind the French Nouvelle Vague, The New Wave movement, that in France that emerges at the end of the '50s and the early '60s and it involved such now recognized, such directors who are now recognized as major figures in the history of film as Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut.

So it was although a short-lived movement, profoundly influential one, and it produced some enduring, and beautiful, and I guess I would say immortal films. The most famous and perhaps in some ways the most perfect of those films is the one you're going to see tonight, *Bicycle Thieves*. And I'll talk a bit about that film in my introduction to the lecture this evening.

I want to begin, though, by giving you a sense of how neorealism feels, a kind of distilled version, or a distilled embodiment of many of the deepest principles of neorealism, and in order to do that, I want to show you a clip from the very beginning of the film you're going to see tonight. So you'll see this beginning twice. Hopefully, the second time you see it, you'll be alive, more alive to some of its implications. So here is the very opening of *Bicycle Thieves*.

And one of the things I want to ask you to watch for is first how much information, how much visual information, dramatic information, becomes available to you under the titles, and then how fluently and fluidly the film moves out of the title sequence into a kind of continuation of the drama that's articulated in that title sequence.

On the surface, this little anecdote at the very beginning of the film seems very modest and one might even think of it as simply expository, that is providing information to the audience so that they can get on with the story. As I hope you'll recognize, and as I'll try to show you briefly after I've shown you the clip, much more is going on than that, and it's a particularly wonderful example of the way in which the best neorealist films generate a kind of texture, a kind of density, what I've sometimes called a multiplicity that we have suggested in this course is one of the fundamental ways in which you can distinguish between entertainment and serious entertainment or between entertainment and art. When items and objects begin to have this multiplicity, when they begin to serve multiple functions, not just a single function, you're in the presence of something not only complex, but something that acknowledges the complexity of the world in some respects. And this opening sequence of *Bicycle Thieves* does this with remarkable economy.

So here's the beginning of the film.

[SPEAKING ITALIAN]

**DAVID THORBURN:** Great. Can you freeze it for a second? One thing I should mention while you're watching this, to interrupt the sequence for a moment. The activity that you see taking place under the titles is supposed to be confusing at first. Although, after a while it begins to clarify. Perhaps you're not fully clear what is going on until the titles disappear and you see these men assembling around that staircase there where a man with a list is speaking to them.

What is going on here is what in the United States in the '40s and '50s on the docks in New York, they called the shape up. And a shape up is a place where men who are eager for work sort of come and hang around and wait for the boss, the foreman, or the hiring boss to pick them out of the crowd. Shape ups are always unpleasant experiences because there are many people who are excluded, and the people who are chosen are often-- this was especially true on the New York waterfront in the days which I know about because my father was a longshoreman for a while. It was a particularly bad thing in the New York waterfront because you had to know somebody to get work. I don't know if that's an implication here or not. Although, you'll see as the men complain that some of them have that suspicion.

In any case, what's going on here is what is called a shape up. Men are gathered around, men who are unemployed, looking for work.

[SPEAKING ITALIAN]

**DAVID THORBURN:** I wish I could let the scene run on. But I hope you, I hope you-- I can tell some of you are responding to what you saw there. Make some observations about what you saw there. What in that introduction what do we learn as an audience? You have to be fast. I only have a few minutes here. Yes?

**AUDIENCE:** Is there a way for [INAUDIBLE]?

**DAVID THORBURN:** All right. One thing we know is that there's a lot of unemployment in this country, a lot, right? And there's a lot of discontent. And then the minute he says, I don't have a bicycle, virtually everyone else in the crowd says, I have a bicycle. Everyone is desperate for a job, not just Ricci. That's right. So we learn how grateful he is, but also how troubled he is.

What's the evidence in the film that he is really very unhappy, very, very troubled by the fact

that he doesn't have a bicycle to get this job after so long? What's the most dramatic piece of evidence we see that he's distracted by his anxiety? Help?

**AUDIENCE:** He doesn't help her with the water.

**DAVID THORBURN:** He doesn't help his wife with the water. Yes. It's a very dramatic scene, isn't it? She's walking behind him, carrying these two heavy-- and he doesn't ignore because he's a nasty patriarch who thinks that women should carry water, he's so distracted he doesn't notice it. And, in fact, he walks down that little incline and looks back and sees her struggling, goes back, and as soon as he recognizes it, he takes one from her. And it's significant, isn't it, that he takes only one from her. They're really partners. And what else is significant? She doesn't yell at him. She doesn't say, my god, Ricci, what kind of a pig are you, making me carry all this stuff by myself? because she shares his anxiety and his concern, doesn't she?

So on the surface, the scenes certainly dramatizes Ricci's desperate need for a job and the fact that he's one of many people in a similar situation. But what does it tell us about his marriage? On the basis of these details, what you just saw in this beginning, do you think he has a good marriage, that he has a good relationship with his wife, that it's a mutually trusting relationship? Of course, of course, right?

And how do we know that? We know that from that detail. Now, the detail does not advance the plot in the sense of telling us anything further about his need for the bicycle or his unemployment, but it does reveal to us something about their marriage, about the kind of man he is, about the kind of woman she is. So that it's a moment in which his anxiety about his job is maybe the primary thing we see, but what is also dramatized for us is the nature of their relationship.

And it's dramatized for us without anyone coming out and saying, let me show you a mutually engaged couple who depend on each other and who survive in part because they share each other's troubles. People whose respect for each other is so total that even when one of them commits a really mean or at least an unpleasant act by ignoring his wife struggles, she doesn't even think to complain to him about it, because she shares his anxiety.

It's an example of what I mean by a moment of multiplicity in which something about their relationship, something about their marriage emerges even as we are also learning something about the economic circumstances in which these characters live.

Say a little bit more about the scene you saw. How about the place where she's drawing water? What about that? Why would-- They're in a city. They're walking, in fact, to a high rise apartment house in which they live. What does it mean that she's carrying two buckets of water to an apartment and then she's going to climb up four flights or three flights to get to their apartment? What does that tell us about Mussolini's Italy?

**AUDIENCE:** There's no running water.

**DAVID THORBURN:** There's no running water in the building, in the high rise apartments. And not just that, is the water precious? How do you know it is?

**AUDIENCE:** She doesn't leave it there.

DAVID THORBURN: Say?

**AUDIENCE:** She doesn't leave it there.

**DAVID THORBURN:** Yes. But what else? Where do they get the water? Is the water-- do they go to a pop in the open square? No. It's in a barbed wire compound. Again, these details may not register instantly as deeply significant, but think what they tell us about the conditions of urban life in Rome in 1947 or 1948 when the film is set.

And you can even go further. Look more closely at the setting. Did anything grow there? It looked like they were walking across a wasteland of mud, except for these high rise tenement buildings. So we have high rise tenement buildings set down in a kind of desert, a place in-- buildings that don't even have running water in which the main water pump has to be protected by barbed wire. So that it's almost as if in this brief introduction to the film, the whole socioeconomic environment of the story has been established for us without anyone giving us lectures about it or calling our attention to it.

That's what I mean by multiplicity, when the details of the film serve character and serve plot and serve our sense of the environment. So it's a rich moment. It's a moment, it's a moment of art. It's a moment of complexity. It's a moment of human truthfulness that resonates for us as the film goes on. Well, there are many, many moments like this.

Virtually every moment in *Bicycle Thieves* has this kind of density or texture, has this kind of implication built into the particular details. I want to very quickly set the kind of the context for-- I've already implied the context for the neorealist movement. The basic context is the end of

World War II.

Most historians trace the beginnings of the neorealist movement to films that were made under Mussolini while the war was still going on, and some people actually date the very beginning of the movement to a film made in 1942 by Luchino Visconti called *Obsession*. It's actually an adaptation of a very popular American pulp novel called *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. It's been made twice into an English language American movie, most recently starring Jack Nicholson. But the Italian version may be the most important and interesting of the films made from the book.

The book itself is a rather tawdry noirish story about the owner of a diner who's an ugly middle-aged pug who's married to a beautiful and somewhat younger woman who very unhappy with her husband begins an affair with a drifter who comes by, and ultimately encourages the drifter to kill her husband. And it's actually a rather heavy-handed male chauvinist fantasy about, partly about, how cunning and dangerous women are.

The Italian version is much more interesting, in part because the working class dimensions of the story are given much greater emphasis in Luchino Visconti's version. And the film partly becomes a kind of meditation on the fate of undocumented workers and nonunion workers in Italian society.

In any case, the emphasis on ordinary people and the emphasis on socioeconomic circumstances in that film by Visconti came to be defining features, among the defining features of Italian neorealist filmmaking.

But the movement really doesn't get going until after the war. And the context of the war is very important. We need to recognize that the film is really set in a devastated society, a society in which, I'm talking now about all of Europe after the Second World War, unemployment reached 25% or 30% higher in some societies. There was economic turmoil in virtually every European society, profound terrible pressures from black market activities of all kinds.

The war was so devastating that something on the order of 35% of all the permanent dwellings in Western Europe were destroyed during the war. 25% of the Polish population was killed. A tremendous proportion, virtually every-- Well, a very large number of Italian cities were damaged very badly, including, of course, Rome itself.

And these abject and terrifying economic conditions were, of course, in Italy doubled by the problem that Italy was on the losing side of the war and therefore faced even more difficulties in the recovery than a culture like the French culture or English society.

So the devastation of World War II and the turmoil and the dislocation caused by World War II is the fundamental fact. What is still operative in Italian society, what institutions still work, is one of the implicit questions that the film explores. And the film suggests that a lot of the official institutions, like the police and especially the religious institutions, have broken down and are not really helping people very much, as you'll see when you watch tonight's film. But there are other forms of help and aid that people get, mostly in some sense from their, the film suggests, from their local communities and from their immediate families.

Well, to this basic sort of setting of devastation and turmoil and economic uncertainty, we need to add two other contextual factors, both of them having to do with the film traditions against which neorealism set itself, against which it understood itself to be in a kind of profound argument.

The first tradition was the tradition of fascist film under Mussolini. These were almost all studio films. They were shot inside studios. Neorealist films are shot outdoors. And they were largely escapist fare focusing more often than not on the upper social orders. In fact, there was a genre of films so devoted to the romantic entanglements of aristocrats that they came to be known as white telephone films.

The reason for this is that in the old days before cellphones and before multicolored phones, all telephones were black. And it was a mark of astonishing aristocratic privilege that the people in some of these films had white telephones. They were such unusual objects for the time that the film's came to be labeled as white telephone films. And they were largely, as I said, escapist movies with beautifully made up actors and actresses in artificial light, performing what were essentially artificial stories.

The second tradition against which the neorealists are responding, against which they are reacting, is the tradition of Hollywood glamor.

There's a wonderful moment in *The Bicycle Thief* as you'll see tonight when Ricci finally goes off to get his job. He recovers his bicycle from hock. He's pawned it. And that's why he's so nervous. He knows where the bicycle is, but he doesn't know how they're going to get out of pawn. And you'll see how his wife solves that problem in the very next sequence beyond the

one I've just shown to you.

When Ricci finally goes to work for the first time, he has someone with him giving him instructions, and what he is a bill sticker. He puts up posters, great pos-- In fact, the poster that he's putting up is a poster for an American movie. And it has a great American, a famous American movie star of the '40s and '50s, Rita Hayworth, on it. And as he's putting the picture up-- you put paste on the board, then you-- he's given these stupid instructions. Anyone could do this job, but the man giving him instructions acts as if he's explaining something really difficult like rocket science, when all he's doing is telling him how to paste a poster up on a board.

But his instructions include systematic remarks about being sure not to leave any wrinkles in it. And I've taken that myself to be a kind of implicit complaint against Hollywood. They'll say the Hollywood female has no wrinkles. The Hollywood female, the Hollywood star, the Hollywood movie is so glamorized that you never see wrinkles or defects. And this couldn't contrast more shortly with the ordinary faces of the actors that we see in neorealist films.

So two traditions of glamor and escapism are essentially the antagonist that help to explain how neorealism defines itself and understands itself.

It's worth briefly mentioning that neorealism has distinguished origins in at least three different national cinemas. The first is in Italian cinema itself. There was a movement during the silent era, a kind of documentary movement, that wanted to talk-- a quasi-documentary movement. They were still fiction films. But they wanted to talk more openly and honestly about contemporary events in contemporary society. And the movement was called the verismo movement, the truth movement. And it occurred between 1914 and 1916 in Italy. And this--

When the neorealists began to articulate their own manifestos and to explain theoretically what they were up to, they sometimes reached back to the verismo movement, as a way of saying we're actually traditional as well as new.

A second fundamental influence on neorealism, a kind of earlier version of neorealism, occurred in the German tradition at the end of the silent era in a series of films made in the 1920s by the director GW Pabst, P-A-B-S-T. The most famous of these films is a film produced in 1925 called *The Joyless Street*. It partly deals with prostitutes, and it talks, it tries to dramatize in realistic ways the conditions of the lower social orders.

And of course the final originating source, this also explains the richness of neorealism that there are other film traditions that are feeding in to it and enriching it, is French, and it's the kind of French film that we associate with Jean Renoir and with the traditions of poetic realism.

Some of the neorealist, at least one of the neorealist directors Visconti, had worked as an assistant director for Jean Renoir at one point in his career. And I believe, I'm not sure this is accurate, so don't take this as absolute fact, but I believe that it was Renoir himself who gave a copy of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to Visconti, which led to the creation of what many people would identify as the very first neorealist film.

The basic practices and traditions of poetic realism are carried over in neorealism. And in one sense, one can see neorealism as an extension of poetic realism. The difference is that neorealism has a more political and social orientation. It's more conscious of having a political and social ambition. It wants to-- And sometimes neorealist films can seem a bit preachy because of that. There's clearly a kind of sentiment deeply sympathetic to the lower social orders, deeply suspicious of the hierarchies of capitalism. Some of the neorealists were Marxists or Marxist sympathizers, and that helps to explain the political orientation of neorealist films.

But the basic features of poetic realism, the use of an outdoor camera, the interest in a mise en scene style, and in a film made by, which I mentioned I think last time, made by Renoir in 1935, a film called *Toni* T-O-N-I. We have a French version of neorealism, because that film, as I mentioned last time, is about Italian quarry workers in the south of France, and it has a lot of nonprofessional actors in it, something that became a key feature of neorealism.

So the neorealist movement then has this powerful context which creates a kind of moral and aesthetic energy that helps to explain the power and the excitement of these films. It has two very clear antagonists, the glamor of Hollywood and the false and aristocratic glamor of the film under Mussolini. And it also draws as well on older traditions of film in Italian, in German, and in French that set earlier examples for the kind of thing that the neorealists wanted to do.

I've already talked about the key features of neorealism just a second ago when I spoke about poetic realism. But let me mention some of those key features in a little bit more detail.

One way to think about neorealist films is to recognize that their emphasis on reality is one which insists on trying to create an illusion of a plausible actuality. And what this meant to them was, listen, people have warts on their noses. People are not beautiful the way they are in

Hollywood. So one thing we need to do is we need to roughen up the look of our performers.

And in fact, professional actors, it was felt, often bring a kind of smoothness or a fluidity to their performance that is inherently artificial. So many neorealist films have no or virtually no professional actors in them, or sometimes only professional actors in the major roles.

In the film you're going to see tonight, the star is a nonprofessional actor. He actually ended up having a tragic life. The film won the Academy Award as the best foreign film of the year in America in 1948, and the man who played Ricci became an international star, but he fell into hard times and ended up not really making much money from his very brief stardom, and my understanding is that he never again made a film as remarkable as *The Bicycle Thief*.

But one of the things that is absolutely astonishing about the performance is that this man is not an actor. You would never guess it. I mean, it's an absolute-- or maybe you would, but you would guess it only after having been told that. Because he performs with such naturalness and such grace. So the use of nonprofessional actors is one of the key features of neorealism.

A second key feature is a rejection of studio filming. All neorealist films, like almost all poetic realist films, were shot outdoors in natural light. Partly because they wanted natural light, and partly because studios lie about the texture of the world. We want the texture of the world in our films, the neo-- Our films are really about reality, so we can't shoot indoors.

A third-- nonprofessional actors, outdoor camera, a third feature would be what we might call a fundamental mise en scene style, taken directly from the stylistic habits established by Jean Renoir and other French directors who worked in the same style.

Relatively modest forms of editing. The forms of montage that you see are not disruptive. You won't get jump cuts or disorienting moments. The camera, the camera is, as with Renoir, constantly restless and in motion, but often in very gentle ways.

There's a wonderful moment in the scene I mentioned a moment ago where we see Ricci putting up his first poster when the camera is watching them, and he's getting these instructions from his comrade about how to put the thing up, and it's really boring. Well, one reason that you know it's boring-- well, obviously as a viewer, you begin to probably feel it without registering that it's boring, but the reason that you know it is is that the camera suddenly looks away.

What happens is the camera discovers something interesting happening on the street and while the conversation continues on the soundtrack, the camera shifts away from Ricci and his instructor, and follows a wealthy man and two children who are walking behind him. And they're really beggars trying to get money from him. And the camera just found it interesting, so it looked at it, a very Jean Renoir-ish move. There are other moves like this in the film, as if the camera, like Jean Renoir's camera, is so interested in the world that it's capable of being distracted. There's a sense that the world's complexity is always threatening the coherences and meanings that the film is releasing for us.

So nonprofessional actors, outdoor filming, a mise en scene, a profound serious mise en scene style influenced deeply by Jean Renoir, and finally, we might maybe another-- not finally, one more, a fourth feature, we might say is what I was trying to indicate when I talked about the social or political bias of these films. One might say that these films have a more profoundly documentary flavor. I don't mean that we feel we're watching documentaries. But we do feel we're watching a slice of life, that the economic and moral and social and personal circumstances of the characters we see in neorealist films are a version of what we would find if we walked into Rome not in a movie and just looked for people of this class, a documentary flavor. So that's four features.

And a final feature, I suppose I would want to add, has to do with the relation between plot and character. It's not quite true to say that these films are plotless, they're not, and one of the most magnificent things about *The Bicycle Thief* is the economy of its plot, and I'll talk a bit about that tonight, but it's nonetheless true that in neorealist films, you do not feel that action drives events. What you feel is that character drives events in some sense, what the plot aims for is a natural unfolding.

You're never supposed to feel in a neorealist film that some event in the plot has been introduced arbitrarily. You're never supposed to step back and say, oh, that could never happen, or how implausible is that, or I guess they did that because they wanted to show x. The kind of response you often have watching certain forms of Hollywood entertainment and other forms of merely escapist entertainment fare.

But you don't ever have that feeling in a good neorealist film. What you feel is that the events of the plot unfold naturally out of the economic and social realities the characters live in and out of their characters. And you can test this generalization against tonight's film, and I'm sure that you'll find that it's a compelling one, that it really describes this movement's respect for the

complexity of character over plot, for the complexity of character and therefore for its commitment to a kind of movie that is more interested in character than it is in story or event in a narrow sense.

The central figures of neorealism are important to mention. And maybe especially the fellow that I have first on my list here, Cesare Zavattini, because he's the least well-known of the names I've listed there. The other three names are all famous directors. And of course De Sica is the director of *Bicycle Thieves*, and I'll talk about his career this evening.

But Zavattini was the theoretical genius behind neorealism and a figure for whom I still retain a tremendous sympathy and affection. He was a novelist and an essay writer as well as a screenwriter. He collaborated with Vittorio De Sica on almost every one of De Sica's significant films. Not on every one, but on virtually every one that is truly outstanding, and there are a number of them. He's the scriptwriter on. And he had a particularly symbiotic relation to De Sica.

Zavattini also articulated what came to be understood as the manifesto of neorealism. And in one such essay, I don't know if it was titled *Manifesto of Neorealism*, but that was its effect. He said this to try to summarize what he thought the ambitions of neorealism were. He said, a good film ought to be focused on the life of an ordinary man to whom nothing happens.

Now, he didn't really that nothing would happen. It's not an early version of the Seinfeld program. What he's trying to get at is this idea that plot does not dominate, that character dominates, that the events of the story grow organically out of the materials of the text, both out of character, and out of social realities.

So Zavattini was in many ways a visionary figure, an overt Marxist for a good part of his life, and probably the central intellectual influence on the neorealist movement. Visconti, the director whose dates I've put there is sometimes suggested-- it is often said that not all of Visconti's work fits neatly, maybe none of it fits neatly into the category of neorealism. And this partly has to do with a kind of flamboyance in Visconti's visual style, and maybe also a fondness for decadence, and for elaboration that does not comport with the social meanings that are implicit in neorealism.

Of the main neorealists, he's the one who fits least well, but he's often said to be the best of them. And there are many historians of film and scholars of film, including David Cook, who believe that *The Earth Trembles*, the film he made in 1948, *La Terra Trema*, *The Earth*

*Trembles*, is the greatest of all neorealist movies. I have sometimes been tempted to show it, but it's less characteristic of neorealism, so I don't show it. But it is a very remarkable film, and Visconti is a very important figure in this movement, even though he probably could be said in his later films to move beyond neorealist concerns.

Roberto Rossellini who also had a very rich long career as a filmmaker, and I've only listed one film there, because I want to show you a clip from it. Part of a trilogy of films he made at the very end of the war called, it was called his Roman Trilogy or his Rome Trilogy, and the first one was-- or his World War II Trilogy-- the first one was called *Rome, Open City*, and then there were two other. The third one was called *Germany, Year Zero*. And they all had sort of a political and social ambitions. They wanted to dramatize the postwar conditions and show the devastation that followed aftermath, that was the aftermath of the Second World War.

*Open City* had a tremendous impact what it was first released, especially in Italy, because it told an anti-fascist story. It's a somewhat melodramatic film that ends in a very melodramatic death, in a very melodramatic murder, or an accidental murder. And partly for that reason, it's a less powerful and less compelling film totally than something like *Bicycle Thieves*.

But its importance can't be overestimated. It established the basic principles that I've been talking about. It was actually begun before the war was over when it was illegal to-- when the German authorities, the fascist authorities were still controlling Rome and Italian society. And you weren't supposed to-- you couldn't film without a license, and some of the early scenes from *Rome, Open City* were actually shot illicitly on very bad film stock from behind doorways and around corners, so the people behind the camera wouldn't be caught by the authorities. And then the film was completed after peace came, after the defeat of the Axis forces.

I'm going to show you a clip from that sequence, from that film, from the very beginning of that film to give you a feel for what the film was like as well. And I think that that clip will also show you why the film was so successful. But I'll partly explain it now.

I think the Italians love this movie because it told a useful myth. It made it appear that very few Italians collaborated with the Nazis and that most Italians were really on the side of the saboteurs who were trying to blow up fascist waterworks. This is probably not entirely historically accurate since Mussolini was during much of his career a very popular figure in Italy, but you can certainly understand why it would have hit a sympathetic chord among Italians, many of whom, I'm sure, felt terrible ambivalence and shame over the events of the

Second World War.

The Italians were always much more reluctant anti-Semites than the Hitler fascists were, and the story of Italian anti-Semitism is much more complicated than the story of German anti-Semitism in this period especially.

So I think that one reason for the success of the film had to do with the way it told a kind of anti-fascist fable that worked particularly well for this postwar society that wanted to put fascism behind it, that wanted to repudiate that past. That felt-- There were certainly segments of the population that had never gone along with that past anyway, so the film sort of mobilized a new kind of feeling of Italian patriotism, and maybe even in some sense a kind of, despite the catastrophe in which it ends, a kind of hope for the future, because the film takes place entirely within the period when the fascists were still in control of Italy. And the catastrophe that occurs at the end is an act of fascist murder, an assassination, an indifference to humanity.

So Rossellini went on to make many, many films, and I feel a little guilty only mentioning this one not totally characteristic film of his, but it's important in the history of neorealism. Rossellini is a director I much admire, partly because he moved away from fiction. And at the end of his career, he was making what he thought of as educational or instructional films. But with the dazzling technique of a great fiction filmmaker. So he's a very interesting figure to study, and I hope some of you will look at more neorealist films and consider looking at Rossellini.

De Sica is the final figure that I want to mention as a fundamental energy in neorealism, and I'll only say about him that he's probably the most various and gifted of all the neorealist figures, partly because he had been a very successful actor before he became a director. And I'll talk a bit more about De Sica this evening.

What I want to illustrate now in the time we have left is an aspect of the neorealist aesthetic, if we could use that term, that I've talked about before when we discussed Renoir and that I implied in earlier comments that I made this afternoon. It's what I call the neorealist counter plot. And by counter plot, what I really want to call attention to are all those elements in the film that seem not to take part in the forward momentum of the story. We might even think of them as retarding elements in which these films sort of pause to smell the roses.

A version of what I mean, of what I mean by this neorealist counter plot, might be said to be embodied in that astonishing camera move we studied at the end of *Boudu Saved from Drowning* last week where the camera makes 180 degree swerve, becomes interested in the

beauty of the river, becomes interested in the scenery, almost as if it's forgotten its character.

Now, what I mean by the counter plot is this impulse in these films and especially in these Italian films to complicate the social and political and even the psychological processes of the story simply in order to give us a sense of what the experience it's describing is like, as if it's a version of what I'm interested in when I talk about how the camera can distract itself.

One way I can illustrate-- So what I mean by counter plot then are energies that retard or slow down the basic story or that seem not to directly contribute to the basic story, but remain part of the film's desire to represent the world, to represent reality and something of its complexity and something of its nuance, even in something of its contradictory incoherence. In other words, I don't really want to call these moments incoherent moments, they're not, because they build a much larger and more complete picture of the whole world you're looking at. And in that sense, they're not incoherent. But they are a kind of counter to the ongoing pressure to find out what happens next, what happens next, what happens next.

Well there are many, many examples of this principle in *The Bicycle Thief* and in other neorealist films. But I want to show you one very dramatic one, also to give you a flavor for an earlier neorealist film other than the one you're going to see tonight.

This is from the very beginning of *Open City*.

[SPEAKING ITALIAN]

**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

These residents of Rome. They've heard an explosion. There's sabotage going on in Rome now. It's near the end of war, and the war's not over. And now the saboteurs return home, and look who they turn out to be. And of course, that's why, Anna Magnani was the actress, was worried about where the children were, because they suspected.

[SPEAKING ITALIAN]

**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

There's already a counter plot operating here. I hope you see. Look at these little child-- innocent faces. So these saboteurs have now come home. Watch.

[SPEAKING ITALIAN]

**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

All right. Stop. I'm stopping it a little early. This scene continues. You actually go into another room in a moment, and you see children in a kind of dormitory like room in which there's one little child sitting on a potty. I think it's the first potty scene in Western film. They do something very disturbing too. They pick him off the potty and put him back in bed without wiping him. But leave it. Maybe there was no toilet paper in postwar Italy.

But your laughter indicated to me that you sort of got the point. But talk to me a little bit about what you see there. It's a wonderful example of what I was trying to illustrate at the beginning as well, this principle of multiplicity. What's happening in this sequence? What do we learn? What about living conditions in Rome, what do we learn? Nobody gives a lecture about it.

You think there is a housing crisis in Rome? Seven families living together in the same room, an old man in bed, lying in a bed, in the parlor, in the space, in the living space of the place. That's clearly where he stays. He's very ill.

What else? The deviation into comedy. The extent to which a kind of a series of comic encounters occur after what, after a moment of political sabotage. And the incongruity of these little children who are the ones who are the saboteurs is also part of the comedy even before we see them fully return to the condition of children when their parents start slapping them in the face and say, how dare you stay out so late. I didn't mean to suggest that the parents actually know that the children are saboteurs, although, some may. But I think the point is that being outside at night is very dangerous for little children in this environment, and that's why they're so concerned. But the fact that even the children are partisan anti-fascist fighters becomes a part of what the film is about.

Now, you can't tell from the very beginning, from this beginning, what the real sort of plot energy of the film is yet, can you? And it will take a bit longer before it finally turns out. The man that she's about to marry is a secret agent, and he's under-- he's being hunted by the fascist authorities, and the film is about how the good Italians try to hide him. But we don't learn that yet.

What I want to suggest to you is something of life's variety, something of life's comedy, something of life's incongruity emerges for us in those moments. It's what I want to call a counter plot, because we take delight in those moments. We don't get impatient and say, come on, film, tell me where you're going.

Because what the film teaches us is that it's not in that narrow sense about plot at all, but it's

about life in its infinite complexity. The greatest neorealist films embrace this principle as well as any films I've ever known, and, in addition, they have a kind of moral authority that's very rare. I'm very jealous of those of you in this course who have never seen *The Bicycle Thief*, because it is a remarkable film and I'm sure you'll remember for the rest of your lives. I'll see you tonight.