

MIT Student

The City in Film

3/20/15

“You’re All Thieves”: The Individual vs the City in *Bicycle Thieves*

In Vittorio De Sica’s 1948 film *Bicycle Thieves* Antonio Ricci spends a Sunday searching through the city of Rome for his stolen bicycle. Most of the day he moves through the crowds unnoticed, like any other citizen of Rome except for two key scenes: when he accuses a young man he thinks is the thief and when he steals a bicycle at the end. These scenes highlight a difference between Antonio and the rest of the city that De Sica shows in his characterization of the thief, the crowd and Antonio himself. Louis Wirth in “Urbanism as Way of Life” explains that the life of the urbanite is in many ways characterized by the social isolation of the individual despite physical proximity to others. Were he to explain Antonio’s inability to find his bike, he would argue that Antonio’s status as an urban individual hinders his ability to achieve his goals because the ties of kinship and community are less strong in the city than in the country. While Di Sica’s depiction of Rome does not follow exactly Wirth’s depiction of “the city,” their separate characterizations of the individual align in his struggle for capability and success.

Both scenes where Antonio is harassed by the crowd follow similar structures. First Antonio has an individual interaction (confronting the Thief/Alfredo and stealing the bicycle) which draws the attention of more people, mostly men. They surround him almost immediately cutting off his escape and preventing him from continuing his individual action. There is then a heightened confrontation where Antonio becomes an interloper; in the “arrest” scene, the men say to him repeatedly “why don’t you just get out,” identifying their neighborhood as a segmented area of the city. Both scenes involve the presence of neighbors protecting the interests

of one of their own, the protection Antonio did not have when his bike was stolen in the Florida. The cop says as much to Antonio when they search Alfredo's apartment; that unless he had witnesses to place Alfredo at the Florida, the neighborhood would move to protect him in court, and that such an occurrence was not uncommon. Conversely, Antonio could never get away with stealing a bike all by himself because the crowd immediately sees him and catches him. The man Antonio steals from is dispossessed in his own neighborhood and therefore has the benefit of proximal contacts to protect his property as Alfredo has to protect his innocence. Antonio has neither property nor innocence protection.

Here the dichotomy of capability between the individual and the group in Wirth's argument becomes key. He argues that despite close physical contact, the individual in the city faces social distance. Urbanites are solitary, tolerant, and competitive (15) and the individual is also not allied with a "single group" having "undivided allegiance" despite being so physically close to their neighbors. (16) *Bicycle Thieves* presents a different reality of urban living. Antonio may not have close ties with people who live around him and thus resembles a Wirthian urbanite, but the neighborhoods he walks through are very tight knit and suspicious of strangers to their local community as well as quick to defend one of their own. According to Wirth, because the city is so dense, "a premium is placed on visual recognition" (14) and the individual needs to become part of a group where he can be recognized by people. Alfredo's neighbors do not need proof that he did not steal the bike, but they are willing to testify for his innocence. De Sica differs from Wirth in his depiction of the neighborhood in that the "single group" that is their neighborhood does indeed hold an allegiance over its members.

Another aspect of Rome as portrayed in *Bicycle Thieves* is the transition from the old city to the modern city. Antonio spends his day wandering through the old parts of Rome, medieval

streets and Roman ruins of arches abound while modern twentieth century structures appear as imposing reminders of not only the legacy of fascism but the new modern world. This is the world Wirth writes about, where the “weakening bonds of kinship and the declining social significance of the family the disappearance of the neighborhood and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity” define the urban life. Indeed, the breakdown of these factors according to Wirth has caused “greater personal insecurity” in the city. (21) Antonio living in the new constructions outside the center of old Rome experiences this far more than the people living in the city center because the modern city fosters this lack of strong group ties.

Wirth defines the city in terms of the individuals who live in it. They are heterogeneous as far as they have different occupations and lifestyles, backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. But an individual in the city does not see himself surrounded by other individuals, he sees a crowd surrounding him as unit, one large group. *Bicycle Thieves* portrays this struggle of the individual to have some sense of personal capability and autonomy in the city when the ties of his community are not strong enough to protect his interests and security. The film does examine an aspect of the city life that Wirth does not fully address: how an individual copes with social isolation and the concrete effects of being so solitary. Antonio has no way to find his bike, accuse the thief, or protect his innocence because he is one man alone in the city. Ultimately, his solitude, integral to his being a city-dweller, makes his life in the city so difficult.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

11.139 / 11.239 The City in Film
Spring 2015

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.