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**Italian Neorealism in *The Bicycle Thief***

**and *Big Deal on Madonna Street***

After World War II, a new movement began in Italian film. Neorealism “attempted to interpret the harsh recent past and uncertain present with compassionate naturalism.” (Harvey, 1) The films *The Bicycle Thief*, filmed by Vittorio De Sica, and *Big Deal on Madonna Street*, filmed by Mario Monicelli, both have aspects of the neorealist movement. Although they differ in genre, *The Bicycle Thief* a tragedy and *Big Deal on Madonna Street* a comedy, they share similar qualities. We can see references of *The Bicycle Thief* in Monicelli’s film. The allusions in *Big Deal on Madonna Street* honor classic neorealism and help the audience to better understand the message that Monicelli is trying relay to the audience.

One of the most obvious differences between the two films is that *The Bicycle Thief* is a tragedy. Although the film is lacking some elements, it possesses many qualities Aristotle deems necessary for a successful tragedy. The main character, Alberto, cannot be classified as an Aristotelian tragic hero because he lacks the characteristics to be qualified as such, namely having a moment of recognition and a downfall. A tragedy lacking a tragic hero would be classified as having a simple plot. Although it is not the tragic hero, or lack of, that makes *The Bicycle Thief* a tragedy; it is the ability to evoke pity and fear in the audience. The ability to rouse pity and fear in the audience is the sign of a true tragedy and while “fear and pity sometimes result from the spectacle, [they] are sometimes aroused by the actual arrangements of the incidents, which is preferable and the mark of a better [author]” (Aristotle, 49).

The way the actions in the film are arranged help to arouse pity and fear in the audience. We pity Antonio when his bike is stolen in the beginning and we feel for him the rest of the movie. From each failed attempt to regain the bike to understanding the importance the bike has to his family, out heartstrings are tugged and plucked throughout the entire film. We also fear for Antonio at the very end of the film when he attempts to steal the bike for himself. We assume that he will be arrested and we worry not only for his fate, but also for the future of his son, Bruno, and the rest of his family. However, once the owner of the bicycle pardons him for his actions, the film does something common to all tragedies: it brings us back to the beginning.

Aristotle stated “tragedy is … a representation of an action that is heroic and complete” (Aristotle, 23). The characters in this film are subject to “the same cyclical structure: the impoverished Roman is the first victim of the theft of his bicycle, and finally out of desperation himself becomes a bicycle thief” (Restivo, 36). After Antonio is pardoned, he and Bruno walk back into the masses. This shows that they are going back to where they started; jobless and without the bicycle, the only thing that would help Antonio get work. The cyclical nature of the story enhances the tragedy because it shows that no matter how hard a person would work, he is just going to be beat back down by the system. It is virtually impossible to climb higher in society.

Aristotle emphasizes the nature of the characters in a tragedy. He states that the characters should be “like” and “consistent” (Aristotle, 55). The character of Antonio is consistent because he is constantly concerned about finding his bike. He always tries to keep his family before him. Every action he makes, whether it is waiting in long lines to see if he has been hired or stealing a bike, he does for his family. Antonio’s character is also similar to many of the men who would have been watching the film at the time of its release. This would be an aspect not only that enhances the tragic nature of the story, but it also adds to the neorealism De Sica adds to the film. Since his character is so like many of the men in Italy, it would succeed in creating a neorealist image, trying to portray the daily life of the common Italian. The similarities the audience will be able to draw between Antonio and themselves add not only to the tragedy, but also enhance the neorealism.

Comedy, on the other hand, inspires “the pleasure of the ridiculous [and] it arrives at the purification of that passion” (Eco, 569) In *Big Deal on Madonna Street*, the audience revels in the ridiculous nature of the characters and their actions. It allows the audience to find humor in simple things, like a pot of pasta and beans. Comedy also “consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster” (Aristotle, 19). The failed robbery at the end of the film is hilarious because of all of the mishaps and the stupidity of the characters that lead to the malfunctions. It is also funny because no one gets hurt, caught or arrested.

The stupidity of the characters also shows that the comic effect can be achieved by “showing the defects and vices of ordinary men” (Eco, 574). *Big Deal on Madonna Street* is hilarious because it is not professional thieves that are attempting to break into the apartment. It is ordinary men trying to perform this feat. Their failure only reinforces that. The audience remembers their true nature and that the characters are just like them.

Where the actions in a tragedy are meant to evoke pity and fear and are complete, “the type of actions of [a] comedy is mimesis” (Eco, 569). The actions of the characters in *Big Deal on Madonna Street* are meant to imitate the actions of professionals. The thieves who try to break into the apartment are trying to imitate real thieves. Yet their execution of the robbery goes completely wrong and they end up doing the opposite of what thieves would do. Also, the elderly man who is attempts to teach the thieves how to break into a safe pretends that he is a professional professor. However, when the neighborhood children run by, the dialect in his voice slips from proper Italian into his native dialect. Like the thieves, he fails to properly be a professor. The failure to properly imitate adds to the comedy.

Although the two films are different genres, there are allusions to *The Bicycle Thief* in *Big Deal on Madonna Street*. The character of Tiberio from Big Deal on Madonna Street is similar to Antonio from *The Bicycle Thief*. They are both devoted fathers and are willing to do anything to provide for their family. Tiberio is trying to support his son and care for him while his wife is in jail. Although he is a photographer, he sells his camera so that he will be able to provide for his family. Antonio sells his bike to buy food for his children, but then allows his wife to sell their linens to buy back the bike when it becomes essential to his job. Both men exhibit qualities of men at that period and add to the neorealism portrayed in both films.

Both fathers are desperate to provide for their families. While they are doing everything with in their means to earn money and be the head of their household, there are moments when their characters crack and we get a sense of the true desperation simmering under the surface. When Tiberio agrees to help break into the apartment, he is only agreeing out of desperation. He knows that he is not a thief but he is willing to accept any quick monetary fix. However, once Tiberio realizes the seriousness of the robbery, he backs out, thinking that he would not be a good father figure and role model for his son if he were in jail.

Antonio also exhibits anxiety through the entire film. He practically harasses the old man in the church and he accuses the boy of stealing his bike. The entire neighborhood comes to the boy’s defense, making Antonio seem even more desperate and borderline pathetic as he continues to accuse the by of theft. We never actually learn if this teen stole the bike, which leads the audience to question Antonio. Was he correct in accusing the boy, or was he just so desperate to get his bike back? The final act of desperation is when he actually becomes the thief and attempts to steal the bike. This is where Tiberio and Antonio begin to differ. While Antonio does tell Bruno to go home because he doesn’t want his son to know how low his father has stooped, Bruno stays and almost sees his father beaten and arrested. The difference between the fathers is that Tiberio backs out to protect his family, while Antonio shows he is willing there are no lengths he won’t go to, to protect his family. Who is the better father?

Allusions to *The Bicycle Thief* also appear in the final scene of *Big Deal on Madonna Street*. The men at the end of the scene are both swept back into crowds of men waiting for a job, although the results are different. Peppe is swept into the crowd of day laborers, waiting to be assigned their day’s work. He is desperately trying to get out of the crowd, claiming that he doesn’t want to work. This adds to the comedy because it is ironic Peppe does not want to work, when so many other men would practically kill for a day’s work of work.

On the other hand, the final scene in *The Bicycle Thief* enhances the tragedy of the film. He is being thrown back into the masses desperate for a job. Unlike Peppe, who doesn’t want to work and sill got a job, Antonio only wishes to work and he will never be able to get a job. This tragic ending is perfect for the tragic nature of *The Bicycle Thief*, but Monicelli changes it to fit the nature of his comedy. Eco claims that one way comedy differs from tragedy is that “it does not end with the death of the protagonists” (Eco, 574). *The Bicycle Thief* does not end with a physical death, but there is the feeling that the hopes of the father and son, hope to find the bike, hope to get a job, have been squashed.

There are some aspects of Monicelli’s film that reject the goals of neorealism. For example, Peppe not wanting to work does not coincide with neorealism. Many people would have done anything for a job and although he does eventually give in and join the day laborers, his attitude does not reflect neorealism. The men lined up early in the morning, eager to see if they have been hired to work for the day, do reflect neorealism. They show the true nature of the Italian society at that time and how jobs were scarce and how precious and rare it was to work for even one day.

The setting of *Big Deal on Madonna Street* also reflects neorealism. The film is set in Rome, however a Non-Roman would never know that the city was Rome because the traditional landmarks , the Coliseum, the Trevi Fountain, are no where to be found. By excluding these traditional tourist traps, Monicelli succeeds in showing everyday Italy. The people of the lower class portrayed in the film would not be seen sipping espresso near the Forum. They would be in the streets, looking for work and trying to do anything they can to ensure that their family survives. It is very clever that Monicelli excludes these sights from his film. He succeeds in showing the everyday life of people in Italy’s capitol. Many people not from Rome may have glamorous visions of Romans, strolling down cobblestone streets and indulging in Gelatto. But Monicelli shows us the Rome that the majority of its inhabitants see everyday. This shows true neorealism because it portrays the typical Italy that its lower class citizens experience.

The references Monicelli makes to De Sica’s film enhance the message Monicelli is attempting to rely to his audience. Monicelli is trying to show the true nature of Italians. They do believe in relaxation, but only after you have earned it with hard work. Most of the world may view the Italian culture as lax, however Monicelli is attempting to add an extra layer to that stereotype. He wants to show that Italians enjoy life only after they have earned it. Mario exhibits this quality because after he falls in love, he buckles down and gets a job, even if it is for a meager salary working at a movie theatre. He understands that he will not be able to marry Carmelina if he did not work. He is working hard so he will be able to enjoy the pleasures of life.

Monicelli also tries to show that Italians can find pleasure in even the simplest things in life. After the robbery fails, the faux thieves gather around the dinner table and share a simple meal of pasta and beans. Even though their plan failed, they are able to come together through one of the simplest and primitive ways possible, by sharing a meal. Although the work these thieves were doing was not honest work, they still devoted themselves entirely to their job. The saying “Work Hard, Play Hard” is personified in the Italian people and Monicelli is trying to show that in his film.

Vittorio De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* and Mario Monicelli’s *Big Deal on Madonna Street* are both examples of neorealism in Italian film. The genres of these two films are different. *The Bicycle Thief* proves to be a successful tragedy because it evokes pity and fear in the audience and the plot comes full circle, with the characters back in the position they were in at the beginning of the film. *Big Deal on Madonna Street* is a hilarious comedy because it shows simple men committing acts that are stupid, but not dangerous. There are many references to De Sica’s film in *Big Deal on Madonna Street*, mainly in the characters of Antonio and Tiberio. They are both devoted fathers who will do anything to protect and provide for their families. *Big Deal on Madonna Street* embraces the neorealism in *The Bicycle Thief* and pays tribute to it in the setting of the film and the eagerness of the men looking to find work for the day. The addition of the aspects of neorealism in Monicelli’s film relay Monicelli’s message that Italians work hard and understand how to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. *Big Deal on Madonna Street* is one of the first films of *commedia all’italiana*, which is “best described as satirical comedy with a bitter aftertaste” (Harvey, 1). Although Monicelli’s film is beginning to break into a new era of Italian film, it still pays homage to the neorealism movement that helped revamp the Italian film industry. The numerous allusions to neorealism and *The Bicycle Thief* in *Big Deal on Madonna Street* help the Italian audience begin to accept the shift in neorealist films and *commedia all’italiana*.

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