



Bicycle Thieves and the Transparency of Crime

By Cameron Chyun

****It is highly recommended that you watch "Bicycle Thieves" before reading. Link to the film is below****

Every time I visit the 1948 Italian neorealist film *Bicycle Thieves*, I am always startled by how relevant and how familiar the socioeconomic conflicts of the film are to what I hear about today, close to 80 years in the future, from a different country and a different culture. The ineffectiveness of the police, the inescapable rut of poverty and unemployment, and lastly, the criminalization of the poor are all perspectives that are excellently covered through its central conflict.

The film's plot is disarmingly simple: Antonio Ricci, a father amidst a nation-wide economic crisis, receives a job offer that requires that he has a bicycle. As soon as he gets one, it's stolen, and so the father and his son, Bruno Ricci, must search the city for the Thief. Yet within this one plot, we're subject to a variety of complex issues that plague his search. All of which is possible due to *Bicycle Thieves* utilizing the tenants of the neorealism genre to its full strength: a plot focused on the poor or working class, using a team of unprofessional actors, and filming in open cities with natural locations instead of sets. Meaning that we are watching a near completely

honest depiction of post-war Rome and what its rampant poverty looked, sounded, and acted like.

Throughout your watching experience, you'll notice that most of which are not even paid actors, but real people in the midst of real contemporary problems. Crowds of people crying foul that they didn't receive a job listing that day; crowds of citizens overloading a bus and hanging on for dear life to get to their workplace, crowds of frail elders waiting to receive food from a soup kitchen, crowds of citizens in prayer, etc. All showing that even within the worst week of the Ricci family's lives, stories of poverty equivalent or perhaps worse than the situation our protagonists are in are a shared reality that middle and low-class Italians in 1948 had to survive through. This philosophy goes from implicit to explicit in the film's final act.

When Antonio finally confronts the Thief, we see in detail what his family, his neighbors, and his house are like. He's a jobless, young man mired in a cramped single room in which a family of four lives. Compare the house with the Ricci family's 4 room house, and it appears they're doing better than the Thief! Even if we know that he is the culprit, lying and unsympathetic to the family that he's dooming, the Thief's neighborhood is quick to collectively defend him and antagonize the Riccis out of sheer loyalty. Their disgust towards Ricci isn't about "who deserves the bicycle more," but the side they simply choose in the matter. And so, the reality is; the desperate poor steal from the desperate poor to survive. This truth seems absolute until the real ending, where the genius of the title *Bicycle Thieves* is revealed.

Antonio, unable to provide any evidence to prosecute his thief despite everything, spots an unattended bicycle on the street and tries to run off with it only to be caught and berated by the owner as a criminal trying to "ruin everything" and both shouting, "That bike is all I have!" All along, we weren't following just a victim of a singular theft, but another one of the people who would eventually commits the titular crime. What are we supposed to get from this depressing tale? Some say it's a tale about how poverty leads to crime, some say it's the story of an incompetent father who fails at every turn to provide for his family, and some say the story has no point and that it's just luck that separates the Thief's victory and Antonio's failure.

I argue the more interesting discussion of the story is not that crime is the inevitability of the desperate poor, but rather that the crime is only considered unacceptable if you are powerless. To start, why was Antonio cornered into a position where stealing the bicycle was his only viable choice? During the entire hour and a half run-time of *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio is repeatedly denied the help of a proper system or community that can restore his livelihood. He has no evidence or a strong understanding of the law, the police are insufficient, he has too few friends to help testify or search, and he's frankly not as smart as his opposition. While the Thief has the first few problems, his charisma, competency, and status within his neighborhood make him immune from consequence. The Thief didn't just steal the bicycle because he needed employment; he did it because he was confident that he could get away with it. The harmful stereotype often propagated by some analysis of this film is the confirmation that the poor are the more likely criminals in the world, yet \$50-100 million is stolen by employees from workers, celebrities get away with a variety of unforgivable stances and actions daily, and even the police

force casually assaults citizens without proper consequence. Why? Because criminals don't have capital, a powerful legal team, and systematic influence. Logically, isn't it more likely for someone to break the law if they aren't burdened by the threat of prison?

Why do we leave off the film with Antonio as the criminal being told that he should be "ashamed of himself" while the Thief's financial plight is recognized and sympathized for? It's because he got away.

Link to *Bicycle Thieves*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVw2ctnL22M&t=1s>

<https://www.theregreview.org/2019/01/23/schriever-stealing-poor-giving-rich/>

Thomas, Leon. (2015, Nov 19). *Bicycle Thieves* by Renegade Cut [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNmrsUqhN0s>