

How to Build a Nation with Films

How to Build a Nation with Films:

A study of Italian film from 1945-1950

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HST 483 – Professor Hanshew

## How to Build a Nation with Films

### **Abstract:**

The objective of this paper is to analyze how Italians could have created their post-war identity via neorealist films. This is achieved by considering the following questions: How did Italians view Germans?; How did Italians view Americans?; and How did Italians view Italians?. These questions were analyzed by looking at five films from two leading directors covering the years 1945-1950. The analysis revealed that Italians are united by similar pain, society fails to consider the future of Italy, Americanization inhibits identity creation, and the institutions in place cannot operate under the current situation and cannot provide for its citizens. While the films did achieve their desired outcome (social and moral upheaval), the population was not able to fully embrace the message because they were so traumatized that they subconsciously desired escapist films to sooth their social and psychological trauma.

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Italian citizens during the late 1940s confronted a complex reality after the end of the Second World War and the Fascist era. Such difficulties included the creation of a new national and individual identity, which was absent due to the destruction of both Italy and the meaning behind being “Italian”. After the fall of Fascism, the once proud regime that Mussolini cultivated left Italians little sense of an identity to cling to and forced many to conceive an anti-fascist nation. Coming out of this chaos, the people struggled to rebuild this concept of identity because they were being stifled by the ever-growing international presence within the country. Yet there was such an immense frustration coming out of Italy during the reconstruction period. Italians had faced the horrors of the war and were now dealing with the horrors of the aftermath. The post-war cinema was a way of expressing the collective struggles and giving the every-day

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people a voice. In this way, the unconventional cinematic movement of the late 1940s can arguably be a microcosm of the broader sentiments felt across the country.

By focusing on the two most well known directors, Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini, this paper seeks to understand the classic – if not traditional – views of the time period. While this cinematic style is characterized for its disillusionment, it forced people to realize that they needed to promote social cohesion in order to morally rebuild Italy. One method to create this solidarity was through defining what is *not* Italian by including portrayals of foreign nations, which played upon the perceptions of the Italian people. Thus, while many post-war Italians used film for entertainment, for others it became a way of constructing a new national and individual identity by looking at De Sica and Rossellini's portrayals of foreigners.



Vittorio De Sica



Roberto Rossellini

This paper will analyze, Rossellini's unofficial war trilogy, *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *Germany, Year Zero* (1948) as well as De Sica's films, *Shoeshine* (1946) and *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), in the hopes of shedding light upon the beginning of the new identity.

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*Rome, Open City* (1945)



*Paisan* (1946),



*Germany, Year Zero* (1948)



*Shoeshine* (1946)



*The Bicycle Thief* (1948)

During this decade of reconstruction, the Italian cinema went through a major shift even though they were mostly presenting American films. Although counterintuitive, the Fascists had allowed many American movies to be shown because of similar features in both: “reverence for leaders, importance of family life, and recourse to nationalist rhetoric”.<sup>1</sup> The new Italian style was staunchly different from the Fascist productions created a few years prior and correctly

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Hibberd, *The Media in Italy Press, Cinema and Broadcasting from Unification to Digital*. Maidenhead, England: McGraw Hill/Open University Press, 2008.

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labeled as Neorealism.<sup>2</sup> Neorealism films usually wrestled with the altered economic and moral conditions of post-Second World War Italy. Although difficult to identify because of it having no single approach, one of the most noticeable characteristics is the sense of dissatisfaction.

Typically, no character is given a happy ending and leaves the audience with a sense of bewilderment and lacking a feeling of fulfillment. This was a key strategy to keep the watchers thinking and discussing with one another about their life outside films. Yet life outside the cinema was similar to the settings of neorealist productions, bleak and dissatisfying. After the Second World War, those who survived had to rebuild and it was no easy task for a country that had little money to spend – employment was scarce and food even more so. The necessities of life soon became commodities the average Italian could no longer afford. By using the same setting, the film directors hoped to get viewers motivated and communally pick themselves up again in order to create Rossellini and De Sica's moral rebirth of Italy.

Moreover, this was planned to create the sense of belonging (their national identity) by making the audience experience shocks like a main character dying, a child being left homeless, or a man left with nothing. The connection between characters to their audience was as strong as it was because of the common experiences. All these examples could be seen on the streets of Italy but it was uncommon to view it in the cinema. Italians during this time were staunchly political beings, yet to recreate an identity out of the rubble would be difficult without reawakening the repulsive idea of nationalism. Italians usually went to the cinema as a form of escapism. Italian comedies and historical documentaries, as well as Hollywood films, crowded

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<sup>2</sup> Vittorio De Sica comments on his work *Shoeshine* and explains neorealism as such: "The experience of the war was decisive for us all. Each felt the mad desire to throw away all the old stories of the Italian cinema, to plant the camera in the midst of real life, in the midst of all that struck our astonished eyes. We sought to liberate ourselves from the weight of our sins, we wanted to look ourselves in the face and tell ourselves the truth, to discover what we really were and to seek salvation.... *Shoeshine* was a small stone, a very small stone, contributed to the moral reconstruction of our country." From *La table ronde* 149 (May 1960), 80.

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the silver screen because it helped the Italian people escape from the harsh realities of poverty, social injustice, and unemployment — everything neorealism sought to upset them with to get a response.<sup>3</sup>

Although neorealism is a famous era of films and loved by movie viewers today, they were not as popular to the Italian people when they were first produced.<sup>4</sup> In fact the films by Rossellini and De Sica did rather poorly in the box office (with the exception of Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*) and usually were around seventh place. As Millicent Marcus points out, “the established authorities felt threatened by their films like *Paisan* and labeled them as antagonistic to the national interest.”<sup>5</sup> Also, the Vatican's newspaper saw *The Bicycle Thief* as being “uncharitable towards Catholic charities” and *Shoeshine*'s use of the Roman prisons caused the jailors to close the doors on all directors who sought to film there.<sup>6</sup> Thus this brings about the argument of how much influence neorealist films had on the people and if there is any worth in analyzing these productions. However, this was only one path Italians could take to create their identity. There were American products and influences across Italy, all of them Americanizing the country in hopes of banishing communism, which had stable roots within the government. Yet this path lacked the national and self-understanding neorealist thought could give them. This unique view of Italy and its citizens is why it is worthy of research.

That said, by looking at Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini's films it presents the classic neorealist thought because their films were not only distributed right after the war, but

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<sup>3</sup> While this is true for Italian audiences, in Roberto Rossellini's *Ten Years of Cinema*, he notes the importance of American markets for his fame. “The American market was especially important; when *Roma Città Aperta* and *Paisà* were distributed there, they were received in triumph by critics and a rather specialized audience.” p. 94. Taken from David Overbey. *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neorealism*.

<sup>4</sup> Peter E. Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*. 2nd ed. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pg. 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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also because they were the masters of the genre. Following De Sica and Rossellini, there were disciples continuing their works as well as a large fan base abroad, though little in Italy. This lack of domestic support was due to the need for escapism that can be seen in the large numbers of American Hollywood films and Italian comedies that filled the screens. This was the antithesis of Neorealism. Yet it is their portrayal of international foreigners and nations that is so revealing. By looking at their interpretations of Americans and Germans during this time period, it reveals the directors' understandings of what it meant to be Italian. Namely, by using the thought: "this is German/American so the contrast must be Italian".

*Rome, Open City* is often described as being Rossellini's masterpiece. It was one of the first neorealist films and captured the true nature of life during the Second World War. The story centers on Pina, a pregnant fiancée with her second child, her son, Marcello, the priest, Don Pietro Pellegrini, Giorgio Manfredi, and Francesco, Pina's betrothed. However, by the end of the movie, it is realized by the audience that "the protagonist is Rome, as a place, as a people, and as a historic identity".<sup>7</sup> By hiring predominantly non-professional actors, Rossellini desired to convey the adversities and destitution average Italians faced during and coming out of the war as authentically as possible. The audience watching underwent the same adversities as the characters as well. In fact, the deaths of both Don Pietro and Pina were taken from recollections of actual events.<sup>8</sup> It was using similar histories as a collective linkage to enforce the national identity. Moreover, the character, Romoletto (Romulus) is taken from the myth describing the birth of Rome. He is a disabled child with an immense following of other children who fight back against the Germans and symbolizes this sort of "rebirth" of Rome and Italian national identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Millicent Marcus, 42

<sup>8</sup> Millicent Marcus, 37

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It is rather obvious to see how Germany is portrayed in this film: as barbaric yet effeminate warmongers eager to spill blood. Yet before analyzing further, what is interesting is the mention – although brief – of the Americans. As Pina looks out on to the rubble and buildings marked with bullet holes, in the dialogue the characters question whether the Americans are real. The scene changes to a blown up house without a roof and she sarcastically replies, “Looks like it”.<sup>9</sup> This symbolizes the alliance with the Allies, specifically the Americans. While vowing to help Italy, the viewpoint the average citizen in Italy is the destruction from the bombs raining down and holes in the wall from gunshots. Moreover, with the Marshall Plan, American help came with a price. Italy needed help to rebuild and the United States was happy to oblige, but while Italy received the money to rebuild their culture, it got something more in return: the vast supply of American goods like Pepsi and Hollywood films, these things being one aspect that hindered the rebuilding of the Italian identity. Italy was either going to be Americanized or the people would simply rot away because they were tired and struggling after the war.

As for the German portrayal, the movies were to act as a moral compass, which he presented Germans as lacking. The two Germans, Major Bergmann and Ingrid, are presented as evil viper-like characters with Bergmann being effeminate and Ingrid, a lesbian, seducing Marina, the younger sister of Pina. In the 1940’s it was still very much a sin to be homosexual and thus a grave insult towards foreign nations. There are countless examples of the brutality the Italians faced. One of the most interesting is when Don Pietro Pellegrini visits one of the Resistance’s bases in order to pick up illegal material. Outside of the building were two German soldiers grasping two sheep demanding that the hotel owner allow them to butcher the sheep

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<sup>9</sup> Roberto Rossellini. *Rome, Open City*. DVD. Italy: Janus Films, 1945.

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inside. In response he utters: “Yes, you guys are good at that”.<sup>10</sup> In this scene it gives a rather fitting example of how the Italian people felt during the war. The hotel owner symbolizes the leader of Italy allowing the Germans to enter the country (the hotel) where Italians reside and massacre the people who were defenseless (the sheep). The lack of trust in the government after the allowance of the Germans to enter not only continues past the war but it also puts the invasion of the Allies in a grey area. The Allies were never invited into the country unlike the Nazis so is the invader those who try to liberate it or those who work with the government but murder its civilians? It is not hard to imagine the common reaction being the resurfacing of pent up anger and frustration from the lost faith in the government. Every citizen had lost a loved one during the war and by harnessing this frustration, Rossellini was trying to transform it into a force that would unite the people in order to encourage a change in the direction Italy was heading. This is also seen from the fact that an Italian man in the film has no name. Sick and paralyzed, “[it] makes him an emblem of that Rome, which was damaged and helpless, yet unwilling to surrender either to superior military force, or to its own will to die.”<sup>11</sup>

In order to understand fully Rossellini’s version of reconstruction, one needs to understand his connection to the Church and religion. As the home of the Pope, Italy’s identity has been tied to the Church. In his films, Rossellini seems to understand that religion will still be an important aspect to Italian society. He himself was consumed with interest in Christian values, teachings, and history. Often his films dealt with the question: “what role does religion play in the modern world”? In order to answer this question, he uses Don Pietro, the priest working with an atheist and a communist, to show that those working for the betterment are not as bad as those who brutalize others. Yet it was the Germans and Fascists who were for a structured religion —

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Millicent Marcus, 46.

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the closest group to the Church. The idea of a priest working with an atheist and communist is unheard of! However, this does not mean that Communism was viewed as negative in his films or for that matter in Italian society. In fact, the bravery the communists displayed in his films and the influence communists had on Italy prove this is not the case. What was negative was the Church's view of communism rather than Rossellini's. Nonetheless, Rossellini creates characters that are easily characterized as good and evil. His accepting of the atheists and communists working with the Church was a way of promoting solidarity and expressing the idea that Italy is in need of those who fight to save their country. The different ideologies mean little if they are fighting for a good cause.

Next in Rossellini's war trilogy came *Paisan*, which details six stories from Sicily to the Po Valley. Every event is self-contained with a different problem, language barriers, poverty, the partisan struggle, and religion during wartime. This film is more directed to the portrayal of the United States being a comrade-in-arms rather than an illusive destructive force, which presents Italians as all being partisans. Even more fascinating is that the second and third episodes are the only sections in Rossellini's war trilogy that details Italian life when the Allied forces remained after Italy's liberation. The second episode was designed to get people motivated to fix Italy with the question: "what world do we want our children to live in?" Although this question is left unanswered from his films altogether, he views Italy as a socially and individually aware society, a secure nation capable of taking care of the orphans from the war, and a united nation working together to reestablish Italy in any way so long as it is collaborative.

By using Pasquale, an orphan of the war, as a main character, it's an emotional realization that there are children exactly like him outside of the cinema who need help. When Pasquale meets a drunken military policeman (MP) named Joe, his natural response is to steal

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whatever he can from the American soldier. After some time Joe finds the boy again and asks, “Why do you steal?”<sup>12</sup> He is met with an unresponsive child and forces Pasquale to take him to his home. It is at Pasquale’s “home” — or what little of a home he had — that Joe realizes the true extent of the aftermath the war created. Orphaned and penniless because he is too young to work, Joe begins to understand the answer to his question, “Why do you steal?” Survival causes these orphaned children like Pasquale steal and pawn off their findings. Yet as these children age, it is chilling to think of how those orphaned will act when they are grown up. Unfortunately, Joe could not cope with the tragedy and ran away leaving Pasquale abandoned and helpless. These two characters, Joe and Pasquale, serve as a reminder that although they are liberated, the fight to live has still carried over into the post-war times. While the American soldiers and MPs are swarming the nation, when they are confronted with the true issues like poverty and neglect, they cannot handle the situation and run away. Thus, only true change can come from the Italian people.

In the third episode, the American soldier, Fred, is showered in flowers as the Allied forces first arrive in Rome, the sincere gladness can be seen on the faces of everyone there. Yet as time goes on, people have become more accustomed to the Allies living in the city and life goes on. Noticeably, the characters have all become sardonic, disillusioned, and unfulfilled in this episode. Fred, once loved by all throughout Rome becomes a cynical American soldier no longer holding on to the hope of finding his love, Francesca. Moreover, when he stays with Francesca for the night, he drunkenly fumes that everything has changed since his arrival. The drunkenness of the Americans in both the episodes serves the purpose of presenting them as unable to conceive of the realities Italians go through as well as enforcing the idea that only

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<sup>12</sup> Roberto Rossellini. *Paisan*. DVD. Italy: Janus Films, 1946.

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Italians can rebuild their nation. American soldiers are able to leave Italy and have no real interest in the rebuilding. Rather, there is the economical interest with the Marshall Plan.

One part of life that had not changed since the occupation of German troops and after the war was the life of many single women. The characters Marina from *Rome, Open City* and Francesca from *Paisan*, both played by Maria Michi, prostitute themselves in order to survive. When the American soldier describes his unsuccessful search for his love, he soon begins to condemn her. In reply, Francesca dismally declares, “Rome is full of girls like me”.<sup>13</sup> Single Italian women were desperate and prostitution was an effective way of achieving at least a semi-comfortable lifestyle. By prostituting towards American soldiers who had money and prospects across the sea, they ensured themselves a more certain future than Italian men could give them. At one point Francesca yells, “You’ll starve when they’re gone!” and “You’ll be in rags like before!” at another prostitute.<sup>14</sup> Thus, although Italy was considered to be free after 1945, this shows that nothing had really changed for many people. The ways they had to endure post-war life were the same as wartime regardless of the liberation. This forces the audience to realize the desperation their country is in. Only by collaboration of Italians can they make life better for not only the children but the women as well – and help them live a more virtuous lifestyle that was sought after.

The last film of Rossellini’s trilogy is *Germany, Year Zero*, which features German life after the war through the eyes of a child. The purpose of this was to give the audience the unique experience of viewing the war not only from the German perspective but a child’s as well. The significance of this it to present the war not only was having devastating effects on Italy but all of Europe. Like the second episode in *Paisan*, a child, Edmund, is the main character that has to

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

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learn how to survive after liberation. Although this is from the German perspective, there are definite similarities to be found between the ways the everyday people were living in both Germany and Italy. For example, Edmund is too young to work yet he has to support his family like many of the children whose family survived the war. Many families had members who could no longer work, either from sickness, age, or they had other disabilities. His sister, Eva, prostitutes herself like many of the Italian women using men in order to obtain cigarettes and the like. However, their father who is bedridden and cannot work said one of the most fitting remarks of the era, “Condemned to live”.<sup>15</sup> These few words embody all that neorealism was trying to convey, orphaned children, overwhelming poverty, rampant unemployment... the post-war decade was in a way worse than the paradise many Italians hoped to find after death. Also, while this does bring up the argument of a universal fate, the film is more of a reminder to not become a nation devoted to hate. It uses Germany as a historical idea from the First World War, whom rebuilt their nation on the hate of the Treaty of Versailles. It is a warning that if Italy retains the sentiments, history will repeat itself and ensure that Italy will be worse off in the future. Also it is a reminder to Italy to not forget the German suffering from the outcome as well.

However, the shocking feature of the movie is the choices the young Edmund makes, which in any other period of time would seem damning. His father’s words and those of his former Nazi sympathizing teacher convince him that killing a person during such struggles like poverty is actually a heroic gesture, a form of sympathy. Rossellini presents the twisted nature people have turned into through the body of Edmund. Even more, to the audience it generates the question: “how did things become so terrible that a thirteen year old boy would commit murder and perceive it as heroic”? After the Second World War, many Italians still believed children

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<sup>15</sup> Roberto Rossellini, *Germany, Year Zero*. DVD. Italy: Janus Films, 1948.

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should be virtuous and innocent. For one to commit such a grave sin is truly horrifying. Therefore, Rossellini argues that uplifting the nation and creating a stable society is one of the most successful ways to preserve the innocence of a child.

Vittorio De Sica also shared this notion of the importance of children. Turning to his productions, there is perhaps a more theatrical yet nonetheless relevant depiction of the average child. In the film *Shoeshine*, it presents life from the perspective of two young boys, Pasquale Maggi and Giuseppe Filippucci, who work tirelessly as shoe shiners in order to buy a horse. Giuseppe is lucky enough to have his family, with the exception of his father, yet Pasquale has none left. While working one day, they are arrested for being an accessory to theft and selling illegal goods given to them by Giuseppe's brother. As punishment they are both sent to a juvenile jail until the trial. In this trial the lawyer says, "the people who in pursuit of our passions, abandon our children to fend for themselves, children who are all alone".<sup>16</sup> Many neorealist directors like De Sica and Rossellini viewed selfishness — like war — as the root of all the problems and thus social cohesion would fix the nation by the community selflessly working together. In fact they show selfishness and greed "spreading throughout the whole community" rather than staying with only one or two characters.<sup>17</sup> This can be seen through the way Giuseppe's family uses the kids in order to rob a psychic. They persuade the two children to sell stolen American blankets and when they are charged with accessory, instead of turning himself in, Giuseppe's brother lets them stay in prison hoping that a package of food would suffice for their silence.

What is unique to this film is foreigners are not directly in the film itself but rather their stuff – the American blankets. Only mentioned once, it sets the stage for the rest of the entire

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<sup>16</sup> Vittorio De Sica. *Shoeshine*. DVD. Italy: International Classic Films, 1946.

<sup>17</sup> Flavia Skov. *Popular Italian Cinema Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011. Pg.128.

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movie. From these goods, the Italians can enter into a life of crime by selling them on the black market (also being a big part of *Germany Year Zero*). However, in the case of the film, the products are used as a guise to rob houses. Pretending to be the police, the robbers “arrest” or threaten the homeowner with jail time for buying illegal products. The movie serves to show the audience that in the post-war period, selfishness and greed thrive in society corrupting the children regardless of their choices and forcing them to spend their lives either committing crimes or suffering in the jails.

De Sica’s last film to be discussed, *The Bicycle Thief*, has no mention of foreigners from other nations. However it is included here to describe how Italians viewed themselves rather than how they viewed others. It is important to mention this here because although the audience can look at others to find their “Italian-ness”, looking at how the typical Italian survives the post-war is just as important for a national identity. The film by De Sica follows a poor, desperate father, Antonio Ricci, his wife, Maria, and his son, Bruno trying to survive in post-war Rome. Originally selling his bicycle for food, Antonio soon gets a job, which requires a bicycle. His wife subsequently sells their sheets from off their beds to buy the new bike. Unfortunately it is stolen the first day of his work and he is forced to spend the rest of the day searching with his son for the bike that seems to have disappeared into thin air.<sup>18</sup>

Not only is there this sense of desperation and hopelessness when Antonio first loses his bike but there is also the presence of his son, Bruno who serves as a reminder of what is at risk. Bruno serves as the child’s perspective, such as in his film *Shoeshine*, and Rossellini’s *Paisà* and *Germany Year Zero*, to reinforce the idea of an Italian family being something to treasure and hold sacred. Millicent Marcus again points out “the bicycle is the emblem of all those cultural

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<sup>18</sup> Vittorio De Sica. *The Bicycle Thief*. DVD. Italy: Image Entertainment, 1948.

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and material forces that determine the relationship from without.”<sup>19</sup> There are many layers brought out through the use of Bruno, not only is there Antonio’s conscience, but the relationship that changes between the father and son. Towards the end, Antonio’s metamorphosis into a criminal mentality (through sheer deprivation) causes a sort of identity crisis for Bruno when thinking about his father. Although Antonio is his father, he has “abdicated any claim to patriarchal respect by violating the legal sanctions on which all authority rests.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet De Sica’s portrayal of authorities who are supposed to be people the citizens like, the Church, the law, and the trade unions, all fail in the end. He shows that these groups have a different perspective from the average citizen. When Antonio claims his bike has been stolen, a journalist soon appears and asks if the police have any sensational news.<sup>21</sup> The reply given to the journalist: “No, nothing, only a bike.”<sup>22</sup> The loss of the Antonio’s bicycle is uninteresting to these men yet it means the livelihood of the entire Ricci family. De Sica includes this to show that only the citizens can bond together. Although all of the institutions are important, which he also includes in the film as well, there is something missing between the average citizen and the institution when perspective is different.

Overall, both Rossellini’s war trilogy and De Sica’s films help the audience come to terms with the injustice and inhumanities of war and provide a social commentary on inequality faced by the Italian people. In *Rome, Open City*, Rossellini uses Germans to present Italians as victims to be united by a similar pain. *Paisan* demonstrates the inability to create a national identity with relentless Americanization under the Marshall Plan. *Germany, Year Zero* has a different take on Germans but expresses the idea that children are the future of a nation and

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<sup>19</sup> Millicent Marcus, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Millicent Marcus, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Millicent Marcus, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Vittorio De Sica. *The Bicycle Thief*.

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society worldwide has failed them. In De Sica's *Shoeshine*, the damages to society as a whole are clearly defined in the breaking of the bonds of brotherhood and family. Finally, *The Bicycle Thief* shows the desperation of the Italian person and how institutions like the Church and police force failed the people. Although these films are popular now, the audience at the time was too traumatized and demanded escapist films rather than confront their situation. Yet these films laid out a path to Italian identity for future generations and consolidated the Italian struggles abroad since neorealist films were more popular elsewhere.

In conclusion, while many post-war Italians went to the cinema for entertainment, for others it became a way of constructing a new national and individual identity by looking at De Sica and Rossellini's portrayals of foreigners. Neorealist movies such as those made by those directors played upon the emotional sentiments of the audience by using stories that could actually be the plight of an average Italian. These films were utilized by active citizens to motivate the public to conquer the problems arising from their liberation and declaring the need for social cohesion to solve them. Thus, this era of film was not only a form of escapism but it created groups of citizens questioning what it meant to be truly Italian.

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