

Neorealism, History, and The Children's Film: Vittorio de Sica's *The Children Are Watching Us* reconsidered

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Abstract

Vittorio De Sica used a child protagonist for the first time, not in his neorealist masterpiece *Shoeshine* (1946), but in his first truly serious film, *The Children Are Watching Us* (1943), which examines the impact on a young boy's life of his mother's extramarital affair with a family friend. *The Children Are Watching Us* proved to be a key work, thematically as well as stylistically, in De Sica's directing career. In its thematic attempt to reveal the underside of Italy's moral life, this film was indicative of a rising new vision in Italian cinema. And in exhibiting semi-documentary qualities by being shot partially on location, as well as by using nonprofessional actors in some roles, *The Children Are Watching Us* was a precursor of the neorealism that would issue forth after the liberation of occupied Rome.

Keywords: Vittorio De Sica; *The Children Are Watching Us*; Italian neorealism; children's films; *Shoeshine*; *Bicycle Thieves*.

Where children are concerned, two myths predominate on film: that of the original innocence of children, an innocence that only becomes sullied by contact with the society of grown-ups; and that of the child-as-father-to-the-man, of childhood as a prelude to the main event of adulthood. Among films of the first kind, Jean Benoît-Levy's *La maternelle* (1932), Louis Daquin's *Portrait of Innocence* (1941), Kjell Grede's *Hugo and Josephine* (1967), Jilali Ferhati's *Reed Dolls* (1981), and Bahman Ghobadi's *Turtles Can Fly* (2004) deserve special mention. Among films of the second kind, in the 1980s Lasse Hallström's *My Life As a Dog* (1985) and Bille August's *Pelle the Conqueror* (1988) were almost simultaneously joined by Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* (1987) and Nils Gaup's *Pathfinder* (1988); they were preceded by such pictures as Arne Sucksdorff's *The Great Adventure* (1953) and Raoul Coutard's *Hoa-Binh* (1970), as well as followed by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Abouna* (2002). For the record, before 1900 the Lumière brothers had made the first films about children, and soon thereafter virtually every film culture grasped the new possibilities of capturing on screen children's cuteness and mischief and pathos.

In the vein of juvenile performance—with professional child actors as well as nonprofessional ones, or “non-actors”—no movie culture has done better than France, however. Think only, not so long ago, of Jacques Doillon’s *Ponette* (1996), *It All Starts Today* (1999)—a film by the redoubtable Bertrand Tavernier about preschool children living amidst Zolaesque conditions in contemporary northern France—and Christophe Barratier’s *The Chorus* (2003). The only possible exception to the rule of the French is Italy, which gave us Giuseppe Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* in 1988, Gianni Amelio’s *Stolen Children* in 1992, and Gabriele Salvatores’ *I’m Not Scared* in 2003. Long before these movies, though, the Italians produced such neorealist masterpieces featuring children as Roberto Rossellini’s *Germany, Year Zero* (1947) and Vittorio De Sica’s *Shoeshine* (1946), as well as the latter’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).



Given its intimate relationship with children’s films, a word on neorealism is in order here. Its roots were political, in that neorealism reacted ideologically to the control and censorship of the prewar cinema; aesthetic, for the intuitive, imaginative response of neorealist directors coincided with the rise or resurgence of realism in Italian literature, particularly the novels of Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Vasco Pratolini (a realism that can be traced to the veristic style first cultivated in the Italian cinema between 1913 and 1916, when films inspired by the writings of Giovanni Verga and others dealt with human problems as well as social themes in natural settings); and economic, in that this new realism posed basic solutions to the lack of funds, of functioning studios, and of working equipment.

Indeed, what is sometimes overlooked in the growth of the neorealist movement in Italy is the fact that some of its most admired aspects sprang from the dictates of postwar adversity: a shortage of money made shooting in real locations an imperative choice over the use of expensive studio sets, and against such locations any introduction of the phony or the fake would appear glaringly obvious, whether in the appearance of the actors or the style of the acting. It must have been paradoxically exhilarating for

neorealist filmmakers to be able to stare unflinchingly at the tragic spectacle of a society in shambles, its values utterly shattered, after years of making nice little movies approved by the powers that were within the walls of Cinecittà.

In fact, it was the Fascists who, in 1937, opened Cinecittà, the largest and best-equipped movie studio in all of Europe. Like the German Nazis and the Russian Communists, the Italian Fascists realized the power of cinema as a medium of propaganda, and when they came to power, they took over the film industry. Although this meant that those who opposed Fascism could not make movies and that foreign pictures were censored, the Fascists helped to establish the essential requirements for a flourishing postwar film industry. In 1935 they founded the Centro Sperimentale in Rome, a film school headed by Luigi Chiarini, which taught all aspects of movie production. Many important neorealist directors attended this school, including Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luigi Zampa, Pietro Germi, and Giuseppe De Santis; it also produced cameramen, editors, and technicians. Moreover, Chiarini was allowed to publish *Bianco e Nero* (*Black and White*), the film journal that later became the official voice of neorealism. Once Mussolini fell from power, then, the stage was set for a strong left-wing cinema.



The Axis defeat happened to transform the Italian film industry into a close approximation of the ideal market of classical economists: a multitude of small producers engaged in fierce competition. There were no clearly dominant firms among Italian movie producers, and the Italian film industry as a whole exhibited considerable weakness. The very atomization and weakness of a privately-owned and profit-oriented motion-picture industry, however, led to a *de facto* tolerance toward the left-wing ideology of neorealism. In addition, the political climate of postwar Italy was favorable to the rise of cinematic neorealism, since this artistic movement was initially a product

of the spirit of resistance fostered by the Partisan movement. The presence of Nenni Socialists (Pietro Nenni was Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Communists in the Italian government from 1945 to 1947 contributed to the governmental tolerance of neorealism's left-wing ideology, as did the absence of censorship during the 1945-1949 period.

Rossellini's *Open City* (1945) became the landmark film in the promulgation of neorealist ideology. It so completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of its historical moment that this picture alerted both the public and the critics—on the international level (including the United States) as well as the national one—to a new direction in Italian cinema. Furthermore, the conditions of its production (relatively little shooting in the studio, film stock bought on the black market and developed without the typical viewing of daily rushes, post-synchronization of sound to avoid laboratory costs, limited financial backing) did much to create many of the myths surrounding neorealism. With a daring combination of styles and tones—from the use of documentary footage to the deployment of the most blatant melodrama, from the juxtaposition of comic relief with the most tragic human events—Rossellini almost effortlessly captured forever the tension and drama of the Italian experience during the German occupation and the Partisan struggle against the Nazi invasion.

If, practically speaking, Rossellini at once introduced Italian cinematic neorealism to the world, De Sica's collaborator Cesare Zavattini—with whom he forged one of the most fruitful writer-director partnerships in the history of cinema—eventually became the theoretical spokesman for the neorealists. By his definition, neorealism does not concern itself with superficial themes and synthetic forms; in his famous manifesto "Some Ideas on the Cinema" (1952), Zavattini declares that the camera has a "hunger for reality," and that the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the historical richness as well as the political importance of actual, everyday life. Indeed, Zavattini calls for an ideal of pure cinema in which the job of screenwriter would disappear, stories would consequently be absolutely minimal, and

all we have to do is to discover and then show all the elements that go to create a basic activity in life, in all their banal "dailiness." That activity will thereby become worthy of attention; it will even become "spectacular." Yet it will become spectacular not through its exceptional qualities, but through its normal ones. For no other medium of expression has the cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things as they happen day by day—in their longest and truest duration. As the cinema's moral responsibility comes from its enormous power, it should try to make every frame count, by which I mean that it should penetrate more and more into the manifestation and the essence of reality.

Thus the artist's task is to make people reflect on real things, exactly as they are. No fable for a starving man, because that is less effective and less moral. The time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life. Otherwise the frequent habit of identifying oneself with fictional characters will become very dangerous. The world is composed of millions of people thinking of myths.

Zavattini seems to be calling here for the making of documentaries; what he is really calling for, however, is a type of film in which not only does the story become absolutely minimal, the actor as someone lending his flesh to another, fictionalized person has no more right to exist than the story itself. In neorealism, as Zavattini

intended it, everyone would be his or her own actor. By this definition, as he knew, none of the best-known films of Italian neorealism—among them Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946) in addition to his *Open City*, and even De Sica's ostensibly plotless *Umberto D* (1951)—qualify as neorealistic. But when in "Some Ideas on the Cinema" he wrote, "We have not yet reached the center of neorealism, which today is an army ready to start," this Italian artist also knew that its citizen-soldiers would often consist of the children to whom I referred in the introduction to this essay.

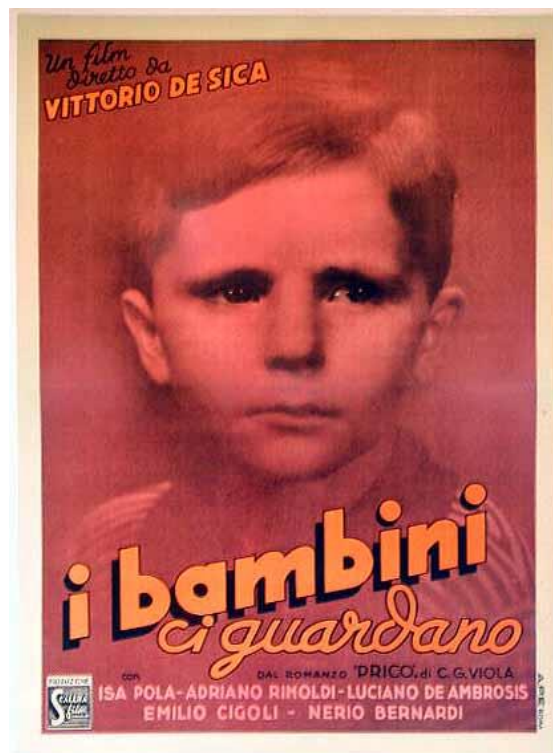


Why children as (non-)actors in these films as Zavattini ideally describes them? Because neorealism—and the "new neorealism" as we find it these days both in Italy and in countries far removed from it—replaces the traditional cinematic emphasis on the psychological complexities of the exceptional or unique individual with a desire to investigate everyday, ordinary human beings in their social, political, and economic context. And non- or first-time child actors in particular, like non-professional performers in general, are more directable in this realist style than in any other (with the possible exception of Soviet formalism). For they do not have to create an internalized or psychologized character in the Stanislavskian sense, a process that requires a considerable amount of training; the players in a neorealist picture need only extemporaneously respond, with feeling, to the stimuli of their immediate environment rather than studiously motivate their every thought or action deep from within.

There is another reason, unrelated to acting, why children appear in neorealist films, then and now, as often as they do. That is because the essential theme of neorealist cinema is the conflict between the common, anonymous person and the immense societal forces—war, politics, organized crime, the economy—that are completely external to him or her, yet completely determine this individual's existence. The most pitiful victims of such forces, because the most innocent, are naturally children, and therefore it is no accident that important neorealist pictures, Italian as well

as international, have featured them: *Germany, Year Zero*, Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1951), and Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), to Hector Babenco's *Pixote* (1981), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988), and Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* (1995).

Although inconsistently or irregularly observed, the basic tenets of neorealism were threefold: to portray real or everyday people (using nonprofessional actors) in actual settings, to examine socially significant themes (the genuine problems of living), and to promote the organic development of situations as opposed to the arbitrary manipulation of events (i.e., the real flow of life, in which complications are seldom resolved by coincidence, contrivance, or miracle). These tenets were clearly opposed to the prewar cinematic style that used polished actors on studio sets, conventional and even fatuous themes, and artificial, gratuitously resolved plots—the very style, of course, that De Sica himself had employed in the four pictures he made from 1940 to 1942 (*Red Roses*, 1940; *Maddalena*, *Zero for Conduct*, 1941; *Teresa Venerdì*, 1941; and *A Garibaldian in the Convent*, 1942).



Unfortunately, this was the cinematic style that the Italian public continued to demand after the war, despite the fact that during it such precursors of neorealism as Visconti's *Obsession* (1942) and De Sica's own *The Children Are Watching Us* (*I bambini ci guardano*, 1943) had offered a serious alternative. Indeed, it was as early as 1942, when *Obsession* and *The Children Are Watching Us* were either being made or released, that the idea of the cinema was being transformed in Italy. Influenced by French cinematic realism as well as by prevailing Italian literary trends, Visconti shot *Obsession* on location in the region of Romagna; the plot and atmosphere (based on James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1934]) were seamy in addition to steamy, and did not adhere to the polished, resolved structures of conventional Italian movies. Visconti's film was previewed in the spring of 1943 and quickly censored, not to be appreciated until after the war.

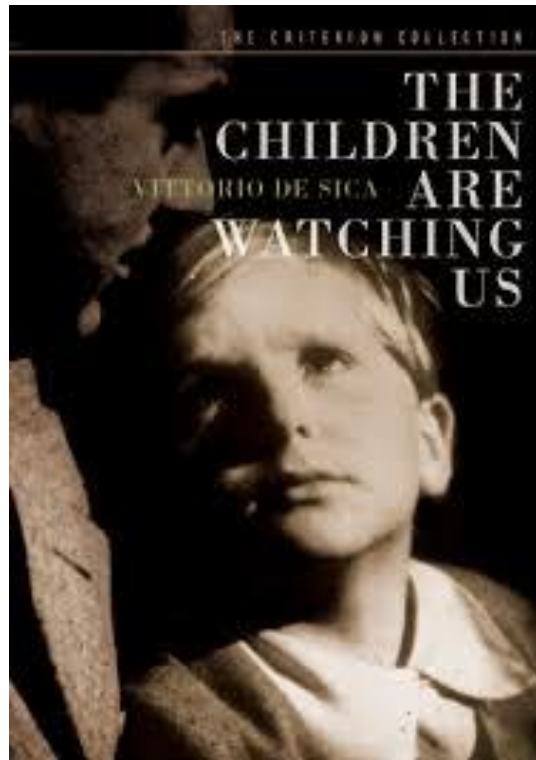
Around the same time, Gianni Franciolini's *Headlights in the Fog* (1941) was portraying infidelity among truck drivers and seamstresses, while Alessandro Blasetti's

Four Steps in the Clouds (1942)—co-scripted by Zavattini and starring De Sica's wife at the time, Giuditta Rissone—was being praised for its return to realism in a warm-hearted story of peasant life shot in natural settings. De Sica, too, was dissatisfied with the general state of the Italian cinema, and, after the relative success of his formulaic films, he felt it was time for a new challenge. Like Zavattini, who had by now achieved a measure of screenwriting success, De Sica wanted to do some serious work in which he expressed his ideas about human problems, human values, and human suffering.

De Sica himself used a child protagonist for the first time, not in *Shoeshine*, but in his first truly serious film, *The Children Are Watching Us*. It was based on Cesare Giulio Viola's 1924 novel, *Pricò*, and scripted by the author, De Sica, and Cesare Zavattini, formerly a journalist and critic. Zavattini thus became an acknowledged member of the De Sica team for the first time, and he was to prove himself, as De Sica's scenarist of choice, the most lyrical and imaginative screenwriter in the history of cinema. Zavattini's touch is immediately apparent here in the extraordinary melancholy with which the narrative unfolds; there is an intensity of feeling throughout the picture far beyond any of the cozy sentiments displayed in De Sica's prior movies, either as an actor or a director. And it was this unrelieved torrent of emotion that made *The Children Are Watching Us* such a radical departure for a film made during the last years of the Fascist regime. Like the fatalism of Visconti's *Obsession*, the frank, undiluted bleakness of this story was nearly unprecedented on the Italian screen. (De Sica did not even sweeten the bitter pill by casting star personalities in the adult parts; the best-known member of the cast was Isa Pola as the adulterous mother, an actress already considered a has-been who never really quite was.)

The title of his new film had already been the heading of one of Zavattini's famous, hard-hitting newspaper columns, and the subject matter of the story itself would be deemed scandalous when it reached the screen. For *The Children Are Watching Us* examines the impact on a young boy's life of his mother's extramarital affair with a family friend. The five-year-old Pricò becomes painfully aware of the rift in his domestic life, and his sense of loss is made even more acute when his father sends him away from Rome to live—first in the country with his unreceptive paternal grandmother, then at a Jesuit boarding school. His mother's love affair leads finally to the suicide of Pricò's ego-shattered father, and, at the end of the film, when his mother (draped in mourning dress) comes to the school to reclaim her child, Pricò rejects her. The last time we see him, he has turned his back on his remaining parent and is walking away by himself, a small, agonized figure dwarfed by the huge, impersonal lobby of the school.

The cause of the marital rift leading to the wife's infidelity is never revealed, the concern of De Sica and his screenwriters being purely with the effect of the rupture on the little boy. And it is this concentration on a child's view of the world—here the world of the *petit bourgeois* family almost apart from the economic and political forces that combine to influence its workings (a world similarly explored, *sans* children, in *Obsession*)—that gives a basically banal, even melodramatic, tale a profound aspect. Except for Clément's *Forbidden Games* (1952), there has never been such an implacable view of the antagonism and desolation that separate the lives of adults and children.



As in his subsequent neorealistic films, moreover, in *The Children Are Watching Us* De Sica does not call upon his cinematographer (Giuseppe Caracciolo) to exhibit striking angles or exhilarating movement: the compositions rarely startle us by their ingenuity; the deployment of the camera is clear-eyed rather than ingenious. What De Sica focuses on at a given point is more significant than the way in which he focuses his attention. The way is never neglected, it simply is not exploited; for it is to De Sica's purpose to move in tandem with unelliptical life as closely as he dares without vitiating motion-picture technique altogether. To subordinate the essentially cinematic as he does is itself a technique of ineffable skill; and to efface his signature as a director from the style of a film argues a modest purity of aim that is refreshing.

De Sica tried out such a detached or reserved *mise en scène* for the first time in *The Children Are Watching Us*, whose simplicity of composition and subdued editing style markedly contrast with the formulaic, studio-dictated cinematic style of his previous four films. The tone of De Sica's fifth picture also strongly differs from that of *Red Roses*, *Maddalena*, *Zero for Conduct*, *Teresa Venerdì*, and even the otherwise dramatic period piece *A Garibaldian in the Convent*, for there is no comedy in *The Children Are Watching Us*; what relief we get from Pricò's suffering comes only in the form of his own heightened or mature perception and sensitivity—indeed, his name is a shortened form of the Italian word for precocious.

Not only is there no comedy in the movie, there is a tragic ending that signaled a change in De Sica's artistic vision. That is to say, the alienation evident at the start of *The Children Are Watching Us* does not disappear; on the contrary, the gap in communication between the mother and her child widens. The discordant ending of this film, moreover, in which Pricò returns alone down the long lobby corridor to his tiny dormitory room, is one of the most powerful in all of De Sica's work—challenged only by the final scene of *Shoeshine*, where a boy slips to his death from a bridge in an attempt to escape attack by the best friend who has turned on him. The ending of *The Children Are Watching Us* thus contrasts markedly with the comic endings of this

director's first four movies, where the strife and confusion of the fictional world are replaced by happy harmony and romantic union.



The Children Are Watching Us, then, proved to be a key work, thematically as well as stylistically, in De Sica's directing career: it cemented his collaborative artistic relationship with Cesare Zavattini, and it marked the beginning of his breakthrough as a filmmaker of more than provincial stature. In its thematic attempt to reveal the underside of Italy's moral life, shared with *Obsession*, this film was indicative of a rising new vision in Italian cinema. And in exhibiting semi-documentary qualities by being shot partially on location at the beaches of Alassio, as well as by using nonprofessional actors in some roles, *The Children Are Watching Us* was, again along with *Obsession* as well as the aforementioned pictures by Blasetti and Franciolini, a precursor of the neorealism that would issue forth after the liberation of occupied Rome.

De Sica's fifth film was not a financial success, however, and its negative reception was in part engineered by those who saw it as an impudent criticism of Italian morality. The unfavorable reaction to *The Children Are Watching Us* was also influenced, of course, by the strictures of the past: during the era of Mussolini's regime and "white telephone" movies (trivial romantic comedies set in blatantly artificial studio surroundings), an insidious censorship had made it almost impossible for artists to deal with—and for audiences to appreciate—the moral, social, and spiritual components of actual, everyday life. This is one of the senses in which neorealism's roots were political, for the movement reacted ideologically not only to Fascist militarism, totalitarianism, and racism, but also to the control and censorship of prewar Italian cinema.

So great was the reaction against such control and censorship that *The Children Are Watching Us* goes as far as to treat a child who may be damaged, even ultimately destroyed, by the world of his elders. Indeed, De Sica's film includes one elder, Pricò's mother, who would sacrifice her child for the sake of an extramarital romantic union. But the distinguishing quality of this Italian film, or its off-putting one from the standpoint of doctrinaire Italian Catholicism, is a matter of something larger: its overall perspective. For it is as though De Sica's camera in *The Children Are Watching Us*, as in his subsequent *Shoeshine*, were a passive or removed witness to tragedy rather than an active, integrated force in the shaping of a fictional story overseen by at least a watchful, if not finally a beneficent, God. (This "passivity," incidentally, was one of the grand illusions of the neorealist movement to come, and one fostered by the frequent use of nonprofessional actors photographed in actual locations, as opposed to the artificial confines of a movie studio.) De Sica, you see, was nothing in these pictures—even more so in *Bicycle Thieves* and *Miracle in Milan* (1951)—if not a critic of Catholicism and its powerlessness to effect social change. And, ultimately, that is where the films' radicalness lies. His secular humanism may have left Catholics cold, but it resonated deeply for many others, who found its courage and forthrightness bracing.



The Children Are Watching Us perhaps owes less to its secular humanism, however, than to the remarkable performance of the boy, Luciano De Ambrosis, himself orphaned just before work on the picture began, and whose previous acting experience was limited to a walk-on in a Pirandello play. De Sica's uncanny directorial rapport with his five-year-old protagonist would, of course, later prove vital in the making of *Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves*, which share with *The Children Are Watching Us* the theme of childhood innocence as it becomes besmirched by confrontation with adult realities. Arguably, De Sica would become the most eloquent director of children the screen has ever known, with the possible exception only of François Truffaut (in such films as *The Four Hundred Blows* [1959] and *Small Change* [1976]). And *The Children Are Watching Us* gave the first evidence of that extraordinary dual perspective that De Sica conveyed in his films about children. At the same time, he subtly managed both to simulate a child's vantage point on the baffling adult sorrows that surround him and to establish an authorial detachment—expressed in the spare neutrality of his *mise en*

scène, even the physical distance he so often maintains between the camera and his subject—that somehow makes the predicament of his young characters doubly moving. *The Children Are Watching Us* and other neorealist films of Vittorio De Sica endure, and one of the reasons is the role children play in them.

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