

WHAT IS CINEMA?

VOL. II

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foreword

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new foreword

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essays selected and translated

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respect of the moments lived, are what the blades of grass are to the field. To paint every blade of grass one must be the Douanier Rousseau. In the world of cinema one must have the love of a De Sica for creation itself.

A Note on Umberto D

Until I saw *Umberto D*, I considered *Ladri di Biciclette* as having reached the uttermost limits of neorealism so far as the concept of narrative is concerned. It seems to me today that *Ladri di Biciclette* falls far short of the ideal Zavattini subject. Not that I consider *Umberto D* superior. The unmatched superiority of *Ladri di Biciclette* still resides in the paradox of its having reconciled radically opposite values: factual freedom and narrative discipline. But the authors only achieve this by sacrificing the continuum of reality. In *Umberto D* one catches a glimpse, on a number of occasions, of what a truly realist cinema of time could be, a cinema of "duration."

These experiments in continuous time are not new in cinema. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, for example, runs for eighty uninterrupted minutes. But there it was just a question of action such as we have in the theater. The real problem is not the continuity of the exposed film but the temporal structure of the incident.

Rope could be filmed without a change of focus, without any break in the shots, and still provide a dramatic spectacle, because in the original play the incidents were already set in order dramatically according to an artificial time—theatrical time—just as there is musical time and dance time.

In at least two scenes of *Umberto D* the problem of subject and script take on a different aspect. In these instances it is a matter of making "life time"—the simple continuing to be of a person to whom nothing in particular happens—take on the quality of a spectacle, of a drama. I am thinking in particular of when Umberto D goes to bed, having retired to his room thinking he has a fever and, especially, of the little servant girl's awakening

in the morning. These two sequences undoubtedly constitute the ultimate in "performance" of a certain kind of cinema, at the level of what one would call "the invisible subject," by which I mean the subject entirely dissolved in the fact to which it has given rise; while when a film is taken from a story, the latter continues to survive by itself like a skeleton without its muscles; one can always "tell" the story of the film.

The function of the subject is here no less essential than the story but its essence is reabsorbed into the scenario. To put it another way, the subject exists before the working scenario, but it does not exist afterward. Only the "fact" exists which the subject had itself forecast. If I try to recount the film to someone who has not seen it—for example what Umberto D is doing in his room or the little servant Maria in the kitchen, what is there left for me to describe? An impalpable show of gestures without meaning, from which the person I am talking to cannot derive the slightest idea of the emotion that gripped the viewer. The subject here is sacrificed beforehand, like the wax in the casting of the bronze.

At the scenario level this type of subject corresponds, reciprocally, to the scenario based entirely on the behavior of the actor. Since the real time of the narrative is not that of the drama but the concrete duration of the character, this objectiveness can only be transformed into a *mise en scène* (scenario and action) in terms of something totally subjective. I mean by this that the film is identical with what the actor is doing and with this alone. The outside world is reduced to being an accessory to this pure action, which is sufficient to itself in the same way that algae deprived of air produce the oxygen they need. The actor who gives a representation of a particular action, who "interprets a part" always, in a measure, directs himself because he is calling more or less on a system of generally accepted dramatic conventions which are learned in conservatories. Not even these conventions are any help to him here. He is entirely in the hands of the director in this complete replica of life.

True, *Umberto D* is not a perfect film like *Ladri di Bicicletta*, but this is perhaps understandable since its ambition was greater. Less perfect in its entirety but certainly more perfect and more unalloyed in some of its parts—those in which De Sica and Zavattini exhibit complete fidelity to

the aesthetic of neorealism. That is why one must not accuse *Umberto D* of facile sentimentality, some measure of modest appeal to social pity. The good qualities and even, for that matter, the defects of the film are far beyond any categories of morality or politics. We are dealing here with a cinematographic "report," a disconcerting and irrefutable observation on the human condition. One may or may not find it to one's taste that this report should be made on the life of a minor functionary boarding with a family or on a little pregnant servant; but, certainly, what we have just learned about this old man and this girl as revealed through their accidental misfortunes above all concerns the human condition. I have no hesitation in stating that the cinema has rarely gone such a long way toward making us aware of what it is to be a man. (And also, for that matter, of what it is to be a dog.)

Hitherto dramatic literature has provided us with a doubtless exact knowledge of the human soul, but one which stands in the same relation to man as classical physics to matter—what scientists call *macrophysics*, useful only for phenomena of considerable magnitude. And certainly the novel has gone to extremes in categorizing this knowledge. The emotional physics of a Proust is *microscopic*. But the matter with which this *microphysics* is concerned is on the inside. It is memory. The cinema is not necessarily a substitute for the novel in this search after man, but it has at least one advantage over it, namely, that it presents man only in the present—to the "time lost and found" of Proust there corresponds in a measure the "time discovered" of Zavattini; this is, in the contemporary cinema, something like Proust in the present indicative tense.

UMBERTO D: A GREAT WORK

MIRACOLO IN MILANO created only discord. In the absence of the general enthusiasm that greeted *Ladri di Biciclette* the originality of the scenario, the mixture of the fantastic and the commonplace, and the penchant of our time for political cryptography stirred up around this strange film a sort of *succès de scandale* (which Micheline Vian has debunked with relentless humor in an excellent article published in *Les Temps modernes*).

A conspiracy of silence, a sullen and obstinate reticence, is building up against *Umberto D* and as a result even the good that has been written about it seems to condemn the film with faint praise; though it is a kind of mute ill humor or even contempt (to which no one is prepared to admit in view of the illustrious past of its makers) that in secret animates the hostility of more than one critic. There will certainly be no "Battle of *Umberto D*."

And yet it is one of the most revolutionary and courageous films of the last two years—not only of the Italian cinema but of European cinema as a whole, a masterpiece to which film history is certainly going to grant a place of honor, even if for the moment an inexplicable failure of attention or a certain blindness on the part of those who love the cinema allows it only a reluctant and ineffective esteem.

If there are lines outside theaters showing *Adorables créatures* or *Le Fruit défendu*, it is perhaps in part because the brothels have been closed;

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all the same, there should be a few tens of thousands of people in Paris who expect other pleasures from film.

For the Paris public to be properly shamed, must *Umberto D* leave the marquees before it has had the kind of run it deserves?

The chief reason for the misunderstandings that have arisen about *Umberto D* lies in comparing it with *Ladri di Biciclette*. Some will say with some semblance of reason that De Sica "returns to neorealism" here, after the poetico-realist interlude of *Miracolo in Milano*. This is true, but only if one hastens to add that the perfection of *Ladri di Biciclette* was only a beginning, though it was first regarded as a culmination. It took *Umberto D* to make us understand what it was in the realism of *Ladri di Biciclette* that was still a concession to classical dramaturgy. Consequently what is so unsettling about *Umberto D* is primarily the way it rejects any relationship to traditional film spectacle.

Of course, if we take just the theme of the film we can reduce it to a seemingly "populist" melodrama with social pretensions, an appeal on behalf of the middle class: a retired minor official reduced to penury decides against suicide because he can neither find someone to take care of his dog nor pluck up enough courage to kill it before he kills himself. This final episode is not the moving conclusion to a dramatic series of events. If the classical concept of "construction" still has some meaning here, the sequence of events which De Sica reports obeys a necessity that has nothing to do with dramatic structure. What kind of causal relationship could you establish between a harmless angina for which *Umberto D* will be treated in hospital, his landlady's turning him out on the street, and his thinking of suicide? The notice to vacate was served irrespective of the angina. A "dramatic author" would have made the angina acute in order to establish a logical and a pathetic relationship between the two things. Here, on the contrary, the period in hospital is in effect hardly justified by the real state of *Umberto D*'s health; rather than making us pity him for his unhappy lot, it is really a rather cheerful episode. That is not where the question lies, though. It is not his real poverty that moves *Umberto D* to despair, though it is in a very real sense a contributing factor, but only in the degree that it shows him just how lonely he is. The

few things which Umberto D must rely on others to do for him are all it takes to alienate his few human contacts. To the extent that it is indeed the middle class that is involved, the film reports the secret misery, the egoism, the lack of fellow-feeling which characterizes its members. Its protagonist advances step by step further into his solitude: the person closest to him, the only one to show him any tenderness, is his landlady's little maid; but her kindness and her goodwill cannot prevail over her worries as an unwed mother-to-be. Through his one friendship, then, there runs the motif of despair.

But here I am now lapsing back into traditional critical concepts, though I am talking about a film whose originality I set out to prove.

If one assumes some distance from the story and can still see in it a dramatic patterning, some general development in character, a single general trend in its component events, this is only after the fact. The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis. One wonderful sequence—it will remain one of the high points of film—is a perfect illustration of this approach to narrative and thus to direction: the scene in which the maid gets up. The camera confines itself to watching her doing her little chores: moving around the kitchen still half asleep, drowning the ants that have invaded the sink, grinding the coffee. The cinema here is conceived as the exact opposite of that “art of ellipsis” to which we are much too ready to believe it devoted. Ellipsis is a narrative process; it is logical in nature and so it is abstract as well; it presupposes analysis and choice; it organizes the facts in accord with the general dramatic direction to which it forces them to submit. On the contrary, De Sica and Zavattini attempt to divide the event up into still smaller events and these into events smaller still, to the extreme limits of our capacity to perceive them in time. Thus, the unit event in a classical film would be “the maid’s getting out of bed”; two or three brief shots would suffice to show this. De Sica replaces this narrative unit with a series of “smaller” events: she wakes up; she crosses the hall; she drowns the ants; and so on. But let us examine just one of

these. We see how the grinding of the coffee is divided in turn into a series of independent moments; for example, when she shuts the door with the tip of her outstretched foot. As it goes in on her the camera follows the movement of her leg so that the image finally concentrates on her toes feeling the surface of the door. Have I already said that it is Zavattini's dream to make a whole film out of ninety minutes in the life of a man to whom nothing happens? That is precisely what "neorealism" means for for him. Two or three sequences in *Umberto D* give us more than a glimpse of what such a film might be like; they are fragments of it that have already been shot. But let us make no mistake about the meaning and the value realism has here. De Sica and Zavattini are concerned to make cinema the asymptote of reality—but in order that it should ultimately be life itself that becomes spectacle, in order that life might in this perfect mirror be visible poetry, be the self into which film finally changes it.*

* "Telle qu'en elle-même, enfin, le cinéma la change." Bazin here rewrites the first line of Mallarmé's famous sonnet *Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*, "Tel qu'en lui-même, enfin, l'éternité le change."