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Umberto D.: Vittorio De Sica's "Super"-naturalism

SOCIOLOGICAL FILM CRITICISM IS forever mistaken because it is forever misled —on humanitarian principles or by self-righteousness or from color-blindness— into confusing ends with means. Asserting that importance lies in subject matter, it fails to recognize that no subject is important until awakened by art; assuming (to give its charity the benefit of the doubt) that love is greater than art, it fails to acknowledge that the art *is* the love. Vittorio De Sica's new film, *Umberto D.* (new here—it was released four years ago) provides a characteristic opportunity for confused judgment. To praise the film for its human appeal is as needless and as miserly as to praise a beautiful woman for her conspicuous virtue.

Umberto Domenico Ferrari or Umberto D., as he prefers to call himself, is a retired civil-service clerk living alone on an inadequate pension and, as the film opens, facing eviction from a furnished room which, as ghastly as may be, is the only place he can call home. His sole companion is a mongrel dog, Flick. To maintain their precious, if contracting, haven (the landlady has taken to sub-renting his room to transient lovers while he is out), the old man joins other aged pensioners in a demonstration (unsuccessful) for higher allotments, sells his gold watch and his dictionary, tries to beg but is unable to support the shameful resolution, engages in frustrated transactions for boarding the dog or giving it away, and finally attempts suicide by standing in front of an oncoming train with the dog in his arms. Flick, in panic, escapes and Umberto D., trying to recapture him, saves himself. The film closes on the old man trying to regain the dog's trust in a deserted park, with an occasional train speeding by.

So rehearsed, the film may easily be construed as an artless and unbuttered slice of life, a testimony of "naturalism": ostensibly a method of expressing reality without inhibition, without overtones and as far as possible without style. Nothing could be further from the case. Like *Shoe Shine* or *Bicycle Thief*, and with justification even more subtle, De Sica's *Umberto D.*—a masterpiece of compassion which he has dedicated to his father—might be termed *super*-naturalism if this compound had not been preempted for another kind of experience entirely. The fidelity of De Sica's attention to the plight of the man, Umberto, realistic in its living details, is enriched by a host of modulations working under and through the story line, so delicately registered as to be imperceptible save to that second awareness evoked from most spectators without their being able to define it. Cinematically created, these modulations

are not arresting, since they accumulate from thematic relationships in the scenario. De Sica's use of the camera is clear-eyed, rather than ingenuous. As in his other naturalist films, his cinematographer (in this case G. R. Aldo, the same who was bewitched, with De Sica, into assisting David Selznick's Florentine hoax, *Indiscretion of an American Wife)* is not called upon to exhibit striking angles or movement: De Sica's compositions rarely startle one by their ingenuity. *What* he focuses on at a given point is more significant than the *way* he focuses. The way is never neglected, it simply isn't exploited; for it is to De Sica's purpose to move with un-elliptical 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.[1]

In *Bicycle Thief,* De Sica developed the film's rhythm by a *pas de deux* of man and boy in their scouting expedition through the city, the boy nervously anxious to keep in time with his father's mood and intention. The adjustments of temper and of tempo, the resolution, the haste, anger and embarrassment, the flanking movements, the frustrations and periodic losses of direction: these constituted a form of situational ballet which gave the film its lyricism. There is no such springy movement in *Umberto D.*; the quality of its form is established otherwise.

The possessive theme is Time; its epiphanies are sounded in a scale of variations. Before even the credits have appeared on the screen, the bells of early Mass ring out as the pensioners gather in the street. After they have been dispersed by the carabinieri, Umberto D. offers his watch for sale to an acquaintance, murmuring his own pride in its workmanship with an imitative "tick-tock, tick-tock". As this scene is succeeded by one at a restaurant, where he resumes his attempt to sell the watch, the background noises of dishes and spoons seem to take up the clicking pulsations of time. Thereafter a tap dripping, footsteps, voices saying goodnight below Umberto's window, his alarm clock, the musical score itself and bells of one kind or another maintain this rhythm and reminder of the irrevocable. When, at the deepest moment of his despair, after he has failed to beg or borrow, Umberto D. returns to his room—already breached and dismantled for the landlady's new domestic arrangements —the clock ticks more loudly; it is virtually the only sound we hear besides

[1]Since writing this article I have attended screenings of I VITELLONI (1953) and LA STRADA (1954), directed by the emergent Federico Fellini; these films, which I hope to discuss in a later issue, are equally distinct examples of methodical naturalism transcended, although in the former the seemingly unrehearsed configurations of daily life, poetically wrought, never quite combine in that stricter unity of realism and allegory that underlies UMBERTO D. and distinguishes, sublimely, LA STRADA. Fellini was co-scenarist of ROMA, CITTA APERTA ("Open City"), and other Rosselini-made films, scenarist of SIENZA PIETA and co-director of LUCI DEL VARIETA, unseen here to date. Before 1953 his purest claim on the future was his scenario for THE MIRACLE (starring Magnani), in which he personally appeared—as the silent goatherd-seducer.

the old man's breathing. . . . Intent now on self-destruction, he inquires first about boarding the dog. The haggling of the couple with whom he tries to deal, conducted in that fulminating rhythm of the back-street Roman, is intercut with a ferociously barking mastiff—the voice of all the world that opposes Umberto's need. He turns away, with Flick still unprovided for, and his retreat is mocked by a housewife who has flipped a carpet over her window-sill, which she then beats at a measured, doom-like pace. Time piles up. A beggar chants plaintively, "Signora! I have two children . . . Signor! I have two children". As a well-dressed woman ignores his appeal, he repeats the plaint like a warning, between savagely clamped teeth, "SIGNORA! I HAVE TWO CHILDREN!" . . . Streetcar and railroad-crossing bells rattle and jangle. Umberto D. makes his futile attempt at self-extinction and is left with his problem as the train catapults by.

Sound, which is time, is always extraneous to Umberto D. It impinges; it does not involve him. The clatter of social life is beyond the fringes of his consciousness; he hears it but it isn't speaking to him. Maria, the landlady's adolescent servant-girl from the country, is ever ready to respond as far as her own preoccupation will allow, but she is pregnant (by whom she is not sure) and fearful that the landlady will find out and discharge her. With eyes misleadingly alive, she seems forever on the verge of communication with the old pensioner, only to escape into her private world of ignorance and fright. And Umberto D., on his side, is as incapable of saying the words that would unite them in their misery. (Beyond an ineffectual reprimand to one of Maria's 'seducers', he operates within the circumference of his own pain.) As he lies in his bed, sweating, anxious, sick and alone, the landlady, her friends and her preposterous suitor sing pompous operatic choruses in the sitting-room. Music, badinage, whispers and coarse laughter announce, without reassurance, the life of others.

Visually the narration is equally cogent, taking in without appearing to emphasize the incongruities, the excrescences, the implacabilities of life at a level of civilization where the meretricious and the ugly are accepted or suffered, where in fact the vitality of a people cut off, by a superimposed culture, from its native modes, expresses itself by choice through a corrupt aesthetic. At the house of Umberto D.'s landlady the camera, with flat-lighted neutrality, exposes the importunate vulgarity of middle-class Italian decor: the mock-Imperial wallpaper, the cut-glass, the lambrequins like shrouds, the fringed table-scarves and (most horrible item of all!) a lamp in the form of a Grecian nymph, with naked light-bulbs sprouting from it. (The stilted terrors of the family photograph album.) There are some remarkable instances in this film of De Sica's sparing use of a background object as *direct* symbol. The old man's coat hanging lifelessly on a gigantic stand which looks like a monstrous under-

water growth is analogous to the social situation in which man is an unbraced, drowning remnant in the ruins of a cheaply florid dream of empire—and when Umberto D. returns to his room the last time, a shot of the hallway gives prominence to a stuffed falcon among the bric-a-brac. The most impressive *vis-a-vis* is depicted in the painful scene of Umberto D.'s tentative rehearsal of begging (during which he tries using Flick to cover him until the humiliation of being encountered by someone he knows forces him to the pretense of teaching the dog a new trick). An overpowering classical column, cracked at the base, is the backdrop for this joyless act.

De Sica's balance between the lifelike and the cinematic is tenuous; if he had actors less responsive to the naked untheatricality he is commonly after, his muted formalism might suffer from the risks he takes. But he can afford to dwell at length on the faces and motions of Umberto D. and Maria precisely because Carlo Battisti and Maria Pia Casilio are sentiently, gravely, inside life. (Neither is a 'professional'. Where, but in Italy, can one find so much unconscious histrionic talent?!). Few directors could manage, without losing their hold on the continuity, the beautiful cadence in this film where the coming of day is enacted through the actions of Maria as she gets out of bed. The scene is wordless, leisured and almost unbearably intimate. There is little in it that could not be performed on a stage, but in its brief duration and its breathing nearness, in the particular placing of the camera for each view of the pregnant girl struggling to experience joy which gives way to fear and then to a daydream indifference, it is a marvel of movie timing and perspective.

Maria, while subordinate to Umberto D., is by an inspired implication complementary. Neglected youth and discarded old age. The girl and her involuntary burden-to-be; the man and his voluntarily assumed burden, Flick: girl and man subservient to the loud concerns of society, exemplified by the middle-aged landlady who is handsome in a brassy way, venal, pseudo-respectable and heartless—living in a world of opera, ormolu and broken-down technology. In *Shoe Shine* the horse was a symbol, if you like, of the unattainable, a dream of power and freedom. The bicycle in *Bicycle Thief* was an occupational necessity which became a projection of the man's self-respect. Flick, neither ideal nor economic necessity, may be felt as representing the last thing a man will surrender: it is the love in the man, Umberto.

When De Sica and Cesare Zavattini (who wrote the story from which, with De Sica, the screenplay was shaped) avoided the easier termination, of suicide accomplished, by ending the film on an inconclusive (which is not to say indecisive) note—Umberto D and the dog gamboling under the cedars—we can be sure they were saying very clearly: Life sometimes leaves you nothing but love, and in your deprivation and anguish you cannot bear to support even such a burden. But this is your only identity and until the day you die you must

not put aside the little humanity left to you. . . . Umberto D. tries to entrust the dog to another; he tries to give it away; he tries to destroy it. In the end he is still, as our idiom says, "stuck with it".

Birth quickens in the unclaimed Maria; the venal landlady marries a fool; Umberto is homeless but keeps his pet. De Sica's films in the naturalist vein have been accusations of the Fascist aftermath; they take their place with the most profound cinematic achievements by sounding vibrations in a dimension larger than the political. . . . When Umberto D. twirls down the path under the trees with the jumping dog, we recall not only the other De Sica 'conclusions'—Pasquale, in *Shoe Shine*, facing a lifetime of expiation; the frustrated 'bicycle thief' and his son renewing the life-circuit by joining hands; the poor, of *Miracle in Milan*, flying away on their brooms to an unlikely heaven—but also perhaps Baptiste, in *Les Enfants du Paradis*, striving against the tide of revellers cutting him off from Truth, the woodchopper in *Rashomon*, undaunted by fearful disclosures of moral ambiguity, deciding to adopt the abandoned baby—and Chaplin disappearing into a California horizon (the *first* time!).

Reviews

WYNDHAM LEWIS

Perspectives on Lawrence

IT IS IN ONE SENSE a favorable circumstance for a reviewer that both Lawrence of Arabia and his debunker, Richard Aldington, are well known to me. It may also be considered a handicap. But that I am unable to agree with Aldington regarding the victim of his critical attack[1] can hardly be regarded as unfriendly.

I first saw Colonel Lawrence on my doorstep after he had scaled my gate, which I had locked, one fairly dark evening. I supposed he had gained admittance in this way in order to present me with a bill, and when I asked him very roughly who he was, holding his head down he whispered "T. E. Lawrence". After that he frequently visited me, as Aircraftsman Shaw, at the end of one of his long motor rides from one or other of his camps. I remember on one occasion he told me that General Allenby wished to propose him to the government

[1]LAWRENCE OF ARABIA. A Biographical Enquiry, by *Richard Aldington*. Regnery. $5.00.