

## OLLI Presentation

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Working Class Problems: *Bicycle Thieves* and *On the Waterfront*

Italian director Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycles Thieves* and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* were produced about six years apart and an ocean away. Although Italy joined the Allied effort during the war, the country itself was virtually vanquished—the cities, the economy, the government, the people and their relationships devastated. America, of course, was the principal victor of the war. Although the country experienced a great loss of life, its soil and non-combatant citizenry were virtually untouched by the conflict, and the captains of industry greatly profited. Whereas *Bicycle Thieves* conveys almost universal suffering in Rome, *On the Waterfront* practically goes out of its way to suggest that the problems portrayed in New York were isolated to the waterfront. Whereas Italy's problems were systemic of the greater ills of its society and were beyond the control of the people, Kazan suggests that the waterfront's problems were practically self-created, that the people simply had not yet done the right thing: stand-up to a corrupt but tiny cabal of evil.

*Bicycle Thieves* and *On the Waterfront* can be seen as a contrast between Rome's helplessness and New York's hopefulness. Italy's infrastructure—social, political, economic and physical—was seriously crippled by the war. Its institutions were not to be relied on. New York's infrastructure and institutions not only survived but were vibrant and largely trustworthy. In Rome, life outside the privileged class was a hard-scrabble existence; there was no help to be found. But on the docks of New York, one needed only to recognize and rely on "the truth." The

support system for dock workers was there: friends, the church, law enforcement. Roman churches fed stomachs, New York churches fed souls. Italian police threw up their hands in frustration, New York police pursued every avenue to solve a crime. In Rome, there was no work. In New York, only irresponsible alcoholics lacked work. There was no evident truth in Rome. In New York, truth was abundant, just waiting to be picked like fruit from a tree. Rome succumbed. New York triumphed.

Considering these factors, one can readily understand why a movement like neorealism could take hold in Italy. The veneer of civilization had been stripped by war. Why cast an artsy veneer onto a film? Roberto Rossellini once said, "If I mistakenly make a beautiful shot, I cut it out." Life for the working class was a day-to-day struggle, moving beyond one obstacle only to confront another. Indeed, life for the working filmmaker wasn't much better. Budgets were tight, in some quarters virtually non-existent. Studios were destroyed by the war so the camera was taken outside. With no money to hire professional actors they hired everyday citizens, all the better to convey a realistic portrait of daily life. In *Bicycle Thief*, De Sica looked directly at the dominant theme of postwar Italian society and appropriately represented it via an economically-feasible utilization of film technology and the cultural realities of the time.

On the the other hand, the single-most important social problem of 1950s America, civil rights, is not discussed in *Waterfront*. In 1953, a unionized workforce was on the rise. America was building a shadow economy, socialism, from the bottom up. The Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 50s was not inspired solely by the communist aggression found in other countries but by what some saw as an erosion of traditional American values. On the surface, both De Sica and Kazan talked about the average Joe, but the underlying circumstances were very different. Although the characters portrayed in *Waterfront* lived in simple and austere conditions, they ate well and lived in dignity. They had jobs. The scrawny workers in *Bicycle Thieves* were fighting

society in its largest manifestation, but Kazan's workers merely fought a corrupt union, an entity which existed outside of society's mainstream.

De Sica's Rome did not have a shiny, titanic white ship sitting in the harbor. Although a concern for morality is at the heart of *Bicycle Thieves*, the characters do not have the luxury of confronting intellectual and spiritual issues. After an exceedingly futile day and near imprisonment at the hands of authorities, father and son walk back into the crowd with nothing. Where a myriad of moral forces have come together to vanquish the enemy in *On the Waterfront*, Ricci and his boy have only themselves—and the inevitable prospect of doing it all over again the next day. Truth, if Kazan's version of it, wins the day in New York, but Rome has perseverance on its side.

### On the Waterfront

On April 12, 1952, Elia Kazan testified in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and provided the names of several colleagues who had earlier been, like himself, members of the communist party. Playwright Arthur Miller, who was to have a falling out with Kazan over his HUAC testimony, was writing the script for *On the Waterfront*, basing it on a series of newspaper stories about corrupt New York waterfront unions. Film critic Tim Dirks states that "due to HUAC pressure on Columbia Pictures' studio chief Harry Cohn...[Arthur] Miller [was told] to change the villains from corrupt and militant union officials and gangsters to evil communists" so as to provide "a 'pro-American' feel."<sup>1</sup> Miller quit the project. Nevertheless, the communism idea did not fly and is not a subject of the movie.

Still, Kazan veiled the political component through common American iconography set in

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<sup>1</sup>Dirks, Tim. "On the Waterfront (1954)." *Filmsite Movie Review*. AMC Filmsite. Web. 11 Feb. 2012.

a morality tale of good versus evil, and used the project to justify and defend his former actions. While Kazan's alter ego, Terry Malloy, struggles with his conscience and tries to make sense of and find his place in a shifting world, Kazan portrays capitalism and the American Way in a positive light while casting unions as corrupt. Ironically, despite the movie's use of pro-religious, pro-government, and pro-capitalist symbolism, the film was criticized for being un-American.

"Stool pigeons" and pigeons dominate *On the Waterfront*, mirroring Kazan's own status in much of the filmmaking community. Kazan is telling us that ratting is justified if done for the sake of truth. To strengthen his position, he enlists the aid of iconic American virtues represented by a Catholic priest; a wholesome, clean and intelligent "girl next door"; dispassionate but fair-minded police investigators; and a gleaming white ship—"the shining city on the hill"—which dominates over the hovel-like union headquarters from the very first frame of the picture. Kazan's intent is especially revealed when the body of a murdered union worker is crane-lifted on a platform from the cargo hold toward heaven attended by Father Barry. Terry and his dock-side colleagues are martyrs in defense of Christian brotherhood and American capitalism. At film's end, Terry is virtually risen from the dead to lead his people (his union co-workers) toward their true destiny represented by the stern but friendly capitalist who accepts the flock into his benevolent bosom. By virtue of his HUAC testimony, Kazan, we realize, has imagined he has performed his Christ-like duty.

Although *On the Waterfront* succeeds marvelously as a Hollywood-produced movie, there are a number of elements that distinguishes it from the typical model. By the time the film was produced, Italian neorealism had made its mark—not with the American public, but with knowing critics and a new breed of postwar filmmakers. It departed from the norms of Hollywood in a number of ways. Although the underbelly of American life had long been a common theme, the grittiness of *Waterfront* was new to American viewers. Much like its Italian

counterparts, it was filmed on location in thirty-eight days and employed the city's ambient sounds. By American standards, it was decidedly low budget, but it conveyed a rawness and naturalness that was new and refreshing. Nevertheless, *Waterfront* didn't go as far as neorealism; its technical and production values were full-blown Hollywood: expertly-composed framing, superb acting, integrated musical score, editing, and a complex narrative style. And although Hollywood has always brought memorable characters to the screen and has frequently provided drama via a character's transformation, those characters have tended—to this day—to be one-dimensional. Instead, Terry is highly nuanced and complex, a tender-hearted but beaten-up and uneducated ex-prize fighter, and his transformation is far more profound and life-altering than found in classic Hollywood narratives.

*On the Waterfront* is often seen as a simple morality tale, demonstrating that a persistent conviction of the truth will reap its rewards. Indeed, this truth is central to the theme and provides the movie's universality. Its political underpinnings are not immediately recognized by an audience that sees priests, wholesome young women, and big commerce as day-to-day norms, but the intent and symbolism is obvious. By testifying in front of HUAC, Kazan stepped into the world of the American mainstream; he acknowledged and accepted its dominate values, its righteousness and its enduring Protestant work ethic. By concluding the movie with the line, "All right, let's go to work," and by shutting the huge, movie-screen-sized door in our faces, Kazan tells us that this chapter is best put behind us; he has had his say and it's time to move on.