

just entertainment

But is it about life?

Modern family no longer a source for drama

BY RICHARD FRANCIS

A recent media article lamented that although the majority of Americans are blue collar workers, the only television programs with blue collar characters are *The Simpsons* and *The Rosanne Barr Show*. The underlying assumption is that our entertainment should reflect life. In post-World War II Italy there existed a school of cinema which shared that point of view. It was called neo-realism. It found drama in the lives of the common people, often the lower and non-working classes, as well as the destitute. If you are unfamiliar with its major proponents such as De Sica and Rossellini, you might know it in some of its hybrid forms in the pre-*La Dolce Vita* films of Fellini, or (with a French new-wave twist) in the early films of Truffaut (such as *400 Blows*). The landmark work of neo-realism is considered to be Vittorio De Sica's 1949 film *The Bicycle Thief*.

Maurizio Nichetti's *The Icicle Thief* begins with a pedantic and non-informative prologue which says it is an homage to De Sica's film, but which also, in a maniacally slapstick style reminiscent of Buster Keaton, introduces us to the film's Woody Allen-like Italian director who has recently turned from comedy to "serious" film, here touching his neo-realist roots (just as Allen would do in his ongoing homages to Bergman and Fellini). And we are about to see the film on Italian television. *The Icicle Thief* suddenly shifts to black and white, and as the titles go by, we see the beginnings of a lovely recreation of old neo-realism with slightly more modern cinematic values. Since we are watching it on television, we see it with commercials. We also see it from the home of a modern Italian family, and from the studio which is broadcasting the film, and where the director sits in increasing frustration as his film begins to decompose in its modern commercial setting.

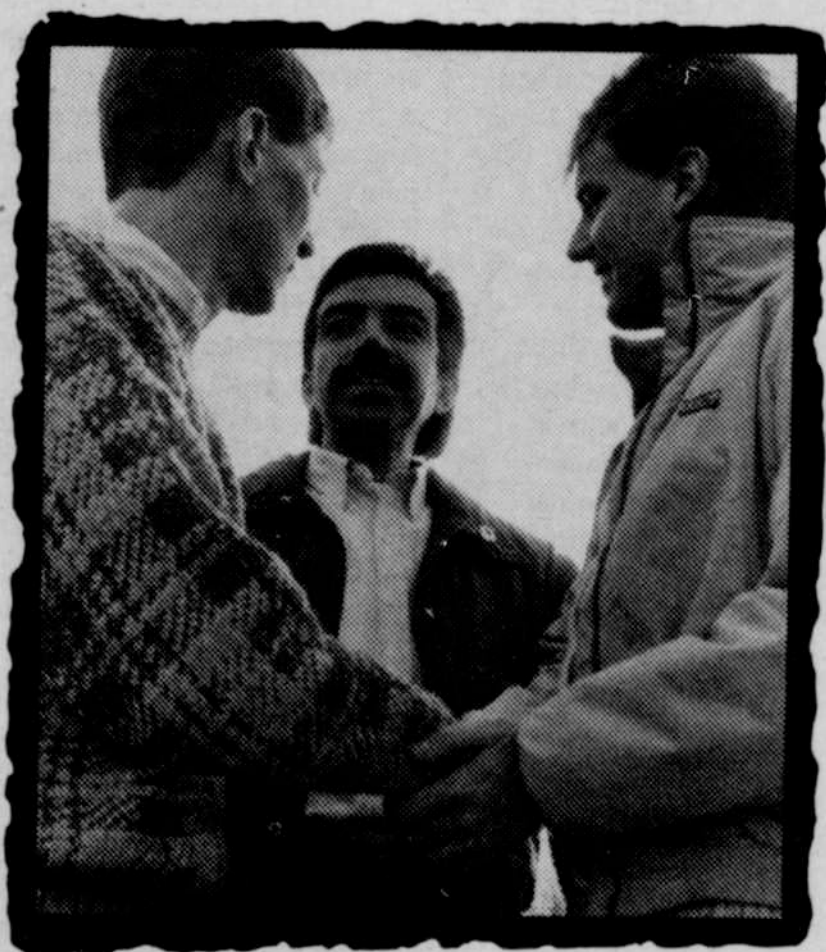
That this film is an homage to *The Bicycle Thief*, as well as to De Sica's *Umberto D*, need

not be a threat to you if you do not know the sources. In a lovely homage twist, Nichetti illustrates De Sica's own turn to dark comedy, thereby turning his own homage into a dark delight which can be hysterical even if you don't know how deep the joke can go.

As the television commercials begin to interrupt the film, the director begins to complain. Here the concerns of the real-life director and the film director converge, for as the commercial and film images mix and flow, they become confused. At first it is simply the 1940s family desiring the items in the 1980s commercials that invade their lives. But then a model from one of the commercials accidentally falls into the movie causing the mother in the film to flee, in jealous anger and desperation, into the commercial world where she can fulfill her dream of being a pure performer. The plot, which we have been told in the prologue, is lost in this new disaster. The characters stay in character, and the plot stays amazingly true to neo-realist film. But this is not what its original writer/director intended. Angered, he invades his own film to correct it. What he does not take into account is that once he becomes a character in his own film, he is no longer the untouchable "god" manipulating these people's lives. He becomes a direct threat that they can put their hands on. The plot he wants, after all, is to destroy the entire family; to turn their father into an auto-accident victim; turn the mother into a prostitute; turn the children into orphans. In his eyes he is expressing a neo-realist sympathy for their horrible plight. For them he is just a man with evil intent for their already troubled lives. Trust me; this is presented with laughter to tears. And we haven't touched upon the family-who-watches.

If there is any other strong statement in this film, among the many, it is the sharp, satirical barb that the modern common family may no longer be a source for drama when its primary shared concern seems to be the issue of what is happening that evening on television.

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