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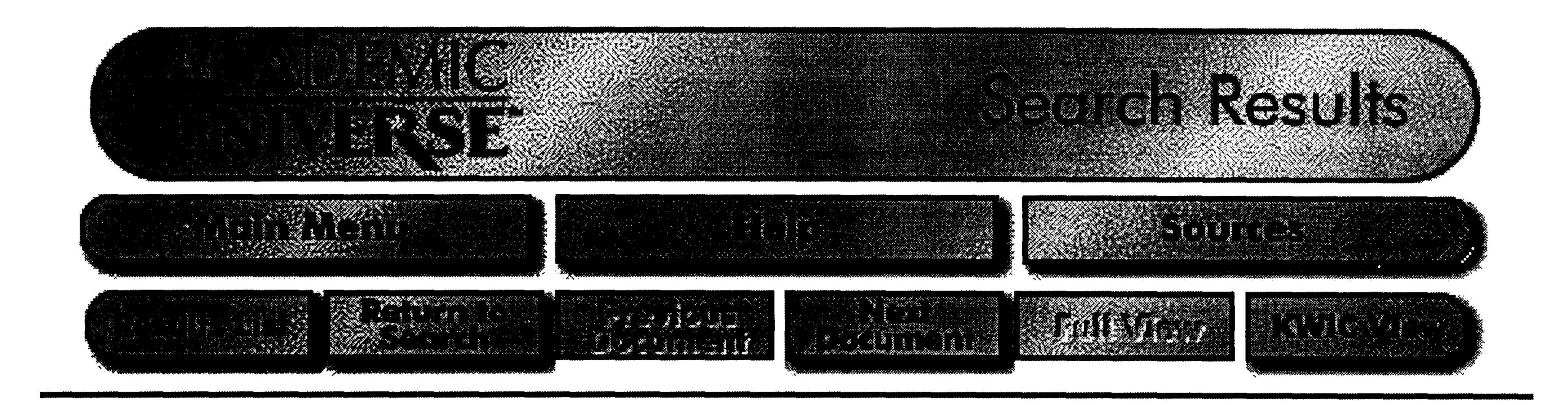
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BODY:

The Bicycle Thief

The Bicycle Thief

Directed by Vittorio De Sica

Written by Cesare Zavattini

A Kino International release

At Film Forum

October 2

15

G.W. Pabst

At the Museum of Modern Art

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October 5-31

The most influential movement in film history consisted of about 20 movies produced between 1944 and 1952. Italian neorealism was the original new wave. The inspiration for Jean-Luc Godard and John Cassavetes, Satyajit Ray and Ousmane Sembene, Andre Bazin and cinema verite, neorealism was understood as a double renaissance--both the medium's post--World War II rebirth and a means for representing human experience outside the conventions of the Hollywood entertainment film.

Roberto Rossellini's Open City came first. This dramatization of Italian partisans was planned under Nazi occupation and went into production only weeks after Rome's liberation in May 1944. Rossellini shot mainly on the street, using whatever 35mm short-ends he could scrounge. Such pragmatism matched the film's urgent quality--many early viewers thought they were watching a newsreel. After an American GI purchased the rights for \$13,000, Open City opened in February 1946 in New York and ran for two years; its reception at the first Cannes Film Festival, in May 1946, was scarcely less enthusiastic.

Open City created the neorealist paradigm--location shoots using available light, long takes, and few close-ups; postsynchronized vernacular dialogue; working-class protagonists played by nonactors (especially children); and open-ended narratives. But it was The Bicycle Thief (1948), directed by the Fascist-era matinee idol Vittorio De Sica from a script by veteran screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, that parlayed that paradigm into what was surely the most universally praised movie produced anywhere on planet earth during the first decade after World War II.

The Bicycle Thief, which opens Friday at Film Forum in a rich, if somewhat dark, new 35mm print, was the latest manifestation of a recurring impulse--the desire to wrest a narrative movie from the flux of daily life. Zavattini had expressed the desire to make a film that would do no more than follow a man through the city for 90 minutes, and, in some ways, The Bicycle Thief is that film. Bazin, who would be neorealism's key celebrant, praised The Bicycle Thief's premise as "truly insignificant...A workman spends a whole day looking in vain in the streets of Rome for the bicycle someone has stolen from him."

If The Bicycle Thief understood neorealism as a style, Bazin appreciated it as "pure cinema...No more actors, no more story, no more sets...the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality." In fact, De Sica created a neorealist superspectacle. Six writers worked on the script; at one point, the project was even pitched to Hollywood producer David O. Selznick, who proposed Cary Grant to play Ricci, the unemployed protagonist given a job putting up posters. De Sica countered by requesting Henry Fonda, a star with a marked resemblance to the eventual lead, steelworker Lamberto Maggiorani.

Although the three leads were all nonactors, The Bicycle Thief's modest \$133,000 budget was far larger than those of previous neorealist films, including De Sica's own Shoeshine. De Sica used many more locations and extras--40 market vendors hired for a single scene--and even effects (fire hoses employed to simulate rain-soaked streets). The production was deliberate. The crowds were rehearsed and the camera moves choreographed. Editing took two months.

Scarcely a story found in the street, The Bicycle Thief is an allegory at once timeless and topical. (Among other things, it reflects the battle for the lucrative Italian movie market. The first poster the luckless Ricci puts up is for the Rita Hayworth vehicle Gilda. There were 54 movies made in Italy in 1948 and 10 times as many imported from the U.S.) Italian unemployment was at 22 percent, but Ricci, who has not worked in two years, is also a version of the urban everyman. As a type, he had inhabited the movies since the dawn of the 20th century.

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Ricci is a member of the crowd, a walker in the city. He's one step up the social ladder from Chaplin's Little Tramp in that he has a wife and a child. Throughout, De Sica's mise-en-scene emphasizes the urban mass (waiting for jobs and streetcars) and its mass-produced objects--the piles of pawned linens, the rows of bicycles. Translated correctly from the Italian, the title should really be the more provocatively totalizing Bicycle Thieves. The city is alternately empty and teeming. Although shot in an authentic environment, The Bicycle Thief is no less stylized in its way than the other European masterpiece of 1948, Jean Cocteau's Orpheus. There are few establishing shots. Unlike Rossellini's, De Sica's Rome is a baffling, decentered labyrinth. The stolen bicycle is swallowed up by the city itself. People disappear to reappear within the urban flux.

Where the optimistic Open City celebrated a potential alliance between Communists and Catholics, The Bicycle Thief parodies both party and church as unable to help the humiliated Ricci. Indeed, the hero's experience of these institutions, as well as the police, borders on the Kafkaesque. There is no justice. Ricci's life is ruled by a catch-22: he needs a bicycle to get the job that will enable him to buy a bicycle. Not for nothing is the bicycle brand-named Fides ("Faith") or the innocent vision of Ricci's seven-year-old son Bruno (one of the greatest kids in the history of cinema) increasingly privileged.

Although not a comedy, The Bicycle Thief was inevitably compared to Chaplin in its content, its structure, its pathos, and its universality. (The mournful music and circular narrative predict the post--neorealist mannerism of Federico Fellini.) The Bicycle Thief looks back at the nickelodeon and forward to the European art film. De Sica's masterpiece was not so much part of a new wave as the crest of an old one--the epitome of movies as a popular modernism.

Film and history have seldom been more intertwined than in the career of G.W. Pabst, the protean, once-renowned Austrian-born director who is the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

Starting with the 1923 expressionist fable The Treasure, Pabst made a series of socially conscious and sexually frank silent movies. He helped discover Greta Garbo, cast--along with the great Asta Nielsen--in The Joyless Street, his 1925 domestic epic of post--World War I disorder. He virtually invented Louise Brooks, the minor Hollywood player whom he made the star of Pandora's Box (1928) and Diary of a Lost Girl (1929). A brilliant director of actresses, Pabst obtained Leni Riefenstahl's most nuanced, least narcissistic performance in the alpine spectacular The White Hell of Pitz-Palu (1929). A cultivated intellectual, he fiddled with Freud (Secrets of a Soul, 1925) and Brecht (The Threepenny Opera, 1931) and was generally considered to be a world-class filmmaker.

While The Love of Jeanne Ney (1927), adapted from a novel by Ilya Ehrenberg, is among the culminating works of silent cinema--a grand attempt to synthesize Soviet montage, Hollywood action-melodrama, and German mise-en-scene--Pabst made a brilliant adjustment to sound. His 1930 Westfront 1918 is an unknown masterpiece--at least as audio-innovative as Fritz Lang's M in its existential battle sequences, thudding sense of the material world, and close-to-overlapping dialogue. The weird sauciness of Pabst's French-language The Threepenny Opera, far superior to his German version, is matched only by the bizarrely Mittel-European exoticism of Mistress of Atlantis ("eine Fata Morgana" from 1932), in which the Bedouin denizens of a Sahara settlement sit around listening to Offenbach. The elaborate Don Quixote (1933), with Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin singing in phonetic English, is an ambitious attempt to develop a specifically filmic musical form.

Once Hitler came to power, Pabst went into exile--first in Hollywood, then in Paris--before haplessly returning to the Reich in 1939 to rekindle his German career. Officially denazified (but aesthetically discredited) after the war, he made his last films amid the West German economic miracle. Taken as

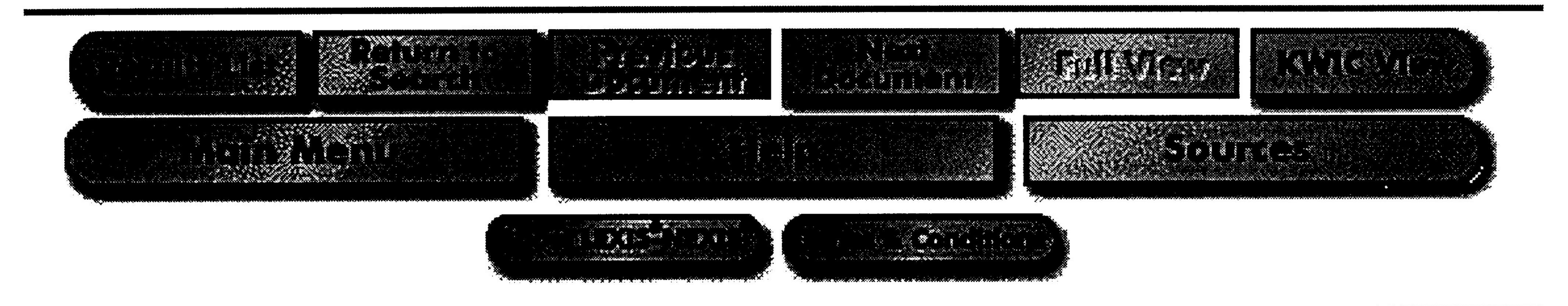
a whole, Pabst's oeuvre is at once specifically German and wildly deterritorialized. A Modern Hero (1934) is a Warner Bros. success story told with startling Teutonic harshness, while Shanghai Drama (1938) is the exile film to end all exile films, made on a Paris soundstage with a cast and crew of Austrians, Indochinese, and White Russians. This reverse Casablanca is the sort of minor masterpiece auteurists cherish, haunting confession in the guise of a despised genre work.

GRAPHIC: Photo: From the flux of daily life: Maggiorani and Enzo Staiola in The Bicycle Thief

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