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Looking up for rain

I first saw Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* in the early 50s, when I was 16, and I have been haunted by it ever since. I more than admire it, as I more than admire certain cherished poems and pieces of music and a couple of novels. There are greater films, I realise, but none that I care for half as much as this incomparable study of a dignified old man enduring loneliness and poverty and rejection.

I think I have always been aware that *Umberto D.* is a flawed masterpiece. The chief defect, and it is a considerable one, lies in the characterisation of Umberto's haughty and unfeeling landlady. De Sica and his scriptwriter, Cesare Zavattini, deny her a solitary redeeming feature. True, she is about to marry her portly, affluent fiancé, and she needs the room Umberto is occupying, and the pensioner is several weeks behind with his rent – but even so, I feel that she ought to be allowed to display the occasional twinge of conscience. She is tall and blonde and proud, and there is something a shade too manufactured in her cruelty. When she clicks her fingers at the hapless maid, Maria, it is difficult not to envisage an Ugly Sister putting Cinderella in her place.

But what the hell... Whenever De Sica's sympathy is at full stretch, there is no director like him. De Sica's camera seems to peer into Umberto's very soul as Carlo Battisti, the retired university professor who plays him, is politely spurned by a government employee he once worked with. Battisti's noble, lived-in face registers all the humiliation Umberto is experiencing. Minutes later, in one of the cinema's truly unforgettable scenes, Umberto – having watched a loud-mouthed beggar successfully elicit money from passers-by – makes an attempt at begging himself. He puts out his right hand, cautiously, and just as a man is on the point of giving him a coin or a note, he turns the hand over and looks up at the sky to see if it has begun to rain. How much the gesture tells us of dignity and self-respect – a dignity maintained up to, and then beyond, the eleventh hour.

The scene has stayed with me for 40 years. Looking at it again two days ago, I was as moved and stirred by the turning over of the hand as I was on that far-off summer afternoon in the Curzon. Umberto's unspoken declaration of his status in society was in my mind when, in 1958, I dared to write a play. My subject was an elderly man, fighting to preserve the remnants of his self-esteem. I called it, rather pretentiously, *As to a Dog's Tail*, because I couldn't find a better title. I wanted Wilfrid Lawson, my idol among British actors, to play the leading role. He had the quality of appearing not to act that the Italian neo-realist directors sought out in their amateur performers, but in his case it was a quality professionally acquired. My play was never staged, though people I looked up to detected promise in it. The inspiration of *Umberto D.*, more than any book I was reading at the time, made me decide to become a writer.

How narrowly this most personal of De Sica's movies avoids sentimentality.

A lonely man and his dog are too often the stuff of sentimentality, but out of such material De Sica created the luminous art of *Umberto D.*, argues novelist Paul Bailey

Umberto's single devoted companion is a dog, for Christ's sake, and everybody knows that the spectacle of a faithful animal on the brink of being abandoned by its master can be guaranteed to induce tears in the driest of dried-up sockets. Umberto's clever little white and black mongrel is named Flick (pronounced Fliko), and during the middle of the film he disappears, thanks to the landlady, who throws him out while his owner is in hospital. Umberto goes to the dog pound in Rome, where the city's strays are briefly housed before they are gassed, and searches desperately for Flick. The two are reunited, and De Sica records their reunion with that generous empathy that is his outstanding gift.

In the closing moments of *Umberto D.*, Umberto tries to give his pet to Daniela, a child he has befriended in the local park. Then he stands, clutching the dog to him, beside a railway track, waiting for the approaching train to kill them both. The whimpering Flick escapes from his clutch, and rushes back to the safety of the park, leaving the heart-broken Umberto suddenly aware that he may have lost the love of the dog. The film ends with another reunion, as Umberto persuades Flick to have faith in him. The mongrel is wary of him for a while, but finally joins him in a game. "Corri, corri" ("Run, run") the delighted old man cries as Flick runs alongside him. "Corri, corri" are Umberto Domenico Ferrari's last, optimistic words.

I should like to quote, with some trepidation, a sentence or two by André Bazin, that great enthusiast of cinematic art. "The Neapolitan charm of De Sica becomes the

most sweeping message of love that our times have heard since Chaplin." Well, yes. He also observes, more accurately, that the director's characters are "lit from within by the tenderness he feels for them". He adds, "Rossellini's style is a way of seeing, while De Sica's is probably a way of feeling. He is one of those directors whose entire talent derives from the love they have for their subject, from their ultimate understanding of it." Bazin's "lit from within" could not be bettered, for that is exactly what one senses in the presence of Umberto, whose life extends beyond the screen. He is a luminous presence, for all the indignities he has to suffer.

Near the beginning of *Umberto D.*, the old man offers Maria, who is pregnant by a soldier from Naples, or perhaps from Florence, some words of advice. He has been giving her lessons in the Italian language, and tells her to work hard at her grammar. He warns her that the ignorant are always taken advantage of, and that she must try to educate herself. The permanently busy maid looks at him and nods and returns to her chores. The message might be De Sica's own, and Zavattini's too, so relevant is it to the four or five wonderful pictures they made together before the money ran out, and the age of neo-realism was over.

Vittorio De Sica dedicated *Umberto D.* to his father, who must have known the privation its hero knows. I use the word "hero" because that's what I consider Umberto to be, nothing less, as he asserts his humanity by pretending to look up for rain; by shouting "Corri" in a voice charged with a newfound hope.



Lit from within: Carlo Battisti as the icon of endurance in De Sica's 'Umberto D.'

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