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Help the Aged

FOR MATURE AUDIENCES ONLY

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

UMBERTO D.

Directed by Vittorio De Sica
Written by De Sica and Cesare Zavattini
Rialto
Film Forum February 15 through 28

LAST ORDERS

Written and directed by Fred Schepisi,
from the novel by Graham Swift
Sony Pictures Classics Opens February 15

There aren't many serious films about aging, but there has never been any shortage of movies that sling sweet bullshit about being old. Living on Planet Hollywood as we do, the moral punch of a postwar "art film" classic like Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952) can be bruising, if only for the movie's unblinking consideration of how society discards the unwanted elderly. (With the extraordinary exception of David Lynch's *The Straight Story*, recent American movies tend to regard the aged as ~~cut~~ judgeonly clowns, from *Cocoon* to *Space Cowboys*.) Heavily lauded in the '50s and nearly forgotten now, De Sica's miniaturist tragedy carries a lot of dated textural baggage, from its cruelly overweening score to its neo-realist half-gestures. But, as in the more pivotal *Bicycle Thieves*, De Sica's attention to social terror and disregard for narrative valves gives the film a queasy immediacy.

After all, as Pete Townshend would have it, you can't pretend that growing older never hurts. Newly restored, *Umberto D.* does hurt, though its position as a paradigm of Italian neo-realism is iffy. As with so many of that overrated national movement's staples, the film's proletariat grit is more a matter of Cesare Zavattini's screenplay than of De Sica's visuals. (Realism for De Sica never meant anything as gauche as an unpretty shot or an unstudied composition.) The movie opens with a surreal ker-pow: a mob of retired Italian bureaucrats massing in a street protest for a pension raise. Once they are all dispersed by a tolerant postwar militia, the titular retiree (played by fussy non-pro Carlo Battisti) emerges as the sorriest of his winded pals: penniless, alone, on the edge of eviction, befriended only by a tiny terrier who eats thanks to Umberto's soup-kitchen bait-and-switch.

Umberto's path is a slickly oiled descent, and De Sica often holds his camera's stare with Bressonian steadiness. Zavattini's script



A LOST GROPE THROUGH AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD: BATTISTI IN *UMBERTO D.*

is overcome by the characters' "dailiness," as he has put it, gradually squashing our naive notion of deliverance. Patiently observed sequences—like the boarding house's maid (a hypnotically desolate Maria-Pia Casilio) waking, watching a cat cross a filthy skylight, making coffee, stretching to shut a door with outstretched toe—are weighted with menacing unhappiness, and Umberto's life be-

comes a series of increasingly plausible glimpses of homeless misery.

At its heart, *Umberto D.* is a horror film—a lost grope through an upside-down world. Eventually, the hero's very home becomes a bourgeois blast crater. It's too bad that the film is sporadically crude (a moment of suicidal angst is illustrated with a shove-zoom to the pavement), prone to mega-Italian extroversion,

and far too in love with stupid pet tricks. Umberto's pooch (Napoleone) becomes the cattle prod with which De Sica jolts our tear ducts; the film's excruciating climax makes it the weepiest buddy-animal movie a young Roddy McDowell never made.