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## DE SICA DISSECTED

### His Humanism Succumbed to Zavattini's Devices

BY ROBERT F. HAWKINS

VITTORIO De Sica's latest film, *Miracolo a Milano*, is far from the "world" which he and co-scripter Cesare Zavattini described in *The Bicycle Thief*. In *Miracolo* De Sica and Zavattini leave behind the simple, direct approach to human problems, and attempt the difficult trick of marrying realism to fantasy. They almost succeed.

A few background facts may explain why and how they have failed, and prevent an over- or under-estimation of the picture in the US.

In previous collaboration, De Sica's and Zavattini's talents were ideally balanced, and resulted in such fine films as *Children Have Eyes* (*I bambini ci guardano*), *Shoeshine*, and *The Bicycle Thief*. But their last collaboration, for better or for worse, swings heavily towards Zavattini's side. It is not De Sica's picture primarily, and when judgment is passed this proportion of paternity should be kept well in mind.

Cesare Zavattini, in addition to collaborating frequently with De Sica, has helped write some of the best scripts in Italian cinema. He

is one of the prime exponents of a school of Italian humorists of a decade or so ago whose work was variously influenced by Clair, Prévert and Chaplin (remember these names when you see *Miracolo*). Theirs was a special brand of personal, intellectual, poetic humor which became fashionable in certain Italian circles. This type of humor never possessed universal appeal, and was confined to a group of devotees of a particular social and intellectual level. The war and its political and social aftermath aged it considerably. *Miracolo a Milano* is a product of that somewhat passé school.

Zavattini first wrote the story from which *Miracolo* was made in 1940, in the form of an outline for a film for his favorite comedian, Toto. Nothing came of this. Three years later Zavattini elaborated it and it appeared as a novel, *Toto il buono* (*The Good Toto*). Late in 1948 De Sica and he decided to film it in color. A year later, after actual shooting had begun, their producers made them give up the idea of color, and then withdrew their financial

support. By using his share of the profits from *The Bicycle Thief*, and by making deals with ENIC (a state-owned distributing organization) and with a foreign production firm, De Sica was able to form his own producing company. One year and two title changes later—the original title was first changed to *I poveri disturbano* (*The Poor Disturb*) and then to *Miracolo a Milano*—the picture was completed. Much time had been lost re-shooting scenes and finishing the difficult and important trick work that the film's "miracles" required.

The authors intended *Miracolo a Milano* to be a fable told against a backdrop of the harsh realities of present-day Italian life.

An orphan named Toto is adopted by old Signora Lolotta, who teaches him to value true goodness above all else in the world. When she dies he is put in an orphanage.

The film next shows Toto as he leaves the orphanage years later and has to face the world. He joins a group of beggars squatting in shacks on the outskirts of Milan. He helps them to rebuild their hovels, and soon, thanks to his good deeds and enterprising spirit, he becomes their leader. When the owner of the land discovers that there is oil under their shacks, and threatens the beggars with his private police force, Toto opposes

to their nightsticks, firehoses and tear gas a miraculous dove sent to him from heaven by the good Signora Lolotta. The dove also enables Toto to grant each beggar's wishes. Some ask for clothes, others want houses, jewels, millions. In his innocence Toto knows only good, and is unable to deny them even their most selfish desires.

But the dove is stolen by two angels, and the landowner's police trap the beggars and haul them and Toto away. Lolotta, however, regains possession of the dove, gives it back to Toto, who frees his companions. Then all grasp the brooms of some streetcleaners and ride off into the sky toward a land "where there is only peace, love, and good."

What are De Sica and Zavattini trying to say?

Several themes seem to be combined. First, there is an exhortation to be simple in heart. Second, there is an assertion that the brotherhood of man, asked for in *The Bicycle Thief*, is able (by the aid of a miracle) to defeat power unjustly used. Third, the authors suggest that the good must seek peace and happiness elsewhere than in this world.

But De Sica and Zavattini commit a fundamental error when they try to apply to these moral problems their particular concepts of the poor. One of Zavattini's books



is entitled *The Poor Are Crazy* (*I poveri sono matti*). And De Sica upheld a similar viewpoint while he was shooting *Miracolo*. "Beggars," he said to me, "are in their own way quite crazy and live in a poetic, completely happy, impractical world of their own. This is the world I want to convey in my film."

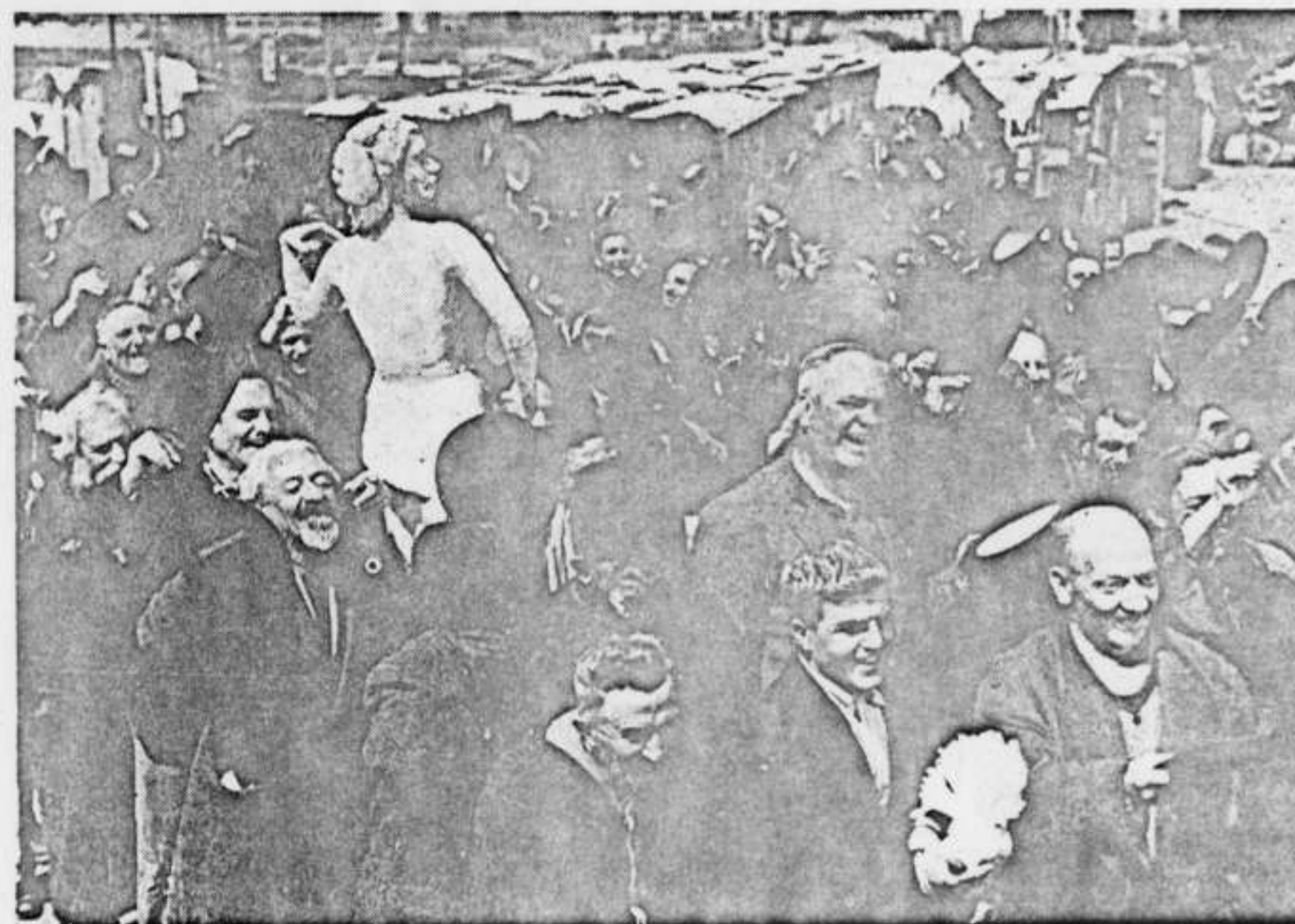
Such conceptions do not fuse well with realistic themes, and the beggars' "poetic" laziness (there is no indication, in the film, that any of them works or even desires a job) doesn't jibe with their often very real desires for jewels, houses, millions. The ensuing contradictions result in confusion and weakness all around.

For purposes of study, *Miracolo a Milano* divides handily into two very different halves. The first comes closest to De Sica's "world," and in it he dominated the material. The first half of *Miracolo* contains some of the finest things he has ever done. The tenderly sketched scenes of Toto being guided toward life by the good Signora Lolotta; of Toto, the only mourner, following the Signora's hearse through the foggy streets of Milan; of Toto's head-on encounter with the actual world when he leaves the orphanage determined to spread good among his fellow men; of his pause outside the Scala Theatre to applaud, spontaneously, the glittering spec-

tacle of bejewelled nobility emerging from the opera; of his arrival among the beggars' shacks; of the fight among the beggars for a single, warming sunbeam on a cold winter day; of Toto setting examples of good for the tramps; of his first meeting with his girl, Edvige—these are superb filmic pages.

In the second half of *Miracolo* De Sica's warm humanity, with one notable exception (the scenes in which Toto and his girl express their love for each other with childish delight and innocence), is dominated by co-scripter Zavattini's cold intellectual gymnastics. With its many comic and satiric moments, the second half is undoubtedly more "entertaining," but shallower, and less successful. De Sica's careful, straight-from-the-heart character-sketching has given way to Zavattini's literary script and dialogue, and to the "miracles." The rapid-fire of Zavattini's intelligently amusing incidents makes one lose sight, temporarily, of the film's objectives, clearly and warmly felt in the first half. Zavattini's cleverness has éclat and humor, but does not survive second thought very well.

And one wishes that some of the film's symbols had been clearer. Particularly the dove. Why is it taken away from Toto, given back, taken away, and returned once more? Why are one's sympathies



From a miraculous dove: high hats and liberty

for the poor weakened by making them appear lazy and often selfish? Similarly, one wishes (as De Sica surely does) that the trick photography, so vital in providing an illusion of the blending of the real and the unreal, could have been less obviously mechanical. (There is good reason to suspect that De Sica abandoned other planned scenes involving process photography). Finally, one wishes that the proof of Toto's "goodness" emerged more from his actions than from Zavattini's dialogue.

De Sica's careful, patient guidance of his cast of professional and non-pro actors once more pays off. Contrary to reports, De Sica has

always, even in *Shoeshine* and *The Bicycle Thief*, added carefully chosen professional actors to improvised "actors from life." (Similarly erroneous were reports that Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani made their film debuts in Rossellini's *Open City*. Both had been established stars for years. Magnani had been in films for a decade.)

Toto is played by Francesco Golisano, an ex-postman discovered by director Renato Castellani for *Under the Sun of Rome*. Brunella Bovo has her first screen role as Edvige, Toto's girl. One of the Italian theatre's greatest actresses, Emma Gramatica, plays Signora Lolotta. Another stage and screen



veteran, Paolo Stoppa, appears as Rappi, a traitorous beggar. Other lesser actors and actresses are mixed with non-professional actors, including a large number of *barboni* (bearded ones), as tramps are called in Milan. Characteristic of De Sica, the show-stealer, once more, is a child: the (uncredited) boy who plays Toto.

The photography is expert and the musical score outstanding. Alessandro Cicognini's music plays an integral part in the action.

What remains to be said, then, of this rich, complex, controversial film? A safe, but also well-considered, appraisal would rate it higher than the elegant failure many have called it, lower than the great, complete motion picture others have deemed it. Undoubt-

edly, in spite of its defects, it touches greatness, and this alone places it well above the current world level.

As to the place *Miracolo a Milano* will occupy in De Sica's career, only time will tell. At present, it seems to indicate a pause, comparable to René Clair's *La Beauté du Diable*, before a new intellectual divertissement, perhaps a change from straight realism, perhaps a new road out of the neo-realistic rut of the post-war Italian film. From certain things De Sica has said about *Miracolo*, and other things he has made a point of *not* mentioning, one infers that he is not satisfied and recognizes *Miracolo's* weaknesses.

One last word: see *Miracolo a Milano* at least twice.