

Sciuscìà

("Shoeshine")

Italy : 1946 : dir. Vittorio de Sica : Alfa Cinematografica : 93 min

prod: Paolo W Tamburella : scr: Sergio Armidei, Adolfe Franci,

C.G. Viola & Cesare Zavattini : dir.ph.: Alessandro Cicognini

[Rinaldo Smordoni](#) [d]; [Franco Interlenghi](#) [d]

Aniello Mele; Bruno Ortensi; Pacifico Astrologo; Francesco de Nicola; Antonio Carlino;

Enrico de Silva; Antonio Lo Nigro; Angelo D'Amico; Emilio Cigoli; Giuseppe Spadaro

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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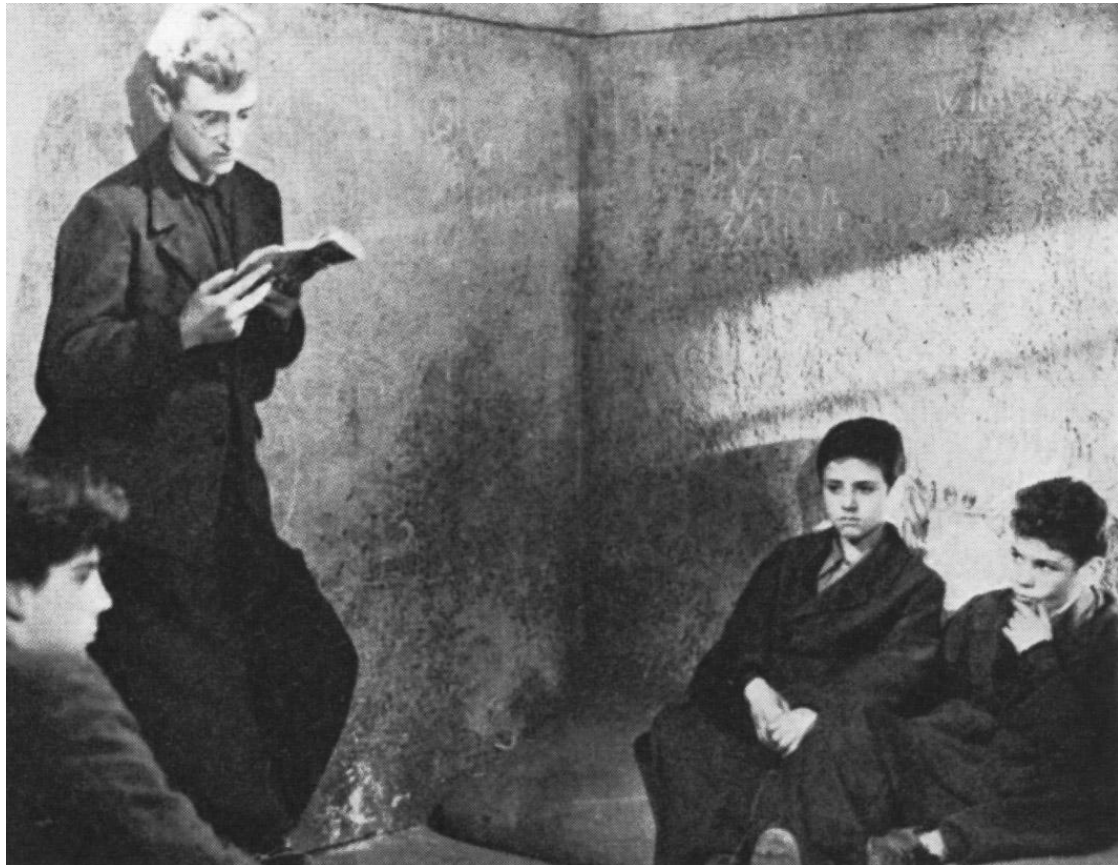
*Sadly, the cards don't warn them what the future has in store. Rinaldo Smordoni centre, with Franco Interlenghi.
Source: Great Italian Films*

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"Street boys try every possible means to raise money to buy themselves a horse, and land in a Borstal. This honestly sensitive neo-realist film made De Sica an internationally famous director after the war, and it was the first non-English film to win an Oscar. The closing scene is very moving and counterbalances the facile straining for effect of earlier moments. ***"

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

"A brilliant, haunting neorealist drama about two youngsters struggling to survive in war-scarred Italy; they become involved with black marketeering and are sent to reform school. This deservedly won a special Oscar – before Best Foreign Film prizes were awarded. **** "



How the face of "delinquency" has changed in a scant half-century. There's nothing conspicuously predatory or sociopathic in any of these faces. Compare and contrast with the 1990s variety.

Source: A Picture History of the Cinema

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"In Nazi-occupied Rome two shoeshine boys become involved in black marketeering, with tragic consequences. Not especially rewarding to watch now, this was a key film in the development of Italian neo-realism. Academy Award nomination: Best script; Academy Award: Best Foreign Film. ** "

"It is filled in every scene with an awareness of the painful complexity of even simple evil " – James Agee

Children in the Movies incidental notes – from reviews of "LADRI DI BICICLETTA" and "LOS OLVIDADOS" [qv]:

"Either as mute witnesses or vulnerable victims [sic] of the war and post-war environment created by their elders, children play an important role in the films of Italian neo-realism. Their return to the city at the end of

"ROME – OPEN CITY" (1945) signifies a hope for the future, whereas the suicide of the young Berlin boy at the end of Rossellini's "GERMANY – YEAR ZERO" (1948) stands for a childhood that has been destroyed just as surely as the city around him. Also memorable are the child-observer of de Sica's "THE CHILDREN ARE WATCHING US" (1944) and the criminal children [sic] of the same director's "SHOESHINE" (1946): essentially witnesses or victims of adult corruption or failure..."¹

"...Its theme of childhood delinquency is reminiscent of de Sica's "SHOESHINE", a film Buñuel admired; and a scene where a young boy is accosted by an older man – innocence and yearning suddenly threatened by adult

¹ Note how completely this particular author has been programmed into analysing everything by the terms of "victim culture" – of "corrupt" adults (men) and "innocent" children. The neo-realists would have rejected such terms as facile and simplistic.

corruption – recalls a similar incident in de Sica's "BICYCLE THIEVES"..."

Excerpt from a filmography of De Sica in **The Companion to Italian Cinema**:

"...In **"TERESA VENERDI"** and **"UN GARIBALDINO AL CONVENTO"**, the female protagonists are caught in oppressive youth institutions (orphanage, boarding school), themes that form a bridge to De Sica's later neo-realist films. **"SCIUSCIÀ"** / "Shoeshine" (1946), **"LADRI DI BICICLETTE"** / "Bicycle Thieves" (1948), **"MIRACOLO A MILANO"** / "Miracle in Milan" (1951) and **"UMBERTO D."** (1952), all scripted by Cesare Zavattini, placed De Sica at the forefront the neo-realist movement, along with Roberto Rossellini and Luchino Visconti. While each film is constructed around a specific post-war social problem (respectively: juvenile crime, unemployment, homelessness, and the plight of the aged), De Sica's lyricism departs from the purely didactic by inviting a powerful emotional engagement..."

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"In Rome, just after the Second World War, two shoeshine boys (Franco Interlenghi, Rinaldo Smordoni) go in for black marketeering, with tragic consequences.

One of the most famous neo-realist dramas, this is a rough-and-ready piece of film-making, primitive by modern standards. Critics of its day rightly hailed it as a gruelling depiction of poverty and a heartfelt denunciation of Italy's brutal penal system. Over and above that, however, it is a very moving, powerful study of how easy it is to lose one's innocence. In the days before Foreign Oscars, it won a Special Academy Award, for "proving to the world that the creative spirit can triumph over adversity" – which makes the film sound rather more optimistic than it is. 7/10 "

"Not a pretty picture to contemplate, nor is it by any means a well-made picture. But [it] mirrors the anguished soul of a starving, disorganised and demoralised nation with such uncompromising realism that the roughness of its composition is overshadowed by its driving emotional force... The English title translations

by Herman G Weinberg preserve the earthy tone of [street] talk... Not an entertainment; rather, it is a brilliantly executed social document."

– **New York Times**

"One of the few fully alive, fully rational films ever made... It is remarkably perceptive and compassionate in its study of authority and of those who embody authority, serve it, and suffer in and under it. It is also the rarest thing in contemporary art – a true tragedy. This tragedy is cross-lighted by pathos, by the youthfulness and innocence [*sic*] of the heroes... The film is in no sense a despairing or "defeatist" work, as some people feel it is. I have seldom seen the more ardent and virile of the rational and Christian values more firmly defended, or the effects of their absence or misuse more pitifully and terribly demonstrated."

– James Agee, **Nation**

"In spite of the fact that [it] will probably break your heart, I must advise you to see this extraordinary Italian film... The acting throughout... is so real that in many cases it does not seem like acting at all... This film is not only powerful as a tract on the evils of juvenile prisons, but it is equally powerful for its picture of post-war Europe."

– Philip T Hartung, **Commonweal**

"It is a human documentary, gripping revealing and frightening... a film everyone with the welfare of the world's youth at heart must see."

– Ross Shepherd, **People**

"In handling a camera I feel that I have no peer. But what De Sica can do, that I can't do! I ran his **"SHOESHINE"** again recently and the camera disappeared, the screen disappeared; it was just life."

– **Orson Welles**, 1960

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"When, after the war, there was a movement for film-makers to say something about the war and its aftermath, only Italy came up with an appropriate statement and this film was received as enthusiastically as **"ROMA, CITA APERTA"**. It revives equally well. Its subject is those left homeless, represented by two young adolescents (Franco Interlenghi, Rinaldo Smordoni) who make a bare living on the streets of Rome by dealing in black-market goods; they are sent to a reform school but in

view of the apathetic, indolent bureaucratic system – guardians, lawyers – they are unlikely to emerge reformed. *** ”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

“Director Vittorio De Sica’s best film is a heart tugger of substantial dimensions. Our emotions are constantly aroused in this story of two street kids who want to save up to buy a horse, but overpowering emotion builds to such a climax that all is forgiven. **** ”



Stills and captions in quotes on following pages are all from Classics of the Foreign Film:

Top: “These two boys, seen in the distance in the next picture , are inseparable chums. They supplement their honest earnings with black market fees in order to buy a horse that makes them an equestrian Damon and Pythias; innocently they are snared in a blackmail operation.”

Bottom: “ ‘Shoe Shine, Joe?’ It was the Italian boys’ formula for addressing American GIs during World War II in liberated Rome. It begins the most notable of the films about ragazzi: ‘kids’ who could become juvenile delinquents.”

A Picture History of the Cinema note:

“ **"SCIUSCIÀ"** ("Shoeshine", Italy 1946), directed by Vittorio de Sica, from a script by Sergio Armidei, Adolfe Franci, C.G. Viola and Cesare Zavattini; with Rinaldo Smordini, Franco Interlenghi, Aniello Miele and Bruno Ortensi. A film of young boys adrift in the chaotic Rome of the closing stages of the War, shot through with gleams of humour, but basically harsh and unrelenting in its condemnation. ”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Neorealist classic about two boys whose friendship gets them through hard times in Rome during the Nazi occupation. But when dealings with the black market land them in a harsh jail, their relationship falters. Winner of a special Academy Award. **** ”

The Virgin Film Guide review:

“Along with **"THE BICYCLE THIEF"** and **"UMBERTO D"**, this film is one of the three neorealist masterpieces produced through the collaborative efforts of director Vittorio De Sica and screenwriter Cesare Zavattini. Like so many of the films of the neorealist movement, **"SHOESHINE"** is simply real life projected on a screen².

After spying on a pair of shoeshine boys for a year in war-torn Rome, De Sica and Zavattini decided to bring their story to the screen with two non-professionals in the lead roles. Giuseppe (Rinaldo Smordoni) and Pasquale (Franco Interlenghi) are waifs who survive by harassing American soldiers – the only ones in post-war Italy with spare change – into spending a few lire to have their boots cleaned. Despite their bleak surroundings, these shoeshine boys still have innocent [*sic*] dreams and hopes, and, in fact, are saving their earnings to buy a handsome white horse.

² nonsense

When Giuseppe's brother approaches them with a black market opportunity to make some quick money, they jump at the chance, buy their dream horse, and refuse to let it out of their sight, even going so far as to sleep in the stable with it.

This brief moment in paradise is short-lived, and they are arrested, taken to a reformatory, and locked away. The longer they stay in their damp, vermin-infested cells, the more hardened the youngsters become. A powerful indictment of the Italian penal system and, on a larger scale, the brutal inevitability of the loss of innocence [*sic*]. ***1/2 ”³

World Cinema – a Short History note:

“...Inevitably Zavattini's total ideal of the neo-realist cinema had to be compromised, not least in many of the films which he wrote himself and which always betrayed an inescapable fondness for sentimental and dramatic conventions. Nevertheless this conscious return to reality was to have a deep and far-reaching effect upon the post-war cinema. Zavattini formed a fruitful collaboration with the former *jeune premier* Vittorio de Sica (born 1907), beginning with **"I BAMBINI CI GUARDANO"** (1943) which used professional star actors, but dealt with problems of family life with an honesty and frankness which provoked strong disapproval from the fascist regime. In succeeding films they were able to move closer to Zavattini's stated ideals, improvising action on location, in the actual streets of Rome: **"LA PORTA DEL CIELO"** (1946), and **"SCIUSCIA"** (1946), a cruel account of the persecuted lives of child shoeblacks struggling for survival in the streets of post-war Rome. Their finest work together was **"LADRI DI BICICLETTE"** (1948), which came nearest to Zavattini's ideal of creating films out of the natural drama of real life...”

³ Some critics are just incapable of writing about kids without blurting out the word “innocent” every few lines...

Classics of the Foreign Film review:

"The Italian title of Vittorio de Sica's film, "SCIUSCIA", was a phonetic rendering of the phrase adopted by shoeshine boys to address American G.I.s in Rome: "Shoeshine (sciuscia), Joe?" The *ragazzi* - Italian for "boys" in the

familiar sense of "kids" - had already attained a focus of filmic interest in two distinguished Russian films, "THE ROAD TO LIFE" (1930), later made into an American version, and "THE CHILDHOOD OF MAXIM GORKY" (1938). As his first important piece of direction to follow World War II, de Sica gave us this *ragazzi* film. Insidiously tender, if also violent and bitter, it



Left: "The victim has identified them, they have been arrested and sent to a reformatory where typical prison intrigue wrecks their friendship. The larger boy is Franco Interlenghi, who grew up to be an internationally known lead in Italian films."

Right: "Remarkably candid, remarkably delicate and sympathetic, de Sica's handling of the trite plot elements turns his reformatory drama into something much outclassing the usual juvenile delinquent melodrama."





Left: "The older boy, wrongly stigmatised as a squealer, whips a bully who has finally succeeded in separating him from his smaller pal; the evils of the reformatory issue into an escape, a pursuit and finally a tragic confrontation between the two pals that ends in the accidental death of the younger."



Hollywood – notably Warner Bros – had produced a smattering of social conscience melodramas on the theme of juvenile delinquency during the previous decade, but none had the rawness or the bleak unwavering eye of post-WWII European cinema. The mauling of war did a great deal to strip away false optimisms.
Source: Great Italian Films

came on the very heels of Rossellini's "OPEN CITY", and as if on purpose, began on the note with which "OPEN CITY" had closed: the ragazzi, having witnessed the priest's execution by the German firing squad, drift back to their futures in the Italian capital.

In our era the so-called juvenile delinquent has been, of course, a major social problem, and from 1946 to the moment in which I write⁴, has occasioned a host of films, more or less serious, devoted to him as a human agent challenging the peace and quiet of the civilised future. A

number of such films, like "THE ROAD TO LIFE" itself, have expressed a romantically optimistic view based on institutional reform. The Italian reformatories, as revealed by de Sica, evidently had not then achieved (whatever they are today) a real enlightenment comparable to the reform seen in Russian films. The end of "SHOE SHINE", brutal and charged with shadow, defines its two boy heroes as compelled victims of the adult system of crime and punishment.

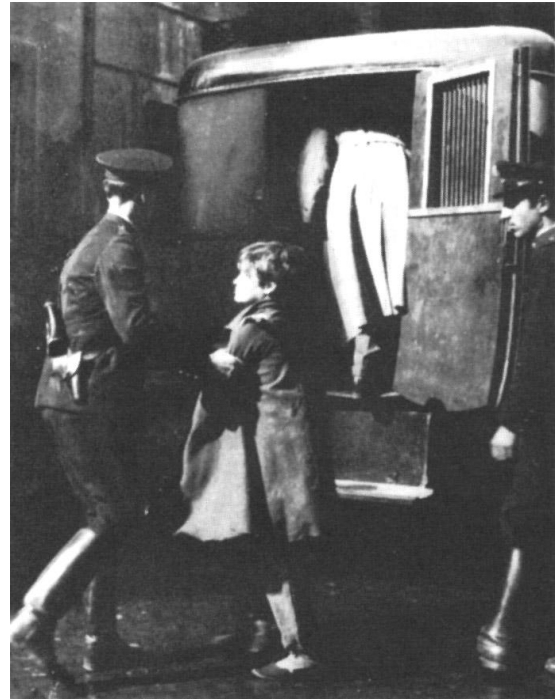
The world issue of the delinquency problem is both complex and controversial; with due recognition of that fact, I should call "SHOE

⁴ the book was published in 1962

SHINE" the most realistic and representative of all the *ragazzi* fictions on film. Italy produced several more and each nation's industry seems to have made its contribution, although Germany's, before World War II, was an explicit arm of Nazi propaganda. **"SHOE SHINE"**'s edge on its rivals is due to what I consider an undeviating, heartfelt awareness of what it means to a boy to be an unformed creature in the hands of "delinquent" adults. A waif, unmoored from family and education, he becomes society's problem child.

Here two of Rome's shoe shine boys, a Damon and Pythias of the streets, are united in possessing a dappled white horse bought with their earnings in a Black Market operated by adults, one of whom is the younger pal's brother. The horse seems a realisation of all the ease, splendour and gallantry imaginable to the boys. Twin centaurs, they are innocent tools [sic] in a new blackmail racket emerging from the Black Market. Recognised by the elderly female victim, they are arrested, taken to a reformatory run like a prison, tragically separated and "grilled". Deceived by the "humanely" faked thrashing given his little pal, the older boy squeals on their adult confederates, thereby losing his pal's loyalty and stigmatising himself. Both are victims of an evil bully who then plants a file in the boy's cell, hoping finally to disunite the two. Punished for possessing the file, the older boy somewhat reinstates himself in grace (and the eyes of his lost friend) when he thrashes the bully in a fist fight.

The obvious, tarnished plot comes alive with de Sica's fresh, sympathetic understanding and the extraordinary naturalism he coaxed from boy and adult actors. A humble new art of candour and humanity was being born to the cinema. A scheme by the bully, to effect his cell group's escape from the reformatory,



You're in luck boys! The child protection folks have come to take you "into care"...

Source: The International Encyclopedia of Film

coincides with a riot started when a film projector, in a movie show held by some priests, catches fire. The bully and his stolen pal are the only two to escape: they go directly to the stable and take the horse. The betrayed boy guesses as much and in an agony of jealous rage offers to lead the reformatory men to the stable. The horse is gone, but now grasping a lead pipe and stealing away, the boy catches the two riders crossing a little bridge. The bully flees as a guilty little Damon faces an incensed Pythias. The gesture with which the latter imitates his warders by reaching for his belt to thrash the smaller boy is truly tragic. Young blood is just as logical in its maimed passions – and just as fatal."

Great Italian Films review:

"Vittorio de Sica and his screenwriting colleague Cesare Zavattini had dealt evocatively with the darker side of childhood before, in 1943, in the minor classic **"I BAMBINI CI GUARDANO"** ("The Children are Watching Us"), in which parents fail to live up to a little boy's illusions about them. But it was **"SCIUSCIÀ"**, his seventh film as a director, that not only solidly established De Sica's international reputation as a major European film-maker but placed him in the vanguard of

neorealists. Like its immediate predecessor (Rossellini's **"OPEN CITY"**), **"SHOESHINE"** offered a gritty look at war-ravaged, impoverished Romans, this time focussing on two delinquent adolescents, caught up in the wave of wartime social problems.

Deriving its unusual title from the street urchins with their shoeshine boxes who sought the patronage of G.I.s with their cries of "Shoosha, Joe!", the movie focuses on the fourteen-year old orphan Pasquale (Franco Interlenghi) and his rootless younger buddy Giuseppe (Rinaldo Smordoni). Obsessed with the notion of owning a horse, the two street pals abandon shining shoes for dealing in black-market blankets, a moneymaking move that gets them their animal, which they proudly ride in the streets. But they are not clever enough to avoid being caught for their criminal activities and are incarcerated in the grim Regina Coeli prison, where harsh conditions toughen them to the point where each loses whatever redeeming qualities he once possessed. Pasquale is tricked into informing on Giuseppe, who retaliates by betraying his friend. The latter escapes, but Pasquale takes the authorities to his hiding place. Finally, Giuseppe is killed when a fight breaks out and the older boy accidentally knocks him off a bridge. As Pasquale jumps down to weep for his old friend and surrender to the police, their horse gallops off.

Except for the final scene, which was shot in a studio, **"SHOESHINE"** has, throughout, the look of absolute reality, the benefit of actual street and prison locations. Similarly, De Sica took the chance of casting his film with non-professionals who had never faced a movie camera before. Young Rinaldo Smordoni and Franco Interlenghi (who went on to pursue a successful film career as an adult) are absolute perfection as the two lads. Never for a moment does either one appear to be acting. As New York Times critic Thomas M Pryor summed it up: **"SHOESHINE"** is not an entertainment; rather, it is a brilliantly executed social document."

The film offered no solutions to the problems it reflected, but it was instrumental in substantially reforming Italian laws dealing with delinquent juveniles. Amusing in retrospect is that *Variety*, giving **"SHOESHINE"** only a capsule review from Rome, foresaw little box-office hope for it in the United States, reasoning that American pictures had already

sufficiently handled such subject matter. Nine years before foreign films categorically competed for Oscars, this landmark of the Italian cinema was given a special Academy Award as "proof to the world that the creative spirit can triumph over adversity." "

The International Encyclopedia of Film notes:

"1946 was to be the big year of neo-realism. De Sica made his **"SCIUSCIÀ"** ("Shoeshine", 1946), a film which did scarcely any business in Italy, where the new American films - and those not seen during the war years - were flooding the market and satisfying the tastes of the escapist mood of the times. Later, after its success abroad, **"SCIUSCIÀ"** was to return to Italian cinemas..."

and from the filmography on De Sica:

"...I BAMBINI CI GUARDANO" (1942) marked a change of style for De Sica as a director and in 1946 he made **"SHOE SHINE"**, which, less flashy than some neo-realist films, was no less concerned with the deprivation of a war-torn country. His use of non-professional actors - notably the leading man in **"BICYCLE THIEVES"**, Lamberto Maggiorani - was adopted by many film-makers...."

NFT flier:

"The fall from innocence [sic] of two street scamps in post-war Rome. A cinematic masterpiece from the director of **"BICYCLE THIEVES"**."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Smordoni:

"Rinaldo, a carpenter's son, was chosen to play the younger of the two innocent delinquents in De Sica's harrowing **"SCIUSCIA"**. (The 16-year old Franco Interlenghi - born 29 October 1930 - who played his older companion, went on to marry the actress Antonella Lualdi and become a leading man in Italian films of the Fifties and Sixties.) Young Smordoni knew the background well enough: he had for some time been shining Roman shoes on his own account. In **"SCIUSCIA"** he graduates to black-marketeering, and so to prison, escape and sudden death.

He played one more important role, a classic one for French boy actors: that of Gavroche in an Italian version of **"Les Misérables"**, directed

by Riccardo Freda. When last heard of, he was still living in Rome, working as a bus-driver."



1946: *First World child labour was not yet a Sin. Trading on the black market was a Sin. Getting caught has always been the Cardinal Sin.*
Source: indeterminate (Amzaon.com?) website

[no listing in "The Cinema Book", "50 Years of the Movies", "Film Review 1945-46", "Film Review 1947", "The Movie Book – an Illustrated History of the Cinema", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "Variety Movie Guide 1993"]

Vittorio De Sica had made his name internationally with "[I BAMBINI CI GUARDANO](#)" ("The Children are Watching Us"), about the effect on a four-year old boy of his mother's infidelity and father's consequent suicide. In addition to winning a special Oscar for "**SCIUSCIÀ**", he went on to win a second in 1948 for "**LADRI DI BICICLETTE**" (which is quite clearly in the plural – I don't know why some critics insist on translating it as "The Bicycle Thief").

Displaced street children eking out an existence in post-war Europe were handled contemporaneously in "**GERMANA ANNO ZERO**" and "**THE SEARCH**", both very fine films.

But as a baldly unsentimental study of streetkids this is equally comparable with titles such as "**LOS OLVIDADOS**" (Mexico) or "**PIXOTE**" (Brazil). As I indicated in a caption above, all of these films came in the wake of Hollywood's New Deal era social conscience melodramas – "**DEAD END**", "**THEY MADE ME A CRIMINAL**", "**ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES**", "**BOY SLAVES**", "**BOYS TOWN**" and many others, but the Hays Code was still sufficiently in force to dampen down any critique of authority implicit in their storylines. European film-makers – even under fascist regimes, as in Italy – seem on the whole to have enjoyed more independence. No American (or British) film of the forties would have followed quite the plot trajectory of this film in its destruction of the bond of loyalty between the two boys. There is something more terrible in that than any conventional recitation of prison barbarisms.

It would take a brave sociologist to explain to us *why* street crime is now both more prevalent and more violent than in the immediate aftermath of a world war, when social privations were infinitely greater, and the mechanisms of social control less well co-ordinated. The answer to that riddle is not unfathomable, but it would take a brave sociologist to articulate it.

No direct comment on the film is possible (I'm surprised myself never to have seen it) but, as delineated above, the plot does lend itself to a more elliptical reading: older boy *gets* younger boy – older boy *loses* younger boy – older boy *kills* younger boy in fit of jealous rage. This would make it a *sotto voce* boy/boy "romance" in direct line with "**AMICI PER LA PELLE**" and "**LES AMITIÉS PARTICULIÈRES**" (both of which also ended tragically for the younger friend). When the chorus of "innocence outraged" has died down, it's true in one sense to say that **all** boyhood friendships – with man and animal alike – are romances in their fashion.

“**THE YEARLING**” is a romance, “**OLD YELLER**” is a romance, “**E.T.**” is a romance. That the word seems somehow unfitting when applied to young boys only shows how narrowly we have come to define it. Boyhood friendships are among the most intense, unconditional relationships of our lives. And if tragic little homosocial affairs like this one are ignored by most – not all – gay film historians, it demonstrates how narrowly they too have come to define their own *gender*-based, not *age*-based, sexuality. To weep for the death of a friend is an expression of love. Q.E.D.

While naturally I hesitate to recommend any title unseen, this was such a seminal piece, and such an honest attempt to see reform school through the eyes of its inmates, that it’s clearly an important work within the archive’s context, and as such, ***Recommended***.

See subject index under **CRIME / DELINQUENCY, DEATH / DYING CHILDREN, DIRECTORS, HORSES & PONIES, NOTABLE FIRSTS, [OSCAR WINNERS / AWARD WINNERS](#), PRISON / BORSTAL, RECOMMENDED TITLES, STREET KIDS, [WAR](#) and [WORKING BOYS / WORKING GIRLS](#)**.