

Una vita difficile (1961) [A Difficult Life]

(English version)

Director: **Dino Risi**

Actors:

Alberto Sordi: Silvio Magnozzi

Lea Massari: Elena Pavinato

Franco Fabrizi: Franco Simonini

Lina Volonghi: Amalia Pavinato,
madre di Elena

Claudio Gora: commendator
Bracci

Vittorio Gassman: se stesso

Silvana Mangano: se stessa



Wed 1st June 2022,

H.6.30 pm,

Soggetto e Sceneggiatura: Rodolfo Sonego; **Fotografia:** Leonida Barboni;
Musiche: Carlo Savina; **Montaggio:** Tatiana Casini; **Scenografia:** Enzo Eusepi;
Produttore: Dino De Laurentiis.

To understand the importance of a film like *A difficult life* (1961) by Dino Risi, we need to understand the way in which this film constructs a (neo) realist parody of the past: that of the World War and that of the Resistance. These are two themes very dear to Zavattini's neorealist school, De Sica and Rossellini. What Risi stages then is not a mocking farce of those films that celebrated the struggle for freedom and sacrifice with the lives of many; it is rather a critique of the purposeful, rhetorically constructed selection of the hero epic and the epic of the democratic rebirth of Italy. The film itself, moreover, was produced in 1961, the year that historiography usually celebrates as the year of the beginning of the economic revival. A parody, it was said, in which the background is the great recent events (for 1961): for example the Monarchy / Republic Referendum, the first democratic elections, and the attempted assassination on Togliatti in 1948.

Against this background, the anti-hero Silvio Magnozzi and his partner Elena are presented, after an idyll that blossomed in her village on the Lake of Como. Silvio introduces himself as a student and partisan, therefore as an intellectual who does not necessarily shoot and kill the Germans; Elena almost fortuitously saves him from certain death by using a heavy iron that hits the invading German. Risi's parody is not

just such: it is a real citation from another film, a masterpiece of Rossellini's neorealism. In *"Rome open city"* (1945), a brave parish priest played by Aldo Fabrizi saves a poor old man, stunning him with a frying pan, before the arrival of the fascists. Both scenes only hint at the violent act, the camera is turned elsewhere and in Risi, it frames the poor Sordi who begs for mercy so as not to be shot.

What Risi then builds is a representation very dear to the directors of the "Italian Comedy": not the hero but the poor devil who tries to get by and survive in the most diverse ways. But the anti-hero Silvio Magnozzi really believes he has done the Resistance in the North. In reality, he was more than happy to be looked after "lovingly" by Elena (Lea Massari), and then, only at the end of the hostilities, did he return to his companions, taking salami and ham with him. Not really a hero behavior we would say. Risi, therefore, creates a clear irony between the fantasy memory of a Resistance that has never been fully accomplished and the naive behavior of the former partisan who moved to Rome and became a journalist. Here Silvio's (neorealist) idealism collides with the cynical realism of the new heroes of acquired democratic freedom. Monarchists live in the past. The real winners are those like Commedator Bracci (Claudio Gora) who with money can bribe and pursue their interests.

Many neorealist films, *"Bicycle Thieves"*, (1948), for example, made the family the last bastion to which the individual could refer when the outside world, History, was about to overwhelm them. In Risi's parody, obviously, not even the family can save poor Silvio from disaster: Elena has middle-class dreams for those times, a car, a fridge, a house; his mother-in-law would like to make him a safe match, with a quiet job in the North. Via the ideals, via the false certainties. But when all seems lost, Risi chooses an open ending to his comedy: the anti-hero par excellence, Sordi, redeems himself in a magical moment of ideal madness and decides to continue fighting against the Italian windmills of the time. Few Italian comedies would end like this. We do not know what will become of Silvio and Elena, but we viewers are happy with what can still happen. The open ending was also a convention of the old neorealism. Risi makes it his own, hoping to improve and enhance "his" comedy as well.

Fernando Porta (June, 2022)