The Sad Art of War

Dates: 1914-1918
Troops killed: 9.5 million (Allied forces), 4.4M (Central Powers)
Total killed: approx. 16.5 million worldwide

Horrifying Distinguishing Elements
• Largest military loss of life to date, esp. among the young
• Slow, paralyzing, trench warfare
• Communication breakdown, especially the homefront
• First fully mechanized war
• The debut of tanks, aka trench busters
• Battles for the superiority of the seas
• The debut of German U-boats/submarines
• Widespread use of chemical warfare
• Widespread victims of “shell shock” (now called “PTSD”)
• The “Great War” or the “War to End all Wars”...

The first four decades of the 20th century were artistically defined by experimentation. Now, most people simply speak of “modernism,” but back then different labels were used:
• Post-Impressionism
• German Expressionism
• Surrealism
• Dadaism
• (Italian) Vorticism
• (French) Existentialism

All sought new forms for depicting modern reality, which was portrayed in subjective, non-realist ways—as dehumanizing, distorted, paranoid or chaotic.
World War II

Dates: 1939-1945
Troops killed: 16 million (Allied forces), 8 million (Axis)
Total killed: approx. 50 million worldwide

Horrifying Distinguishing Elements
• Deadliest conflict in human history
• Battles for the superiority of the skies
• Blitzkriegs, all-night bombings, and fire-bombings
• Human torture & medical experimentation which even German Expressionist film could never imagine
• Concentration Camps, infanticide, genocide
• Fiery Birth of the Atomic Age
• The war everyone vowed “never to forget”

The Bhagavad-Gita,
Sacred Hindu Scripture

Physicist Robert Oppenheimer,
Lead Scientist, The Manhattan Project,
16 July 1945, 5:30am
5 miles from Alamogordo, New Mexico

Before and After Aerial Images,
6 August 1945

The horrors of war fundamentally changed the way people perceived experimentation – especially that which sought to distort, manipulate, and dehumanize the human body and reality.

The world had seen far too much of these things in concentration camps, and our concept of reality fared little better, having witnessed the effects of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda and the horrifying images of genocide and atomic incinerations.

Post World-War II
A noticeable reaction against experiment set in—deriving directly from the attitude that experimental methods were politically irresponsible, bourgeois, and even dangerous.

Return to: traditional narration, linear plots, realism (!), stable characterization, etc.

Rejection of: stream of consciousness, multiple perspectives, temporal/chronological inversion, unreliable narrators, etc.

Italian Neorealism

The Quest for Inclusion

Italian Neorealist films generally are:

- Socialist/Marxist in politics
- Pseudo-documentary in style
- Humanistic in sensibility
- Exterior (often on-location) in setting
- Conversational in speech
- Emotional rather than abstract
- Starkly realistic, and
- Refuse to offer pat or propagandistic solutions to complex social problems

Italian Contexts

Italian Neorealist films reacted against the government propaganda that flourished under Benito Mussolini’s reign (dictator from 1922-44). The state then controlled the film industry and prohibited films about poverty or unemployment. By contrast, these are the chief subjects of Italian Neorealist films.

When Bicycle Thieves was released in 1948, approximately 25% (!) of the Italian workforce was unemployed.

War’s Urban Landscapes

Italy didn’t just need to rebuild its film industry, either. Like many countries, it suffered during World War II, so the impoverished, desperate, or destroyed landscapes you see were real, not constructed.
Faced with economic and political bleakness – i.e., the loss of social support – people turned to each other and the church.

“Life has changed, the war is over, the cities have been reconstructed. What we needed was a cinema of Reconstruction.”

-- Roberto Rossellini (director)

1. What political contexts helped give birth to this film movement?
2. Describe post-World War II life in Italy—one of the cultural capitals of the world.
3. Name some (or many!) of the characteristics of Italian Neorealism.
4. In what ways does Italian Neorealism blend elements of Marxist and Christian Humanism?

“Bicycle Thieves (De Sica) is Everyman’s search for dignity – it is as though the soul of man had been filmed.

The Bicycle Thief is about a man, a worker, who must have a bike in order to work at his job. He is desperate, pawn everything to regain his machine, goes to work, has the thing stolen from him while his back is turned, and then goes on a search through Rome to find it.

That is about all there is to it.

But it happens to be very close to a lyrical masterpiece.”

-- Arthur Miller, author of Death of a Salesman, etc.

1952
1. Bicycle Thieves (De Sica)
2. City Lights (Chaplin)
3. The Gold Rush (Chaplin)
4. Battleship Potemkin (Eisenstein)
5. Intolerance (Griffith)
6. Louisiana Story (Fellini)
7. Greed (von Stroheim)
8. Le Jour se Leve (Carne)
9. Passion of Joan of Arc
10. Le Regle du jeu (Renoir)

1962
1. Citizen Kane (Welles)
2. L’avventura (Antonioni)
3. Le Regle du jeu (Renoir)
4. Greed (von Stroheim)
5. Ugetsu Monogatari
6. Battleship Potemkin (Eisenstein)
7. Bicycle Thieves
8. Ivan the Terrible
9. La terra trema
10. L’Atalante
Word-process a one-page, 250-350 word response to the following question:

What artistic functions does the character of Bruno play in the film? Would this film be as successful without him? Please focus on a specific scene or two to support your points.