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FOR A CINEMA OF THE BLIND AND VISIONARIES

The Forgotten Lessons of Cesare Zavattini

by Giuliana Minghelli

To truly understand what is in the name Cesare Zavattini, it might be useful to forget, for the moment, his association with filmmaker Vittorio De Sica, his work as screenwriter and editor on famous postwar films such as *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan*, *Umberto D.*, and his role as tutelary deity and apostle of neorealism. The name Cesare Zavattini, or Za for short, would be better approached as a field of creative energy fueling and often short-circuiting the Italian cultural scene and its cinema during the last century with reverberations across global cinema.

AN EVERYDAY BIOGRAPHY

Given his profound belief in the material basis of all human life and experience, it seems appropriate to enter the planet Zavattini by dwelling on some of those earthly elements that could shed light on the artist's temperament, cultural background, and visual poetics. "Really to understand Zavattini the man as well as Zavattini the writer, one must know something about his birthplace," so William Weaver prefaces the 1970 collection *Sequences from a Cinematic Life*, the first book-length English translation of Zavattini's writings.

Luzzara, where Zavattini was born in 1902, is a small agricultural town on the banks of the Po River in the province of Reggio Emilia. There is nothing remarkable about Luzzara; it is provincial Italy at its most anonymous. Nonetheless, leafing through the pages of *Un paese*, the photo-book that Zavattini created in 1955 with American photographer Paul Strand, we encounter this same Luzzara as a land of epic landscapes and quietly dignified people whose simple words draw a compelling picture of 1950s Italy. It is in the seemingly unremarkable, everyday world of Luzzara that Zavattini learned early on one of the revolutionary tenets of his poetics that eventually shaped postwar cinema—the banal

After Luzzara, Zavattini lived in the northern city of Bergamo with an uncle, then in Rome, in whose vicinity the family moved during WWI, and then in Parma where, after dropping out of law school, he started his career as a journalist for a local newspaper. A voracious reader but mediocre student, Zavattini found in the streets, variety theaters, and cinemas his true university. Before Charlie Chaplin, his idol was the Italian stage performer Leopoldo Fregoli, the greatest and most versatile quick-change artist of his day, famous for his extraordinary impersonations and rapid change of roles. Fregoli, the artist as a protean being, dashing on and off stage, resonates with the ebullient artistic temperament of Zavattini. In the

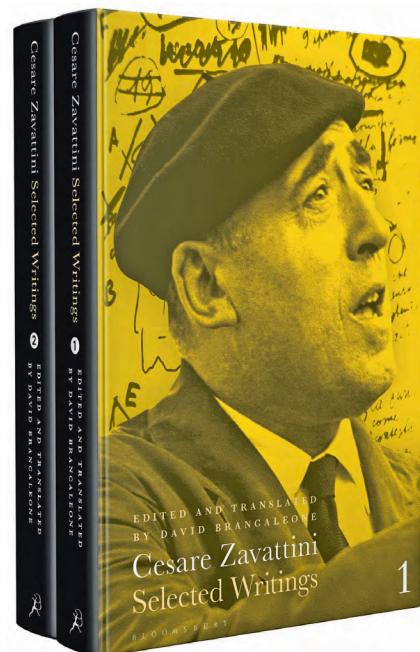
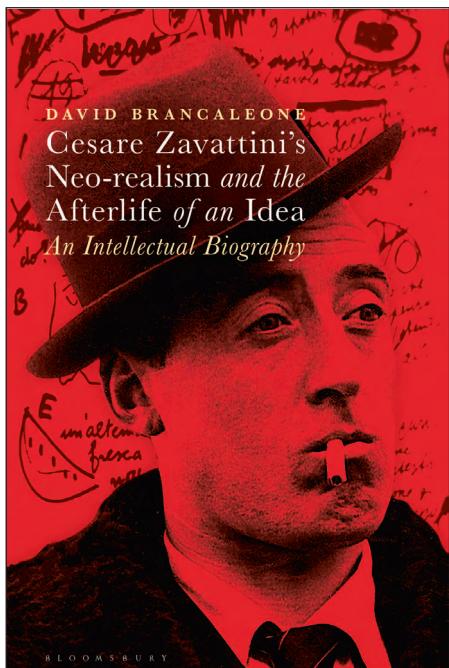
space of a few years during the 1930s, he too would undergo swift and amazing transformations: from obscure provincial journalist to the most acclaimed fiction writer in Italy, popular magazine writer and editor, cultural

trendsetter and, toward the end of the decade, sought-after screenwriter. Then, in the postwar period, he emerged as one of the main figures of neorealism, theorist of a modern ethical cinema, engaging tirelessly in cultural and political initiatives that shook the Italian cinematic establishment.

Three new books detail the screenwriter's importance in Italian neorealism and also reveal his influence as a democratic force in cinema in Spain, Cuba, Latin America, and elsewhere throughout the world.

does not exit. Once invested with an attentive eye and ear, the most ordinary reality becomes extraordinary and revelatory, an infinite repertory of images "worth narrating in every moment."

In Luzzara, Zavattini's family ran an elegant café and pastry shop in the center of town. Always busy and always struggling with debts, the entire family worked in the popular café, leading an existence that left little space for intimate and private moments. "The caffettieri [baristas] do not have a home even when they have one, one even eats among clients, cohabitants," Zavattini will reminisce years later in *Going Back*. The open space of the café, where the whole community comes and goes as in a seaport, where words flow with the coffee and liquors, where stories are heard and told, is a space of meeting and listening which profoundly shaped Zavattini's poetics. The cinema of the encounter, his Utopia, at once aesthetic and political, of civic cohabitation in a living space that is shared and for which we share responsibility, finds its roots here. In Luzzara, living the life of the caffettieri, Zavattini developed his unique art of storytelling that introduced into Italian literature and then cinema the view from the street, the world seen from the eyes of the "common man," a direct and simple language, resonating with the living voices of people.

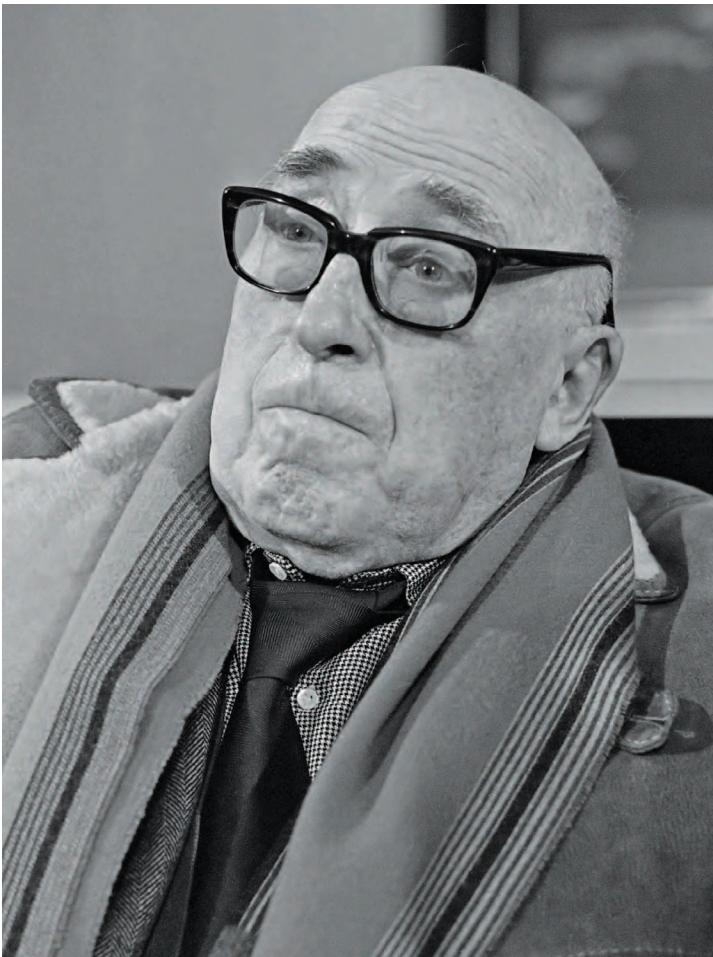


A NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION

This long and complex history is finally made accessible to the English public through a series of books published in 2021 by Bloomsbury Academic: *Cesare Zavattini Selected Writings*, a two-volume collection of texts representative of Zavattini's volcanic output, translated and curated by David Brancaleone; and *Cesare Zavattini's Neo-realism and the Afterlife of an Idea: An Intellectual Biography*, a companion volume by the same author. These volumes help flesh out an artist who usually appears as a footnote in the history of postwar cinema and thus fill a long-standing gap in film history in the English language. Reopening a conversation on Zavattini, a polymath working across a wide range of media and a deeply original, if unsystematic, thinker, will highlight his contribution to the theory and practice of modern cinema, putting it into a dialogue with more familiar postwar voices such as André Bazin, Sigfried Kracauer, and the better-known Italian Pier Paolo Pasolini.

The first volume of *Cesare Zavattini Selected Writings* contains Zavattini's fiction and screenplays, materials translated for the first time in English. It includes excerpts from Zavattini's early novels *Let's Talk a Lot about Me* (1931) and *The Poor are Mad* (1937) and the 1941 collection of short stories *I am the Devil*, and an extensive array of scenarios ranging from his first in 1936, *The Nervous Tic Clinic*, to the 1981 scenario for Zavattini's first debut as actor and director, *The Truuuuth* (interestingly Zavattini's career in film starts and ends with stories set in mental asylums). The scenarios offer a comprehensive view of Zavattini's rich and varied input to Italian cinema. In comparison, the prose selection, which Brancaleone rightly argues is central to understanding Zavattini's comic vein, unique mix of realism and fantasy, and modernist writing style, seems inadequate. The selected passages could have been more extensive and better contextualized regarding the structure and plot of the books they come from to afford the reader a better understanding of how Zavattini's narrative in the Thirties both foreshadows and differs from his later neorealism.

The second volume of *Selected Writings* includes a representative corpus of Zavattini's theoretical and critical interventions in the form of essays, interviews, and confer-



Cesare Zavattini (1902–89), prolific screenwriter and the leading advocate and theoretician of neorealism in Italy and elsewhere around the world.

ence papers. Starting from the prewar writings, the bulk of the materials cover the period of neorealism and the subsequent evolution of Zavattini's idea of ethical cinema, particularly his activism in the Free Newsreels Collective and counterinformation movement of the Sixties. The materials coming from two Italian collections of 1979, *Neorealism etc.* and the *Cinematographic Diary*, appear in English for the first time except for "Some Ideas on Cinema," and "Thesis on Neorealism." The volume also includes unpublished correspondence, some of it documenting Zavattini's collaboration with representatives of Cuban and Latin American cinema.

While praised for the terseness of his fiction writing, as a thinker and speaker Zavattini was torrential in his output. Ideas and initiatives came fast and furious to Zavattini only to be shelved or abandoned with equal speed. Being an editor of his work is a daunting task. While praising Brancaleone's overall selection of materials, the organization of the two volumes of translations could have been tighter and better integrated. With an artist like Zavattini, who disregarded boundaries separating media, genres, and disciplines, and who worked synergistically on fiction, screenplays, and theory, the choice to separate fiction from theory is at

least questionable. This division also creates a lot of overlap and unnecessary redundancy in Brancaleone's editorial notes, with the potential of diluting the impact of the texts and confusing the reader. Similar organizational problems surface in the intellectual biography, where, to take an example, at least three chapters are dedicated to separate yet related discussions of the *Italia mia* project. The story of this road movie/ethnographic documentary to encounter Italy is crucial for understanding Zavattini's activities in the postwar cultural environment, but since *Italia mia* did not materialize into a film (though it was the seed for the stunning photobook with Paul Strand), the story did not need to be told three times over.

Most unfortunately, however, this important and timely contribution to film and cultural studies did not receive a careful review or proofreading at the editorial level. Many repetitions, errors of attribution, and even spelling hinder its value as a reference. On the other hand, even considering the academic nature of the publication, the reference apparatus is at times so intrusive as to make the reading needlessly arduous. Finally, the absence of any visuals in a book on "the founder of visual culture in Italy" is lamentable. A selection of photographs, film stills, as well as of Zavattini's paintings—he started painting in 1939 in a naïf/abstract style and continued throughout his life—would have greatly illuminated the reading.

Despite these shortcomings, Brancaleone's work has the merit to document Zavattini's richness and originality and to detail the profound, often overlooked influence that he exerted not just on Italian but also world cinema. Thanks to Brancaleone's original research in the Zavattini Archives, we have for the first time a detailed account of his intense collaboration with Spanish, Cuban, and Latin American cinema, thus documenting the direct influence that neorealism exerted on the rise of movements like Third Cinema. Brancaleone's critical presentation drives home the fact that Zavattini's contribution has staying power. While it sheds light on postwar cinema, refreshing the debate surrounding it, his theory and practice open a compelling dialogue with many contemporary practices, from slow cinema and ethnographic cinema to the engaged documentary. Zavattini still matters.

WHY ZAVATTINI?

Why is it that, except for the 1970 publication of *Sequences from a Cinematic Life* and a couple of essays, Zavattini did not receive sustained critical attention in the English-speaking world? Brancaleone convincingly explains Zavattini's marginalization through his connection with a clichéd idea of neorealism as simple social realism. Although critics such as André Bazin and Gilles Deleuze have long dismantled this reductionist reading, the cliché has persisted. A recent body of studies on both sides of the Atlantic (which Brancaleone unfortunately does not engage) have reopened the question of postfascist cinema and its aesthetics. Within this discussion, Zavattini has become a key figure for recognizing the role of neorealism in opening the trajectory of today's cinema rather than as a tradition we have superseded.

First: Regrounding Cinema

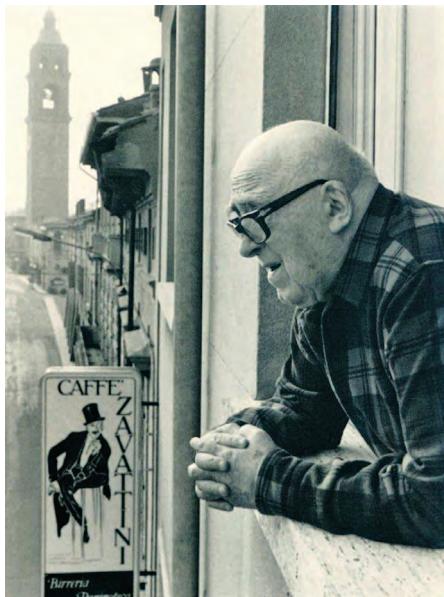
Zavattini wrote his most incisive interventions at times of great upheaval—on the eve of the Second World War, in the immediate postwar, and during the Sixties counterculture. The way in which he raised fundamental questions pertaining to the nature of cinema and its task within an urgently lived historical moment continue to resonate.

The 1949 Perugia conference on Neorealism took place during the escalation of the Cold War when the new cinema was under attack from the censorship of the Christian Democratic government. It was an international event attended by filmmakers, photographers, and critics, including Joris Ivens, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Paul Strand, and Georges Sadoul, along with the leading figures of Italian cinema and culture. Zavattini delivered a compelling opening address entitled “Cinema and the Modern Man” that put cinema on trial and raised the question of its future.

To put it simply, cinema had failed...How many films were made during the long vigil, in preparation for the great slaughter? An incalculable number in fifty years: 1895–1944. Fifty years of cinema. It sounds like a tombstone...Cinema didn't help us.¹

The experience of the war and the fall of fascism had taught a radical lesson.

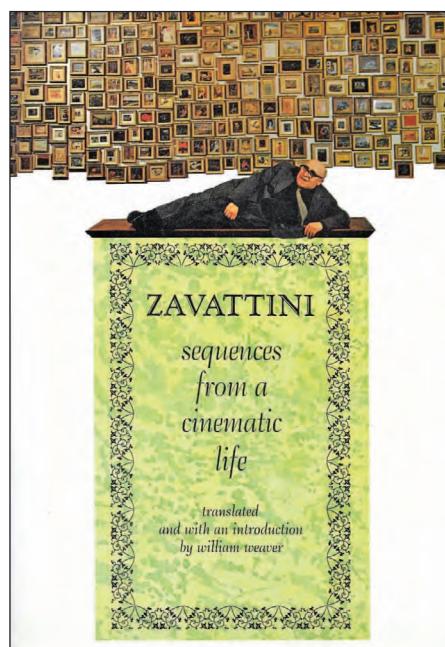
Surrounded by war rubble, we realized that we'd spent too few images to open our neighbor's eyes...In no time at all, [cinema] succeeded in pushing viewers as far away as possible from themselves...Having deserted their own surroundings, viewers felt they were citizens from a country suspended in mid-air, a place where they could hear the cries of sufferings of invented characters on the screen, but not those of the people in whose company they'd crowded buses and stores.



Throughout his life, Zavattini often revisited his birthplace of Luzzara.

For Zavattini, emerging from the darkness of a movie theater is synonymous with leaving the darkness of fascism. After having lived a life as sleepwalkers, the citizen-spectators return to earth. After the war, cinema cannot be the same. The agenda for Zavattini is clearly set—to atone for the past and reground cinema historically and ethically. “Neorealism is by now the conscience of cinema.” This meant that a radical rupture in the understanding of culture, spectacle, and spectator was in order.

Those years and Zavattini's words seem very distant from us. Nonetheless, in 1998, at another fifty-year distance, Jean-Luc Godard, reflecting on cinema and the tragic



Zavattini's 1970 anthology is out of print, but copies are available on Amazon and other sites.

history of the twentieth century after completing his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, echoed Zavattini's conclusions: “Cinema totally fell short of its duty...It is like the parable of the good servant who died from not being utilized. Cinema is a means of expression from which expression disappeared. Only the medium remained.”² But, while for Godard cinema could return to its mission by way of the archive and the editing table (redeeming the image by actualizing what had remained implicit in the cinematic vision), for Zavattini, in 1949 it was in the direct encounter with the world, in the space between the camera and reality, that cinema could start over again.

“Let it be Lumière” (the title of an essay by Dai Vaughan),³ was the battle cry of Zavattini in 1949, when he argued that cinema was to return to its roots, when the world lay before the camera unscripted.

It seems to us that we are about to rediscover the original value of our image in three dimensions. But then, this is what cinema was from when it first opened its lens to the light of the world. That was when it gave equal importance to everything, and everything was worth fixing on the plate. That was the most uncontaminated and promising moment in cinema history. Slowly, reality began to resurface, although it was buried under a pile of myths. Cinema began its creation of the world. A tree here, an old man there, a house, a man eating, a man sleeping, a man weeping.

From Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) to *Umberto D.* (1952)—roughly the beginning and end of the high season of neorealism—what Zavattini called the cinema of encounter unfolded as an ongoing reminder of the materiality and contingency of our looking, what critic Sandro Bernardi summarized in this imperative—“Now, here, you, are watching these things.” This documentarist vision challenging the boundary separating fiction from nonfiction is at the heart of the revolution of neorealism. As we have entered an age of momentous geopolitical as well as environmental transformations, and at a time when the proliferation of media interfaces and modes of image production and consumption has endowed the word cinema with an uncertain status (nostalgic, expanded, dissolved), Zavattini's reflections on what cinema is and could be, the nature of its tasks within a time of upheaval, continues to challenge us.

Second: What is Reality?

The recent book by Jill Godmilow, *Kill the Documentary: A Letter to Filmmakers, Students, and Scholars* (Columbia University Press, 2022), is the latest reminder that the documentarist vision at the heart of postfascist cinema is still an embattled and contested terrain. Although Zavattini is not quoted in Godmilow's volume, I would argue that Zavattini's idea of cinema—precariously and productively suspended between reality and



In *Umberto D.* (1952), directed by De Sica from a screenplay by Zavattini, elderly pensioner Umberto Domenico Ferrari (Carlo Battisti), behind on his rent and threatened with eviction, goes out on the street and tries to figure out how he can beg without completely humiliating himself.

fiction, open to contaminations across various media and genres (the diary form, the cinema journal, the photobook)—and his sophisticated understanding of reality, make Zavattini's reflection central to the contemporary debate on a documentary form that is performative and experimental, yet not necessarily, as Godmilow proposes, *postrealist*. What matters, as always, is to clarify the terms of the discussion.

The big stumbling block in the discussions of neorealism, as well as the documentary, is the semantic field of the real, reality, realism. In his presentation, Brancaleone rightly insists on clearing away the misconceptions surrounding the "realism" in neorealism, a set of deeply engrained prejudices that, as noted before, has pigeonholed postwar Italian cinema and Zavattini with it. Far from evoking a naive, mimetic notion of the real, Zavattini's cinema of the encounter proposes reality not as a space of representation but of invention where the perceived world and imagination meet in mutual interrogation. It is precisely because of this complex understanding of reality that Italian postwar cinema figures largely in major reflections on modern cinema. From the start, André Bazin rejected a codified, prescriptive notion of "reality" as the object of neorealism, replacing it with the deceptively simple and open "what is." By doing so, he shifted the focus from content to form, reality being the result of an aesthetic engagement of the camera with the world. As Gilles Deleuze wrote later, in neorealism "the real was no longer represented or reproduced, but 'aimed at'; it was not an already known real but an ambiguous, yet-to-be deciphered "what is."

By focusing as it does on the everyday, the ephemeral, the fragmentary, the contingent, Zavattini's cinema of the encounter is at one and the same time realist and modernist, breaking established aesthetic boundaries. To borrow the words of John Berger on Michelangelo Antonioni, what we encounter in the image-worlds of neorealism is "something so real that it does not yet have a name."⁴ Doing away with an objective, dogmatic notion of reality associated with nineteenth-century "realism," the "real" understood as a mystery and a project is what we should keep in mind as we discuss Zavattini and postwar Italian cinema.

Let's look for instance at an amazing short piece entitled "The Best Dreams," made available for the first time in Brancaleone's translation. In this seminal essay, which originally appeared in the magazine *Cinema* in 1940, Zavattini posits "blindness" as an organizing principle behind cinematic vision, thus evoking a complex notion of realism predicated on invisibility and fantasy.

I often close my eyes during a film and try to guess what is going to happen next, both in terms of film technique and the events of the story...A pedestrian, trite and logical movie, followed with this lowering of eyelids, always justifies our presence...you are left with the angelic doubt that in those moments of blindness brilliant actions might have taken place; in other words, we make allowances, as we do with people given to long silences, since there is always poetry in parsimony...*Deficiencies enliven the imagination.*

Cinema is the result of a double vision: images flow before the eyes, contained in a visible and logical straitjacket, while others are projected behind the eyelids. "Blindness," the ability to see beyond appearances, to combine reality and imagination, emerges as the organizing force of a new vision both for the spectator and filmmaker. So Zavattini continues:

Dreams belong to the blind and visionaries. A film that was entirely based on dreams would be an important documentary, even for future generations. Otherwise how would they know what citizens of these warlike times were dreaming?...But no fade in, no slow motion, no surrealism...for our dreams are crystal clear and fierce...We need to drop the tricks of the trade, the special effects, the filters, the endless subterfuges, so dear to Méliès. *We shall discover the marvel in ourselves and express it without marvel:* the best dreams are without fog, they are as visible as the veins in leaves.

With a startlingly momentous insight, Zavattini rejects a cinema defined by the regime of visibility to posit invisibility as cinema's intrinsic structural element. Distancing himself from a stereotype of surrealism, Zavattini imagines a *new* realism bound to the world's materiality yet veined by the imagination. The visions of the blind are not a flight to an elsewhere but an immersion in the real, which is of necessity enigmatic and mysterious. The dreams of this new realism are dreams with the senses wide awake. This subtle yet momentous shift within the notion of realism is what is contained in the "neo" of neorealism.

Zavattini's notion of a cinema of double vision short-circuits deeply held notions about Italian postwar cinema. Neorealism, a cinema of simple stories of street urchins and unemployed workers, relying on documentary-style filming of postwar ruins and dusty streets drenched in the anonymous light of the everyday, seems a cinema bound to the visibility of an absolute present. Zavattini's cinema of "the blind and visionaries," however, suggests how the profilmic materiality of postwar Italy is both the site of a visible realism and emotions, memory, dreams "visible as the veins in the leaves." But what is exactly the blindness that weighs on Zavattini's eyelids? Elsewhere I have suggested how Italian postwar cinema is born from a split between a commitment to the documentary visibility of the present and a silent engagement with a yet unspeakable past.⁵ Here is where neorealism differs from the original vision of Lumière. As cinema at the end of the war opens its eyes on the world again, it finds a reality *pre-occupied* by mourning, trauma, and guilt. The past is the weight on Zavattini's eyelids.

Third: Cinema as Democratic Practice

As the title of Brancalione's intellectual biography makes clear, far from being circumscribed to the immediate postwar, for Zavattini neorealism was a life-long project. Having been declared the conscience of cinema, neorealism became the project for an ethical cinema whose potentialities lay in the future. In the Fifties, when one by one Italian filmmakers, under pressure of political censorship from the ruling Christian Democratic Party, steered away from a declaredly committed cinema, Zavattini kept at it. 1952, the year of *Umberto D.* and the vicious attack on it by future prime minister Giulio Andreotti (who famously declared that neorealist cinema had to stop "washing the dirty linen in public"), Zavattini published some of his most important theoretical reflections on the new cinema.

In the writings of the period, he develops a sustained critique of cinema as a cultural institution at the formal level—challenging the straitjackets of scripts, genres, and aesthetic codes—and at the political and economic level—denouncing the suffocating joint hold of censorship and industry. As a response to these strictures, Zavattini started exploring new possible forms that the cinema of encounter could take. To bypass the control of the production system, Zavattini argued that the gap separating thought and filming is too big and that the camera should confront, shadow, and narrate contemporary reality without mediations. Zavattini called for a "cinema of immediacy" and the adoption of the diary form, a writing that possesses the swiftness of the movie camera and thus is most able to "stay at the heels of time." The diary, he declared in 1950, is "the most complete and

authentic expression of cinema" ("Scrap Scripts"). Zavattini's appeal resonates profoundly with Jonas Mekas's experimental work, as well as with the contemporary flourishing of first-person cinema and the essay film.

The 1953 anthology film *Love in the City*, with the reenactment of news stories featuring the actual protagonists, the shadowing of real-life people, and grafting the magazine format onto the structure of the film, is the first showcase of this cinema of immediacy, what Zavattini also called a "Flash Film." But the fullest realization of this idea of cinema is the experience of the *Cinegiornali* (Newsreels). After *The Newsreel for Peace* in 1963, the most compelling examples of this initiative were the Free Newsreels Collective that Zavattini launched in 1967 together with a group of young filmmakers including Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, Marco Bellocchio, and Bernardo Bertolucci. In a year's time in many cities throughout the country, collectives were spontaneously formed to chronicle, analyze, and critique current events. This guerrilla cinema—variously described as "cinema now," "cinema by everyone for everyone," "cinema together"—was uneven in its results and short-lived, but some amazing works remain, such as *Apollon. Free Newsreel 2. An Occupied Factory* (1969), collectively produced by the striking workers of a printing factory in Rome together with a group of young filmmakers.

In the Sixties, Zavattini became an outspoken proponent of a democratized cinematic culture that would do away with the divisions between producers and consumers, spectators and spectacle. Already in the Fifties, Zavattini proposed a national program to distribute still cameras in the schools to empower all children to look at

the world, document it, and, through the image, interrogate it. In the next decade, he called for the distribution—this time of film cameras—to students and workers. Technological limitations and lack of funding left Zavattini's proposals unrealized. His project hardly seems utopian today, just ahead of its time. The ideas of the diary form, the Flash Film, and culture as a participatory realm of seemingly interchangeable producers and consumers seem to have come to fruition in our present tech-savvy, gadget-rich world of instant communication, of YouTube personal channels, Instagram, and Facebook. It is through consumer technology, however, and not revolution or even education, that we seem to have arrived at a twenty-first-century iteration of the cinema of everyone for everyone. How does Zavattini's work give us a critical perspective on our present?

The limits of Zavattini's Utopia are nested in an unthought-through contradiction. The new ethical cinema was predicated at the same time on both immediacy and duration—"cinema of duration" was another slogan of those years. In the 1950 essay decrying scripts, he writes, "It is certainly the contemplation of reality which makes everything truly possible in cinema. This contemplation is, in my opinion...the ethics of this cinema." While revolutionizing the notion of access and production, immediacy left unaddressed the questions of spectacle and spectator. How are stories to be told just by looking at reality? As early as 1940, Zavattini framed the practice and poetics of the everyday as a spectacle with a memorable anecdote.

What becomes spectacle are things stilled in a planned attention. So, for example, my uncle, who was a very wise man, never said: "Look at the sunset." Instead, he would line us up in front of the window—he'd often even invite some of his friends—ring a bell, and only then draw the window curtains and exclaim: "Here is the sunset!" What a wonderful vision! ("The Best Dreams")

It is not speed but the insistence of the gaze, the attention, the conscious creation through framing of a no-matter-how-humble theater of vision, that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. Once again mediation is reduced to the minimum; all that is needed is a shared space charged with the consciousness of seeing. "Few have the patience to look and listen," notes Zavattini in 1953. But exactly for that reason, modern cinema's chief task is that of cultivating attentiveness. Despite his energetic optimism, Zavattini was well aware that:

It will be hard to turn these events into spectacle. It will require powerful human insight, both in the filmmaker, and in the viewer. What is required is to give every single minute of man's life its historical importance. ("Some Ideas on Cinema")



Love in the City is available in a *RaroVideo* Blu-ray edition available from Kino Lorber.



Bicycle Thieves (1948) won numerous Best Film awards in festivals worldwide as well as an Honorary Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as the “most outstanding foreign language film” released in the U.S. in 1949. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

The uneven results of Zavattini's cinematic praxis beyond neorealism might be explained in this unproblematised coexistence of immediacy and duration, and the divide between communication and vision. Technology, immediate access, and speed are not sufficient to change the distribution of power or the ability to know and critique the world we incessantly photograph. Walter Benjamin's warning that “the illiteracy of the future will be the ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography,” resonates in Zavattini's utopia as well as our present reality.

There is a place where the pedagogical mission of the new cinema is fully realized. This is in the films that Zavattini made with De Sica. Incidentally, Brancaleone rightly insists on the fact that, given his participation in all aspects of filming and editing, we should think of Zavattini as co-author with De Sica. *Bicycle Thieves* is the best example of the “education of the onlooker.” The first part of the film tells in twenty minutes, in a classical rapid-montage Hollywood style, the story of how Antonio, an unemployed Roman worker, redeems his pawned bicycle

only to have it stolen his first day on a job hanging posters. From this moment on, the film, as if dismounting from the bicycle, slows down and, in a full hour of near-real time, follows the wanderings of Antonio and his son Bruno through Rome in search of the stolen bike. From an abstract cinematic quantity, time becomes the embodied time of the drama of being in and looking at the world. As a result, the film works as a training of the viewer from “a realism on wheels,” predicated on cinematic speed, to a new kind of realism where the actors, the camera, and the viewers are ethically sharing a field of vision and a common universe of injustices, mistakes, and forgiveness.

THE MAN OF CONTRADICTIONS

To present Zavattini's extensive production, spanning roughly from the rise of fascism to the fall of the Berlin Wall, is a huge editorial and critical undertaking. In the biography, Brancaleone chooses the seemingly safe path of following chronologically the unfolding of Zavattini's work. The picture that emerges of Zavattini—tireless

experimenter, perpetual outsider—is both exhaustive and partial. It tells the story of Zavattini as the man of infinite transformations, while forgetting what William Weaver called “the man of immense contradictions.” Zavattini is the artist who called for immediate cinema and elimination of scripts, while working full time writing screenplays for mainstream cinema; the artist who wanted a cinema of immediacy and duration at the same time; the leading representative of neorealism who in 1949 adapted a prewar fairy tale in *Miracle in Milan*. The list could go on. These contradictions (actual or apparent) are the most compelling and productive moments of Zavattini's thought and artistic practice. Thus, for instance, Zavattini's “contradictory” appeal to both realism and imagination allows us to rethink neorealism as “a documentary all made of dreams.” In this sea of contradiction, however, there is one central tension that is life-defining for Zavattini's personality and contribution—this global proponent of an ethical and democratized cinema had been one of the most successful and respected protagonists of Italian culture under the fascist regime.

It is standard practice, in order to give a few clear signposts to orient us historically, to divide the twentieth century between a pre- and postwar. We rely automatically on this division despite its historical and theoretical evasiveness, an evasiveness which emerges when we speak instead of fascism and postfascism. Wars end but violence and coercion linger on. The question of how this transition should be thought—as a radical break with the past or as continuity—is still debated by historians. Brancaléone in a way embraces both theories: the war and fall of fascism marked a radical shift in Zavattini's work and poetics and Zavattini was already Zavattini in the Thirties. Paradoxically both statements are true. This being the case, however, a conscious, concerted effort needs to be made to acknowledge and engage with how that is meaningful, even foundational, for Zavattini's work.

Zavattini's passage from fascism to post-fascism was not an instantaneous liberation. It was a painful crossing which took up the rest of his life. Using the words of critic Mino Argentieri, who curated the Italian edition of his writings, Zavattini was one of the few Italian intellectuals who tried to face the moral ruins (much more disastrous than the material devastation) which fascism left in its wake.

His hands are clean, but he feels remorse for not having done more, for having been, with his grumpy acceptance of Fascism and with a doubtful inurement, co-responsible in the deceit which had enormous repercussions. (Argentieri, 2002)

Thus, there is a Zavattini to imagine the future and another to read and understand the past. Zavattini the utopian is a man deeply scarred by history.

Under Fascism

The recurring image in Zavattini's biography is that of the eternal outsider: the satirist who under fascism uses "humor as a weapon"; the filmmaker who attacks the institutions of cinema; the madman who speaks *The Truuuuth*. But the reality, unpleasant as it might be, is that since the early Thirties, Zavattini had been an insider. Deeply entrenched in fascist cultural life, through his fiction, journalism, and work in



For several decades, director Vittorio De Sica and screenwriter Cesare Zavattini enjoyed one of the most successful collaborations in the history of Italian cinema.

popular magazines and cinema, he greatly contributed to shaping it and was showered with recognition. Undoubtedly, he had to struggle with censorship and constantly sweat over his initiatives in fear that they might expose him. In those early years, as Brancaléone extensively documents, he was instrumental in creating a modern visual culture. But his innovative impact on the format of the new illustrated popular magazine—less text, more images, more color, more scantily dressed women, more cartoons, flexible layout—could be read as an express response to working both within and against the strictures of the regime.



With this screenplay, Zavattini demonstrated that neorealist films could also be comedies.

Despite his coexistence with the fascist regime, Zavattini's temperament is essentially and profoundly antifascist. This antifascism is not to be found so much, as is usually thought, in his comic vein—the ambiguous dissidence of jokes and cartoons were happily tolerated by the regime, as the flourishing of humoristic magazines in the Thirties clearly shows—but rather in his poetics. What could, in fact, be more counter to fascism than his attention to the everyday, the banal, the unheroic, his willingness to take up the point of view of the common person, the subaltern? His success in the press and cinema was due to his ability to express the immediacy and simplicity of life.

The delightful comedy he scripted for Alessandro Blasetti in 1942, *Four Steps in the Clouds*, is just such an example of Zavattini's aspiration to tell the story of simple men and women mixed up in and ultimately trapped by the mythologies of the regime. In a brutally hierarchical society, in which citizens were choreographed as anonymous masses, he lent a human face to the inhumanity of fascism—thus he made fascism more tolerable and, thus, arguably, he made it worse. Neither an apologist, nor a rebel, his tight-rope act extorted a high moral price that left him deeply wounded.

His fiction writing in the Thirties, although only cryptically, denounces this malaise. A short story written in the last years of fascism, set in an anonymous geography and environment reminiscent of Kafka's universe, reveals allegorically the moral nature of the compromise that bound artists, intellectuals, and common Italians with the regime. "Dance at A..." is part of the 1941 collection *I am the Devil*. The action takes place at a Carnival party, safely set during the previous war. The (male) narrator absents himself from the party with the excuse of a migraine and unbeknownst to the others returns to the dance disguised as a mysterious femme fatale. "I had prepared the joke very well, faking even the breasts." The fascinating lady repulses all advances until the local judge in a fit of passion leads her into a waltz. The narrator's musings carry us through the scene.

My plan was to reveal my true sex at the most opportune moment, in the midst of the hall. What fun! The judge, encouraged by my silence, proposed to me with a heavy breath while people were looking at us maliciously. He then squeezed me brushing my neck with his lips. I saw his watery pupils disappear in the white of the eyes. It was my skin that inflamed him; my hips under the touch of his hands: he would have thought forever about the warmth of my flesh. I was forever bound to his throbbing desire. One day, at the very same time that I will be speaking in via B., he will be trembling at the memory. Oh, I want to change my skin. I ran away on my high heels. (Author's translation)

This amazing little piece invites a reflection on the nature of the entanglements between fascist power and its subjects. Zavattini might have used "humor as a weapon," but, as the little parable suggests, the dance with power, far from leaving him unscathed, forced him to succumb to its corrupting touch. For so many Italians, the moral compromise with fascism involved an often disavowed, yet profound cultural and social debasement, one that remained inscribed on the body, a mark of shame that, as Zavattini so strikingly suggests, can be hardly forgotten or done away with.

1943–1945: Self-Critique

Zavattini was one of the few who, between 1943 and 1946 in his private diaries (available in Weaver's translation), openly raised the question of the past and the responsibility of the cultural class. "I am what I did not do," he writes and, mourning twenty years of hypocrisy, he notes, "On a newspaper the title: 'Shrewd behavior of Italian culture under the regime.'" Just like "cinema," the medium he indicted at the 1949 conference, Zavattini and his colleagues did not open their eyes to the oncoming slaughter. In 1944, after the liberation of Rome, at the first conference of the newly formed "Cultural Association of Italian Cinematographers," Zavattini announces:

This first conference will have a trial-like title: "Proceedings against Italian cinema." Our goal is not simply to survive but to grow thanks to this force that impels us to research our past and which becomes, in its radicality, a guarantee of the future. We should not strive to liquidate demagogically the work of twenty years but to individuate what were our individual responsibilities and what legacies are still acceptable. (Author's translation)

Insistently in those years, Zavattini calls for self-analysis to foster the process of working-through and reconciliation with the past. In a short 1946 piece entitled "The Red Fishes and the Dishonest," he declares, "we will save ourselves if we will know ourselves." Called to fulfill this arduous task, cinema will at once deflect it and artistically

fulfill it. Postfascist cinema offered a way to absorb, process, and represent, through a seemingly objective realism, what words could not—the trauma of the war and, more importantly, twenty years of fascism.

Poetics as Escape

Zavattini's postwar poetics is marked by this unresolved relation with the past. As his art evolved, the call for self-analysis was overshadowed. Explaining how the simple fact of meeting the world with a camera could give rise to art, Zavattini wrote in 1953:

In the meantime [the filmmaker] should go; and already in this movement he will have achieved the first act of his poetics—and he has a world to discover before him—he must make a radical break with the past, sharply, because afterwards he will never succeed in separating himself from it. It will follow him like a shadow—if not become his own body. (Author's translation)

The imperative to know the world, the excitement and wonder for the everyday, is coupled—in a syntactically awkward way that indicates the strain of thinking these two moments together—with an equally strong imperative to escape from, even erase, the past.

Cinema should never look back. It should embrace the contemporary unreservedly, TODAY, TODAY, TODAY. We should investigate what lies before us, using cinema as if it were a spotlight"…Cinema should create the story⁶ (if we can still call it that) along the way. ("Some Ideas about Cinema")

Zavattini insists that cinema's task is "to face the thorns of reality," but what are the "thorns of reality" if not the thorns of the past? From the cinema of contemplation, engaging dreams and memory, cinema became more



Zavattini's "Big Self Portrait" (1970) was one of many such paintings he created.

and more bound to a present that stood in the place of what could not be expressed. In a final gesture of self-criticism, Zavattini recognized these limits in a 1970s TV interview on the topic of cinema and history.

Italian cinema sought to divide the past from the present. It has placed the past there, the present here, and in the middle a great abyss; and so the past might have had an emotive value, sometimes a lyrical value, but it never overflowed onto the present, truly becoming an element of critique and consciousness. (Author's translation)

What in 1949 at the Perugia conference Zavattini described as "this singular domestic judgment day, without trumpets, without celestial interventions, between man and man, which started in our cinema immediately after the war," which he declared "can't be interrupted," was, in fact, cut short. The process of historical awakening and reckoning with a shameful past that started in 1943–1946 never fully came to fruition. Nonetheless, until the end Zavattini remained obsessed with staging himself and telling the truth, even while knowing that "Truth is made of what remains unspoken." Notwithstanding the silences, or in fact because of them, Zavattini and neorealism did not fall short of their duty. Italian post-war cinema expressed through lasting images the end of a world of violence and an uncertain new beginning.

The "Grande Autoritratto" (Big Self-Portrait), a mixed-media painting realized in 1970, shows Zavattini in front of his famous collection of tiny paintings that he commissioned over a period of thirty years from famous contemporary artists. These minute pieces of the world embody the intense encounter between the gaze and reality. Against a wall of colorful spots stands the stenciled figure of Zavattini, eyeless, his face a blot of white paint almost merging with the light background, while each small vibrant image, like an eye, looks back at the ghostlike presence of Zavattini, the artist-spectator. "In the silence I find myself whole, in the words incomplete." ■

Endnotes

¹ All translations, unless differently noted, are taken from *Cesare Zavattini Selected Writings, volume 2*. Occasionally, I have changed Brancaleone's translations for accuracy.

² Jean-Luc Godard, "Le cinéma n'a pas su remplir son rôle" in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard, II. 1984–1998*. Paris: *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1998. Author's translation.

³ Dai Vaughan, "Let it be Lumière," in *For Documentary*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

⁴ John Berger, "The River Po," in *The Shape of the Pocket*, New York: Vintage International, 2001.

⁵ See Giuliana Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Films. Cinema Year Zero*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

⁶ In Italian la storia means both "story" and "history," hence the ambiguity of this sentence.