Cesare Zavattini's Principles of Neorealism and Their Impact on Contemporary Filmmaking

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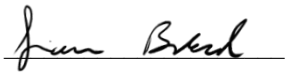
Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) in Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.



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Abstract

This thesis is about the life and work of Cesare Zavattini, an Italian journalist and screenwriter who was the leading proponent of Italian Neorealism; a movement in cinema that advocated for an ethical cinema and a cinema of conscience. This movement occurred in the wake of World War Two in Italy, which laid the foundations for an exploration of the quality of life in Italian society post-war. This study would focus on the ordinary man who was consistently situated in the working class and faced great upheaval in the pursuit of basic rights, or the necessities to survive at the time. Pre-war, Benito Mussolini's tight control over Italy as well the means of producing cinema made it impossible to tell real, genuine, and honest films about the living standards of Italians. When he fell from power, Zavattini and other Italian filmmakers saw this as the perfect opportunity to bring their vision for their new type of cinema to life.

This thesis will explore Zavattini's lead in this movement, focusing on his aspiration for an almost documentary style approach to filming, introducing the aesthetics of this wave such as the casting of non-actors, and filming on location. This paper will demonstrate how Zavattini's steadfast commitment to an anti-narrative approach, cantered on mundane events, coupled with his rejection of Hollywood's reliance of spectacle, contributed to a more profound and ethically resonant form of neorealism. My work will be structured into three chapters that examine different areas of Zavattini's neorealism. Firstly, this will contextualise the role that Zavattini's past played in the formation of his ideas and ideals, in particular his interest in cinema and literature, and empathy for working class struggles. Secondly, this analysis will delve into his practical approach to writing and having a major creative involvement in his films as well as the major financial and political obstacles he faced overtime. Lastly, this work will illustrate how Zavattini's concepts of realism have transcended borders and time to different waves of realist cinema, influencing successive waves of realist cinema and having a broader impact than he could have ever anticipated.

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Introduction

Cesare Zavattini was one of the most influential figures in the development of realist cinema, not only shaping the Italian neorealist movement but also leaving a lasting impact on the broader landscape of global filmmaking. His vision of cinema as a tool for social and political engagement was radical in its simplicity. He argued that film should depict real people in real situations, without embellishment or artificial narrative structures. Zavattini's ideas challenged conventional storytelling and pushed filmmakers towards a more observational, ethically driven approach. This thesis explores how his principles of realism and its qualities of emphasising everyday life, non-professional actors, and open-ended narratives continue to resonate in contemporary realist cinema.

To fully understand Zavattini's influence, it is crucial to examine the roots of neorealism and the socio-political climate that shaped his ideas. As will be explored in the first chapter, Zavattini's commitment to realism was deeply personal, shaped by his own experiences and political beliefs. Living through fascist Italy and the devastation of World War Two, he saw cinema as a means to confront social injustices and give a voice to the marginalized. His collaborations with Vittorio De Sica, particularly on films like *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952), set the standard for neorealist storytelling, stripping away melodrama in favour of stark, unfiltered portrayals of hardship. These films, though simple in structure, were revolutionary in their emotional and political impact, forcing audiences to engage with the realities of post-war Italy.[1]

The second chapter examines Zavattini's poetics of the everyday—his belief that cinema should immerse itself in the rhythms of ordinary life rather than manufacture grand narratives. For Zavattini, reality was already rich with meaning, and filmmakers needed only to observe and document it truthfully. His ideas laid the foundation for an ethical approach to filmmaking, one that prioritised honesty over spectacle. This chapter delves into the aesthetics of neorealism, exploring how Zavattini's call for minimal intervention influenced a generation of filmmakers. By rejecting elaborate scripts and favouring improvisation, he sought to close the gap between fiction and reality, creating films that blurred the lines between documentary and narrative cinema. His emphasis on moral responsibility in filmmaking also

[1] Brancaleone, David, "Cesare Zavattini's Neorealism and the Afterlife of an Idea: An Intellectual Biography", United States, Bloomsbury, 2021, p.75.

raised questions about the role of the director: should they merely depict reality, or actively engage with it? These debates continue to shape discussions around realist cinema today.

The final chapter traces Zavattini's legacy beyond Italy, illustrating how his ideas continue to inspire filmmakers across different cultures and eras. His influence can be seen in movements such as the Iranian New Wave, where directors like Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi have embraced a similar blending of fiction and reality to comment on social and political issues.[2] Likewise, British 'kitchen sink' dramas of the 1960s and 70s share Zavattini's commitment to depicting working-class struggles with raw authenticity. More recently, filmmakers like Ken Loach have carried forward the neorealist ethos, using cinema as a means of social critique.[3] Even in the age of digital filmmaking and online content, Zavattini's dream of a democratised cinema—where anyone can pick up a camera and tell their story—feels more relevant than ever.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that Zavattini's principles of realist cinema were not confined to a single historical moment but have instead continued to evolve, influencing filmmakers across generations and geographies. His vision of cinema as an ethical, socially engaged art form remains a powerful counterpoint to mainstream storytelling, reminding us that the most compelling narratives are often found in the everyday lives of ordinary people. By revisiting his ideas in the context of contemporary filmmaking, we can better understand how realism functions not just as an aesthetic choice, but as a philosophy, one that challenges us to look more closely at the world around us and, perhaps, to see it more truthfully.

[2] Khosravi, Hanna, "Iran's Cinema of Resistance", *Dissent Magazine*, 2023.
[3] Mitchell, Neil, "Where to begin with kitchen sink drama", *BFI*, 2016.

Chapter One: The Roots of Neorealism: Zavattini's Personal and Political Foundations.

This chapter describes how Zavattini's vision for social realism was formed from his personal history, political observations, and sense of responsibility post fascist Italy.

Cesare Zavattini's humble beginnings and personal experiences helped form the basis for his socially conscious cinema. He was born in a small unremarkable town called Luzzara in 1902, characterised by marsh-like landscapes and was often mistaken for the bigger, more well-known town over, Suzzara. His parents earned an honest living by working tirelessly in their family-owned bakery. Zavattini recalls fond memories of spending many hours in the day here, surrounded by constant chatter and an always lively atmosphere. Their second business, a coffee bar inside a makeshift picture house, was also a sentimental place because of its convenient location. Zavattini was five years old when he witnessed his first moving image and was instantly captivated by the monochrome shapes on the large screen, even if it was just dogs chasing after rats in a Pathé journal documentary. While he enjoyed visiting regularly and living in the town of Luzzara, his parents' financial struggles were constant and became too severe. They had no choice but to send him away to Bergamo, a faraway town, to be raised by his cousin Silvia and her father. Cesare found this experience isolating, but he quickly found comfort again in cinema and literature. He would witness the early days of cinema in the Teatro Sociale in Bergamo Alta, and Cinema Nationale at the other end of town. Silvia's readings of poems such as Pascoli's 'La Cavalla Storna' would truly have an impression on him, regularly moving him to tears. Nonetheless, his newly found obsession with cinema and literature did not curb his rebellious nature as a young adult. In 1914, Cesare and a handful of his classmates joined an interventionalist demonstration, in fierce protest of their government's reluctance to get involved in World War One.[4] Then during his second year of high school in 1917 in Rome, Zavattini would consistently skip his classes to immerse himself in the town's local attractions involving light entertainment. He would use up all the tuition money that his mother sent him for these attractions, attending matinées, to afternoon and evening performances. As if this did not satisfy his interests, he would spend any lasting free time he had on extended public tram journeys for the sheer enjoyment of

[4] Brancaleone, op.cit., p.19-20

watching pickpockets rob people blind. Moreover, when he was sent to Alatri as a form of punishment for not taking his studies seriously, Zavattini would break the curfew of his student lodging and stay out for hours into the night gambling. Though he remained unfocused in his youth, his keen observations of people's struggles, including his own family's hardships, began to take root in his thinking. He was undoubtedly lost for a meaningful activity to dedicate his energy to until he came across Giovanni Papini's Un uomo finito (1913) ("Finished Man"). This novel expressed a strong sense of immediacy for self-expression, examining and attempting to rationalise one's past decisions through storytelling. It brought about a renewed sense of purpose for Zavattini and moulded his future interest in justifying characters' troubled decisions through literature. Zavattini would go on to tell the author many years later that he "read it in a single night. What a cataclysm! From the next morning, a new life began for me."

Zavattini's early career in journalism and writing led to his initial explorations of neorealist techniques. Zavattini's interest in literature continued into his adult years, as he would write for several anti-fascist magazines such as La Gazzetta di Parma, until working his way up to an editor position at the Milan newspaper, Rizzoli.[5] Between the early to late 1920's, he used his position to create unique means to criticise the establishment while deepening his focus on the ordinary man. Humour became his primary tool for social critique, provoking reflective thinking and challenging conventional thinking. He communicated this through short, condensed quips which granted him immunity in questioning taboo talking points such as censorship and sex. This use of satire would become consistent throughout his career and would be frequently used to comment on the hollow storytelling that was being produced in Hollywood, not as a means of light-heartedness, but rather contempt for an industry he described as "a formidable publicity machine". He despised the star system and believed actors that perhaps the inclusion of well-established actors in films sacrificed authentic in storytelling in favour of attracting larger audiences to sell the products. Zavattini went on to express his belief that "nobody can avoid the pervasive attractions of advertising". His fascination with everyday people was strong and apparent from as early as his time at La Gazzetta di Parma, where he advocated for additional features on the cultural page such as where one could 'Dite la vostra' (Express Your Opinion) to his radio broadcast conversations at Eiar, the national radio, where he would have direct and intimate chats with listeners, finding out what was developing in their lives. This was especially unusual at the time due to the

[5] Brancaleone, op.cit, p. 37

formality of 1930's culture. He became well known for taking serious issues lightly and bringing validation to the more mundane issues of the everyday man. In other words, he would make the ordinary feel extraordinary, a concept which would later become a key pillar in neorealism. It didn't take long for him to expand on this concept when he transitioned to literary work. However, for Cesare, the role of journalist and writer were so similar that he embarked on both careers simultaneously. His first few novels would continue to focus on the struggles of everyday people, exploring underlying themes such as class conflict, family issues, as well as the relationship between the individual and crowd. For example, in his second book, I Poveri Sono Matti (The Poor are Mad) focuses on lower-middle class employees as they struggle for validation from their boss.[6] In one section of the story, a dream sequence features a funeral for the main character, Bat, where his boss was in attendance. It reveals that all his friends and family follow his boss instead of his hearse, painting a cruel comic critique on society at the time and the influence of class hierarchy. While his early literary work laid the foundations for his fascination with everyday struggles and social critique, his transition to screenwriting introduced complexities that sometimes clashed with his vision for an ethical cinema.

Although Zavattini was steadfast in his vision for an ethical cinema, his early screenwriting often contained contradictions. Cesare broke out onto the screenwriting scene with a distinct and unusual yearning for comic humour. He was a fan of the fast-paced American slapstick cultivated by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and would strongly advocate for this and magic realism in his screenplays. This approached aimed to highlight the absurdities of everyday life in a way that felt organic rather than theatrical. Zavattini had hopes to establish this new subtle comedy built around gags in Italy. However, this comedic ambition arguably stood in contrast to the realism that had defined his previous work. Whereas his previous projects sought to strip away embellishment in favour of an unfiltered depiction of human struggle, this new comedic direction leaned on stylisation and deliberate construction of humorous scenarios. An example of this comes in his 1938 screenplay, Diamo a tutti un cavallo a dondolo (Everyone Should Have a Rocking Horse), where he imagines a worker at a balloon factory attempting to convince his boss that letting his employees have a toy to play with would improve their overall happiness. Instead, whenever a worker stood out of line they would be lifted up with a balloon and sent away to a special room, where they could shout as loud as they could. Zavattini would even go so far as to

[6] Brancaleone, op.cit., p. 51.

write an article in Il terve, in 1936, that Italian films had the potential to make better comic films than anyone else, on the condition that it adopted Zavattini's new ways. Nonetheless, the reoccurring theme throughout his screenplays in the 1930's was the opposition between wealthy and poor, but this time it was mediated and potentially augmented by Zavattini's humour to create a poetic resonance. However, the second and biggest contradiction of Zavattini's was his involvement in white telephone films at the time. These were films that focused primarily on the lavish and magnificent lives of the upper class and their mundane struggles, often seen as a form of escapism from the disease of the working class. This was heavily pushed by the Italy's fascist government in an effort to glorify national pride, traditional family values, and social order[7]. These repressive and narrow-minded ways of thinking were everything Zavattini adamantly opposed, yet this did not stop him from writing the plots and dialogues of no less than one quarter of the films then produced in Italy, with the help of his fellow screenwriters Aldo De Benedetti and Alessandro de Stefani.[8] A prominent white telephone scenario which he was involved in at the time was Darò un milione (I'll Give a Million). This film about a millionaire makes a departure from Zavattini's usual focus on ordinary people and serves as an example of him setting aside his values and anti-fascist beliefs to further his career. He was the artist who advocated for immediate cinema and the abolition of scripts, but spent his days writing screenplays for mainstream cinema.[9] Zavattini would later express open criticism of his decision, raising in his diary at the time "I am what I did not do". Despite working in the industry, his attitude remained strongly anti-fascist, as is clear from the reoccurring themes throughout his screenplays in the 1930's of the class struggles, but this time it was mediated and potentially augmented by Zavattini's humour to create a poetic resonance. Essentially, his sense of humour seemed to be tolerated by the regime, as its dissent remained ambiguous through jokes and cartoons[10], as was the case as his time as a journalist at La Gazzetta di Parma. Zavattini's employment in the industry appeared to come with a serious weight, but it was not for lack of trying that he could not pursue his dream for a more moral and inclusive cinema.

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[7] Del Grico, Fabio, "White Telephone Films,"IndieCinema, https://blog.indiecinema.co/white-telephone-films/, Accessed 14 February 2025.
[8] Brancaleone, David, "Cesare Zavattini's Neorealism and the Afterlife of an Idea: An Intellectual Biography", United States, Bloomsbury, 2021, p.70.
[9] Minghelli, Giuliana, "For a cinema of the Blind and Visionaries; The Forgotten Lessons of Cesare Zavattini", Cineaste, 2022, p. 15.
[10] Ibid, p.16.

The challenges of advocating for ethical filmmaking and the final turning point in Italian Fascist Cinema. Before the war, Zavattini was becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of power he had as a screenwriter. In Darò un milione (I'll Give a Million) he clashed heads with the director, Mario Camerini, over his intention to keep the film realist and avoid stylistic humour. Zavattini believed in his absurdist, minimalist stories, and fought tooth and nail to keep his ideas, such as a staircase becoming a xylophone and the use of cartoon inserts. He perceived taking conventional routes of storytelling too safe and would publicly mock Camerini, implying that he did not have the courage to abandon traditional plot structure, dialogue, and linear narrative. Nonetheless, Zavattini was outnumbered by the other writers as well as creatively paralysed by the producer. Cesare took major issue with the stronghold that producer had on the project, holding all the decision making power within the film industry. He believed that Cinema was uniquely the only art to rely on capital as much as it did, comparing to what he say as the broken Hollywood system which should not be followed. Producers did not consider cinema as an artform and could impose their will freely and with impunity in Zavattini's mind. Thus, ideally the weight of creative and financial control producers had should be upended in order to provide more meaningful, bold, less financially lead work. The grip that fascist censorship had at the time was strong also, and prevented the development of several scripts which Zavattini sought to pursue. In Diamo a tutti un cavallo a dondolo (Everyone Should Have a Rocking Horse), fascist censors accused Zavattini of provoking class conflict and refused to approve the film unless he rewrote the ending so that the employee, Bot, and the worker, Gec, resolving their differences rather than remaining in opposition.[11] Zavattini rejected this ultimatum and as a result the film never made it to production. Censorship was all-encompassing, and a threat to anyone who attempted to shift the government agenda. However, Zavattini's creative control began to steadily increase with his initial collaboration with director Vittorio De Sica in I bambini ci guardano (The Children Are Watching Us) (1942). This film is seen a precursor to neorealism, portraying a lower-middle class Italian family, dealing with uncommon themes such as loss and alienation. This new direction with De Sica, who would become an eduring creative partner was ambitious and endeavoured to reject the traditional family ethos at the time, showing a very unhappy child in the midst of a broken marriage. This idea of a child's gaze being a method of reflection, almost like a silent witness, became a recurring one in Italian Neo-realist films. The Children Are Watching Us transcended the norms of mainstream media and gave an insight into where Italian Cinema and Zavattini's work was heading. To

[11] Brancaleone, op.cit., p. 66-67.

the benefit of the continuation of this work, it would become clear in the autumn of 1943 that Italy had lost the war and the fascist regime and censorship was no more.[12] Italian cinema was in a very uncertain place and Zavattini was ready to lead it into a new era.

[12] Ibid, P. 72

Chapter Two: Zavattini's Poetics of the Everyday: Realism, Aesthetics, and Ethical Cinema.

This chapter explores Zavattini's theories on neorealism, his practical approach to storytelling, and the unexpected level of creative control over his projects as a screenwriter.

The defining principles of neorealism and the misconceptions surrounding its aesthetics are crucial to understanding the movement's impact on cinema. At its core, neorealism is about portraying an unfiltered, objective view of the everyday and uncovering the rich layers of drama that exist within ordinary events. It is rooted in poverty and social criticism, and by nature was grounded in the discovery of contemporary issues. "Why should a filmmaker look for extraordinary adventures when we can find drama in the everyday and marvel in what is generally considered banal?"[13] he told a reporter. Furthermore, the idea was to "to excavate reality, to give it a power, a communication, a series of reflexes, which until recently we had never thought it had"[14] as Zavattini would later write in his infamous article in Some ideas on the cinema. Realism was, above all, a form of honesty and offered a radical shift in the post-war era. Zavattini had tremendous faith in the dramatic weight of everyday scenarios and continued to advocate for focus on poverty, leading to an ethical cinema, or the "conscience of cinema"[15]. Zavattini believed that cinema should not take inspiration free from literature, theatre, and the figurative arts, but should draw from real life.[16] He believed that cinema was created with a moral purpose, serving as a tool of studying the world, that it was a scientific means of offering audiences a new ethical perspective of events and people.[17]. This belief heavily influenced neorealism which thus became, in many ways, a study of the contemporary world and, for Zavattini, a sharp critique of the failings of the past. Zavattini believed there was refusal to engage in self-criticism, particularly regarding the defeat of Fascism and the country's moral bankruptcy. It was hence about confronting the lack of awareness, or even the unwillingness, to address these issues. Zavattini believed this was crucial for understanding and accepting the traumatic impact that the previous twenty years of fascist regime had on the country. Therefore, neorealism grew

[13] Brancaleone, op.cit., p. 88.
[14] Dyer MacCann, Richard, "Film: a montage of theories", New York, E.P. Dutton & Co Inc, 1966. P. 216.
[15] Minghelli, op.cit. p 10.
[16] Brancaleone, op.cit., p. 153.
[17] Ibid, p. 81.

inseparable from its deep connection to post-fascist Italy's history. Now, it was time to ensure that these values were accurately represented on screen. The two filmmakers agreed that if they could, they would pick their actors right from the streets, from the people that they see every day. Their lead would be that young person sitting across from me on the tram, or the woman walking hand in hand with a child.[18] There are several aesthetics associated with neorealist films, including the use of non-actors, on location filming. These were primarily results of the lack of money and resources after the war, however they were not a definite staple of this genre. Casting established actors who had previously performed in white telephone films would have been seen as betrayal to the grounded, realist approach that was being established. Nonetheless, to say that the actors weren't carefully chosen for these films would be wrong. In Sciuscià (1946) (Shoeshine), one of the first Italian neorealist films, De Sica harshly discarded two impoverished boys, which were partial influences for the story, not photogenic enough to be considered for a lead for the film as they were.[19] Moreover, while the Allies turned the looted and empty Cinecittà film studios into a temporary refugee housing after the war, it did not necessarily stop these filmmakers from using smaller setting recreations. Again, the common belief that neorealist films had to be shot on location was debunked in Shoeshine, where all of the indoor scenes were filmed in a makeshift studio.[20] Thus, while this aesthetics of neorealism are valid they are not proven to be as important as the subject of poverty and self-reflection, which is what stuck with Zavattini in his explorations of neorealism.

Zavattini's cinematic exploration of the ordinary world highlights its poetic resonance, revealing the dramatic potential in everyday life. Certainly encouraged by the release of what is now understood to be the first neorealist film, Roma città aperta (Rome open City) (1945), they concentrated on what remained post-war. However, in true Zavattini fashion, he turned his focus to what endured in the ordinary man, the human remains, in opposed to the physical remains of architecture that was explored in a trauerfilme, or 'rubble films'.[21] Zavattini theorised that something as small as "a woman buying a pair of shoes can become a drama if we dig deep enough into her life and the lives of those around her."[22] Cesare was eager to make this new kind of film in the uncertain new beginning of post-fascitst Italian cinema in Shoeshine. This film followed two boys who's professions shared the same name of the film, working for a living, as

[18] Brancaleone, Op.cit., p. 72.
[19] Ibid., p. 85.
[20] Ibid, p. 84.
[21] Ibid., p. 83.
[22] MacCann, Op.cit., P. 216.

De Sica put it, "who are aware that they shouldn't be doing what they are doing for a living"[23]. Zavattini first employed by setting a scandalous juxtaposition of a child protagonist and the external world, portraying wavering confusion, the uncharacteristic inability to act or decide.[24] Zavattini's approach to storytelling, with its stark juxtapositions and observational detail, shares similarities with certain poetic forms, particularly narrative poetry or free verse. Like a poem that captures emotion through fragmented imagery, his mise-en-scène and characters' uncertainty create meaning not through exposition, but through mood and atmosphere. This story, with its slow, lingering depiction of reality, was one of the first to confront honest topics like child labour within a stark, contemporary world. It framed history as it unfolded, carrying a quiet poeticism beneath its rawness. When it came to Bicycle Thieves, Zavattini's empathy for a man enduring seemingly trivial hardship was profound. He argued "If, for example, someone stole Antonio's bicycle, the press, in my opinion, should cover the theft with a headline splashed across four columns".[25] To communicate this effectively, Zavattini used metaphor in his use of a bicycle in this scenario. It is not just a way for Antonio to get around; it represents his dignity, his means of survival, and a glimmer of hope in a post-war world. It becomes a lifeline for him and his family. This symbolism really highlights the film's poetic essence, where even the most ordinary objects carry a deep emotional significance. Another poetic quality of the film is its successful immersion of the viewer in the reality of its setting through natural ambient sound. Sounds like the hum of traffic, distant chatter, and the everyday noise of Rome are foregrounded, grounding the audience in the world of the film. By prioritizing these authentic sounds over artificial music or sound effects, the film reflects the true experience of being in an urban environment. Cesare held a rare position of influence as a screenwriter, a level of creative control normally reserved for directors. Firstly, he was heavily involved in the casting of the film, hand picking the lead role from a series of screen tests. Furthermore, he would strongly advise De Sica on production problems on set daily over the phone. Finally, the screenwriter would attend multiple editing sessions weekly where he would inform the cutting down and delivery of sequences. Zavattini was undeniably an unrecognised co-author of sorts when it came to his collaborations with Vittorio De Sica. Nonetheless, these motion pictures proved that neorealism wasn't strictly bound to the war and its aftermath. Shoeshine may have resonated because of the revolutionary energy that came with Italy's liberation from fascism, but Bicycle Thieves went further, it reinforced and redefined the

[23] Brancaleone, Op.cit., P. 83.
[24] Ibid, Op.cit. P. 86.
[25] Ibid, Op.cit. P. 87.

movement's aesthetic. It proved that neorealism didn't have to lean into hyper-documentary realism or romanticized storytelling to be impactful.[26] It's anti-narrative approach did not take away from the emotional reaction but, if anything, it enhanced it.

The disregard for traditional story in favor of observational storytelling is a key feature of neorealism. Zavattini believed in disregarding plot and the use of the "story", as he saw it as a devise that had been perpetuated in media as a means of escapism to avoid facing harsh realities. He insists that "until we are able to overcome some moral and intellectual laziness, in fact, this reality will continue to appear uninteresting."[27] The discard of story further cemented the viewer in the situation, making them complicit in what was unfolding. It gave them a more active role in the character's struggle, pushing them to engage critically with the events on screen. The audience member is essentially placed in the role of a witness to the unfolding tragedy. This emerging non-linear narrative writing faced strong, but perhaps rational, criticism during the writing of Bicycle Thieves. The other writers considered this type of writing fragile and refused to believe that a film could exist without dramatic tension or usual spectacular elements. After reading the Zavattini's scenario, one of them even remarked, 'This isn't cinema.' They could not believe that the theft of a bicycle could be the cause of so much hassle.[28] It was clear that they did not trust Zavattini's new approach, in which saw each sequence in the film introduce a new situation, follow its own logic and structure, and eventually build up to a larger picture where the character's helplessness unfolds. It was fortunate that De Sica understood what Zavattini had proposed, and was a clear sign of the trust which they had in each other as creative partners. It became clear along this process that their vision for a modernist type of narrative was quickly taking shape. Their success with Shoeshine gave the filmmakers the confidence to push the boundaries of observational filmmaking and to advocate for a more visually led screenplay. This was paired with a reduction in dialogue within scenes. The deliberate intent behind this was to heighten the impact of minimal gestures, shifting the weight of communication from words to the actors' body language.[29] This emphasis on nonverbal expression complemented their evolving use of long shots, which became an aesthetic that increasingly aligned with real time as it matured. This technique peaked in Umberto D. (1952) when Zavattini and De Sica employed the use of

[26] Ibid, Op.cit., p. 94.
[27] Dyer MacCann, Richard, op.cit., p. 217.
[28] Brancaleone, Op.cit.,p. 90.
[29] Ibid, p. 91

"'Shadowing', where the camera would follow the imaginary character through their every action, tracking each movement and never really straying from their point of view. There's an even greater sense that screen time and real time begin to merge, and shots persist much longer than would've been welcomed at the time. Zavattini argued that the point of duration is to create a sense of solidarity with the viewer, not to be confused with melodramatic sentimentality. His documentary, "shadow" like qualities were so attractive to Zavattini that the opening to the film was a long ten minute sequence of following Umberto's housemaid Maria as she woke up and made coffee. While it is revealed that she is pregnant in this sequence by the way she feels her stomach, there is nothing of other significance that happens. This would mark the peak of Zavattini's exploration of anti-narrative in neorealist films, just before the movement began to fade into its final chapter.

The decline of Zavattini's neorealism was driven by shifting cultural and political landscapes,. With De Sica's help, Zavattini had cultivated a powerful, culture-shifting movement, beginning with Shoeshine in 1945 all the way until 1952, when the landscape of Italian cinema was began to shift once again. Umberto D. was the next logical step in Zavattini's evolving cinematic language, and follows a pensioner who is forgotten by society and resorts to begging on the street. This film is, similar to all other neorealist films, innately political and grounded in the struggles and suffering of the working class. Umberto's desperation drives him to see suicide as the only escape from his harsh reality, and echoes the real life tragedy of 500 Italian pensioners who took their lives in 1950. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Umberto was written to attend protests involving other pensions only a couple of months after a similar demonstration of pensioners in real life. However, to the detriment of the film, censorship in Italy was on the rise once more, this time under the influence of the Christian Democrats. One of their Ministers, Giulio Andreotti, was strongly opposed to the continued negative representation of Italy in neorealism and infamously accused De Sica and Zavattini of producing a "cinema that washes its dirty laundry in public."[30] As a result, the distribution and exhibition of Umberto D. was severely impacted. It was clear that he was sending a direct message to neorealist filmmakers to bring the genre to an end. This intimidation worked very well on producers who from then on, were deterred significantly from touching anything that exhibited neorealist qualities.[31] Zavattini's next neorealist venture, Italia Mia, had both producers drop

[30] Brancaleone, Op.cit., p. 125.
[31] Ibid, p. 126.

out, despite having previously assured their commit to the project on several occasions. As a result of this scarcity of willing directors, Roberto Rossellini who was attached to the project to direct, decided to produce it himself.[32] Neorealism faced more and more criticism from Italian film critics from then on. A common criticism of the genre was its narrow focus on poverty, with many arguing that the films failed to offer any meaningful solutions to the issues they depicted. Zavattini's argued why the focus on poverty was being questioned in the first place for any other reason than to want to ignore it. To which he stated, to want to not inform yourself about poverty would be inherently out of fear of the subsequent pressure to interviene. Furthermore, Zavattini argued that cinema was a response to a problem and did not specifically have an obligation to find solutions to it. Other critics would suggest that neorealism failed to be art because of its documentary like aesthetics, which they believed diminished the role of creative expression in filmmaking. Zavattini pushed back at this also, stating that documentary filming can never be a mechanical process. Even if it were possible to capture events as they unfold, it would still demand "choice and a creative act."[33] Faced with "many desertions and much disorientation," along with the backdoor dealings of the film industry, Zavattini saw Italian cinema as hypocritical. In his eyes, it was at risk of betraying its true purpose through compromise, ultimately losing its social impact and effectiveness. Nonetheless, Zavattini was adamant that neorealism continued in some form, given its inherently socialist values, as it explored the relationship between cinema and reality while offering a constant critique of society, rooted in a shared social consciousness. To abandon neorealism, he claimed, would be to surrender to a world that accepts extreme poverty, exploitation, and injustice.[34] Nonetheless, despite the fall of neorealism in this time, he remained committed to his realist ideals and would continue to collaborate with De Sica and other neorealist directors in the future, leaving an enduring mark on Italian cinema.

[32] Ibid, p. 135.
[33] Ibid, p. 152.
[34] Brancaleone, Op.cit.,p. 150-151.

Chapter Three: Zavattini's Legacy: Neorealism's Influence on Global Realist Cinema and Modern Filmmaking.

This chapter is about the final chapter in Zavattini's career and his lasting impact around the globe.

Zavattini's career continued beyond the neorealist movement, cementing a legacy that spanned his lifetime. After the neorealist era came to an end, Zavattini and De Sica's relationship continued. The screenwriter went on to write several mainstream scripts for De Sica that achieved major commercial success, including La Ciociara (1961) (Two Women), which won Sophia Loren an academy award for best actress, Leri, Oggi, Domani (1963) (Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow), and Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini (1970) (The Garden of the Finzi-Continis), which received the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.[35] These works marked a departure from the strict social realism of their earlier collaborations, embracing a more polished, often more commercially viable style. Yet, even as he adapted to the changing cinematic landscape, Zavattini's commitment to exploring the human condition remained a constant thread throughout his work. Curiously, despite his deep creative involvement in his films with De Sica, he confessed to having an inferiority complex about the technique of directing, which had led him to avoid pursuing directing throughout his career up until this point. In a candid reflection on the evolving state of cinema, Zavattini expressed a frustration with the growing dominance of technique over ideas in modern filmmaking, stating "today technique has taken over from ideas. Ideas don't rule anymore; it's technique that rules."[36] This comment underscores his belief that the essence of cinema is its ability to communicate powerful, socially relevant ideas. It would appear that he had become more pessimistic over time with the changing landscape. Nonetheless, he did not give up. In 1982, at the age of eighty, Zavattini directed and starred in his first film, La Veritàaaa (The Truuuuth).[37] In it, he portrays a a mental patient who escapes from a lunatic asylum who is desperate to proclaim his understanding of truth, which stands in stark contrast to everyone else's. The sharp contrast between his firm belief in his truth and the disbelief of everyone else highlights Zavattini's ongoing theme of the individual trying to assert their own version of truth in a world that often shuts it down. Even after a lifetime of realist filmmaking,

[35] "Cesare Zavattini", Britannica.
[36] Ibid, p. 19.
[37] Crowdus, Gary, "Neorealism and Beyond: An Interview with Cesare Zavattini", Cinease, 2022. P. 18.

Zavattini continues his critique of society's tendancy to reject unconventional perspectives, instead shining a light on the complexity of human experience and the subjective nature of truth. Right until the end, Zavattini was fixated on presenting himself and telling the truth, even while acknowledging that "Truth is made of what remains unspoken." His career was both long-lasting and notably successful, with his work laying the groundwork for global explorations of realism in cinema.

Zavattini significantly influenced the narrative and visual style of the Iranian New Wave.. Iranian cinema has had a long history of being a reaction to repression and political aggression, dating back to the 1960's with the Iranian New Wave. Similar to the neorealist films that just came before, these films focus on the ordinary lives of Iranians, weaving political commentary seamlessly into everyday dialogue, visual landscapes, and narrative structures. These films differed from traditional western films and rejected taking inspiration from novels and media in favour of primarily focusing on the real struggle of women and their fight for basic rights. These deeply poetic films unfold at a slow, contemplative pace, rich in symbolism and intellectual depth, creating a rhythm that evokes a sense of "melodious numbness." These films often portrayed a physical and psychological isolation through extended shots filmed within cars, reflecting the harsh loneliness in neorealist films. This technique is later used by Iranian filmmaker and political prisoner Jafar Panahi in his docufiction film Taxi (2015), now a part of the contemporary movement of Iran's cinema of resistance. Panah poses as a taxi driver in the film and collects a diverse range of passengers, mainly women, who express their candid opinions. Banned from making films altogether, uses this setting of a regular taxi with a small dashboard camera, and the seemingly random collection of women to produce this film, at risk of imprisonment and lashings from the Islamist regime. Although appearing as complete documentary, the interviews are mainly staged and the sharp dialogue is scripted. Zavattini's vision of documentary like neorealism sought to challenge dominant narratives by highlighting systemic injustices. These Iranian realist films inherit this ethos, exposing government oppression. Moreover, while Zavattini's battles with censorship were nothing compared to Panahi's state oppression, both were determined to do what they felt was right, no matter the personal cost. Drawing from Zavattini's conscience of cinema, Panahi's films do not speed up life's pace for the sake of excitement or entertainment. Instead, they compel us to look, making it impossible to ignore the reality unfolding before us. The appearance of each character carries a sociopolitical weight, such as the director's young niece, Hana, who has to make a "real" film for a class project while being banned by the

government for showing “sordid realism”. She elaborates that her school is under the jurisdiction of the Islamic Regime’s so called morality police. The use of child characters, such as Hana in *Taxi*, mirrors Zavattini’s technique of presenting social and political issues through innocent, questioning perspectives. This also is reminiscent of the child’s gaze as a means of reflection in neorealist films. However, these films draw upon neorealism stylistically also with the use of non-professional actors, open ended narratives and symbolism, such as a taxi serving as a form of resistance.[38] These approaches to realism in film continues to transcend borders, sharing key similarities with another influential movement that emerged in Britain around this time.

British "kitchen sink" films demonstrate distinct thematic and stylistic connections to Zavattini’s work**.** Between the late 1950s and early 1970s, a wave of films reshaped British cinema, leaving a lasting impact. Often associated with, but not limited to, the British New Wave, these so-called ‘kitchen sink’ dramas emerged, bringing raw, unfiltered portrayals of everyday life to the screen. These films were predominantly focused on the working class and featured protagonists with broad and genuine. They explored raw human stories, and covered topics that were considered taboo at the time such crumbling marriages, the harsh life of unskilled workers, and homelessness. These films often centred on angry young men, frustrated housewives, and angsty teens, set in unglamorous urban locations.[39] This exploration of everyday people, unburdened with the hollow demands of typical mainstream media are evoking the realist movement which Zavattini had started. One of the biggest proponents of this movement was the filmmaker Ken Loach, who, with his writing partner Tony Garnett committed to making features where the audience is moved “to new conclusions and insights about society and our lives”, that were “true” and pertained “a fidelity to the texture of the everyday as an act of political respect and solidarity.” This is exactly in keeping with Zavattini’s ideas on realism in cinema, using film to capture everyday life with honesty, not just as a stylistic choice but as a way of engaging with politics and society. Like Zavattini, Loach in particular saw authenticity as a tool for making audiences confront the realities of working-class life and question the structures that uphold inequality. His early television work Up the Junction (1965) focused on a series of working-class lives, but perhaps most notably on 17-year-old Rube, exposing the harsh reality of backstreet abortions. It strongly mirrors reflects Zavattini’s

[38] Khosravi, op.cit, 2023.
[39] Mitchell, op.cit., 2016.

messaging in Shoeshine, highlighting a world where vulnerable children are unfairly thrust into circumstances they should never have to face. The piece was filmed in an documentary style and was one of Loach's 10 entries into the BBC's Wednesday Play strand.[40] He would affirm that his films were "not made for people who are politically sophisticated, but for ordinary working people." And also that "One reason we have done much of our work for television is that we can reach a large, working-class audience." Loach was successful in attracting the masses to share his realist work, with over twelve million viewers tuning in whenever his work was on the air. This television episode had significant and cultural impact with the creation of The Abortion Act two years later and the founding of homeless charity Crisis which were both influenced by Loach's TV dramas. Loach also advocated for less spectacular form of storytelling and shared Zavattini's disregard for American cinema, stating "the American audience is not interested in unsensational, quiet films that ask them to draw general conclusions from the nuances of English working class life."[41] Loach would carry these ideals throughout his extensive career, often reflecting similar overlaps with Zavattini's beliefs over time. In 2016, Ken Loach would direct one of the most critically acclaimed films of his career, I, Daniel, Blake. This film about an ill 59-year-old carpenter seeking employment and support allowance echoes the societal hardships and loneliness seen in Umberto D. The two portray everyday people battling an uncaring system, focusing on the emotional and social impact of poverty with a raw, realist approach. Zavattini's ideas remained vibrant and enduring, perhaps even in a stronger position than he had originally hoped for the future of realism.

Zavattini's had a clear and distinct vision for the future of realism in cinema. Cesare envisioned a cinema not burdened by financial constraints, one where the director had the freedom and resources to make any film that truly reflected their creative desires. He imagined an alternative version of cinema, where the cine-camera is accessible to all and dirt cheap. He believed celluloid could be "as affordable as a packet of sea salt from the neighbouring store". In his quest to democratize cinema, Cesare also proposed a national initiative to distribute still cameras in schools, giving children the power to observe, document, and critically engage with the world through images. In the 1960's, he advocated for a similar distribution of film cameras to students and workers. Unfortunately, due to technological constraints and lack of

[40] Quart, Leonard, "FIDELITY TO THE REAL: An Interview with Ken Loach and Tony Garnett", Cinéaste, Vol. 10, No. 4,1980, p. 26.
[41] Ibid, p. 29.

funding, Zavattini's ideas remained unrealised. While his vision may have seemed idealistic at the time, it now appears ahead of its era. The concepts of the diary format, Flash Films, and a participatory culture where creators and consumers are often one and the same, have largely come to life today, in our tech-driven, gadget-rich world of instant communication through platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. However, it is consumer technology, rather than revolution or education, that has brought us to this 21st century version of cinema created by and for everyone. Zavattini believed there is an infinite amount of stories left to tell, pointing to the daily newspaper as a form of inspiration; "The paper that comes out at 11 O' clock is a treasure trove of stories". He strongly believed that everyone has at least one story that they could tell cinematically, asserting "There's no shortage of ideas". Zavattini sustained his belief that by filming real people and real situations, viewers can develop a deeper appreciation for themselves, gaining a stronger sense of their own worth and self-awareness. Shadowing plays a crucial role here, as by focusing on people who aren't typically seen as different, it fosters solidarity, highlighting a sense of connection in a society where that connection is often absent.[42] To further reflect his commitment to authenticity, Zavattini proposed the abolition of screenplays altogether in favour of filming candidly on the street. He argued that filmmakers should "narrate reality as if it were a story, instead of inventing a story that is similar to reality." In his view, screenwriters should focus on the technical side, but the act of writing a scenario and screenplay should never be disconnected from the process of directing the film.[43] Despite his advocacy for a more direct and participatory form of filmmaking, Zavattini continued to value cinema's power, encouraging future filmmakers to always have something meaningful to say. While he recognized the limitations of film, Zavattini acknowledged it was not the right medium to express every thought. He explained "It's no longer merely a cinematic problem but a larger one of truth, of context. I no longer presume, as do so many filmmakers, that film can solve all problems". Zavattini also expressed that cinema is a very slow medium of conveying ideas and ethical debates, and suggested a preference for the quicker exchange of these issues through direct questions and answers.[44] Throughout his career, Zavattini remained a champion of an ethical, democratised cinema and thus had been one of the most successful and respected figures in Italian culture under the fascist regime, his commitment to discovering and understanding reality never wavering: "We don't have reality in our

[42] Bancaleone, Op. Cit, p. 147.
[43] Ibid, p. 148.
[44] Crowdus, Op.cit., p. 20.

grasp. One must always discover it. I will always be who I am and I will always try to understand what I see."

Conclusion

Cesare Zavattini's influence on contemporary realist cinema is both profound and enduring. His vision of a cinema that prioritises lived experience over spectacle, that challenges dominant narratives rather than reinforcing them, and that places ethical responsibility at its core, continues to shape filmmakers across the world. His ideas were radical in their time and, in many ways, remain radical today. He saw film not merely as a medium for storytelling but as a powerful tool for social change, one capable of fostering a deeper engagement with reality itself. In a world where cinema is often dictated by market forces and driven by formulaic narratives, Zavattini's belief in the political and artistic potential of the everyday still stands as a challenge to filmmakers to push beyond convention and embrace the raw complexities of real life.

What makes Zavattini's legacy so compelling is the way in which his ideas have transcended their historical moment. While Italian neorealism was deeply rooted in the socio-political landscape of post-war Italy, its principles have found resonance in vastly different contexts. From the Iranian New Wave to British kitchen sink dramas, from Ken Loach's unflinching social realism to Jafar Panahi's defiant cinematic resistance, the impact of Zavattini's realist ethos is undeniable. These filmmakers may not have consciously set out to follow in Zavattini's footsteps, yet their work embodies his core principles: an unvarnished portrayal of everyday struggles, a commitment to social critique, and an insistence on cinema's role in bearing witness to reality.

Zavattini's belief that film should move beyond artificial narratives and instead immerse itself in the lives of ordinary people was groundbreaking in its time, and in many ways, it remains an unfulfilled vision. Contemporary mainstream cinema, with its reliance on high-concept plots and neatly resolved story arcs, still resists the very things Zavattini championed—uncertainty, ambiguity, and the unembellished rhythms of real life. Yet, in the margins of the industry, there are those who continue his work, filmmakers who embrace long takes, non-professional actors, and fragmented, open-ended narratives as a way of presenting the world with honesty. The persistence of these techniques in independent cinema, in documentary hybrid forms, and even in new digital spaces suggests that Zavattini's call for a "cinema of truth" remains as relevant as ever.

His dream of a truly democratic cinema—a medium accessible to all, unconstrained by financial and institutional barriers—has, to some extent, been realised through technological advancements. The rise of

digital filmmaking, the affordability of high-quality cameras, and the reach of online platforms have allowed for a more participatory form of storytelling, one in which people who were once excluded from filmmaking can now document their realities and share them with the world. In many ways, Zavattini's vision of a cinema that is as commonplace as writing a diary has come to fruition, though not necessarily in the way he imagined. Rather than film becoming a collective instrument of truth, it has splintered into countless individual perspectives, with platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok offering glimpses into everyday lives from around the globe. While this represents a form of democratisation, it also raises questions about authenticity, curation, and the commercialisation of personal storytelling.

Zavattini's ideas about realism were not simply about representation—they were about ethics, about how filmmakers engage with their subjects and how audiences engage with what they see. He resisted the idea that realism was just an aesthetic choice; for him, it was a moral imperative. This is where his influence remains most vital. As debates about representation, exploitation, and authenticity continue in contemporary cinema, Zavattini's insistence on the filmmaker's responsibility to truth serves as a crucial reference point. His emphasis on portraying reality without manipulation—without the intrusion of excessive stylisation or narrative distortion—reminds us of the power that film holds in shaping perceptions of the world.

At the same time, Zavattini was not naïve about cinema's limitations. He recognised that film could not solve all problems, nor could it fully capture reality in its purest form. He was acutely aware of the tensions between documentary and fiction, between constructed narratives and direct observation. His later work, particularly La Veritàaaa, reflects this growing awareness of subjectivity, of the way in which truth is always contested, always filtered through personal experience. This acknowledgment makes his work all the more valuable in today's landscape, where the boundaries between reality and fiction, between journalism and storytelling, have become increasingly blurred.

Ultimately, Zavattini's legacy is one of persistent questioning. He refused to accept cinema as a passive medium, one that simply reflected the world as it was presented to it. Instead, he saw it as an active force, one that could challenge, provoke, and inspire. He asked filmmakers to look closer, to see beyond the surface, and to find meaning in the ordinary. He asked audiences to engage with cinema not just as entertainment but as a means of understanding, of confronting the realities that are often ignored or obscured. In this way, his influence is not just about the films that have followed in his wake, but about the very way we think about cinema itself.

As contemporary filmmakers continue to grapple with issues of representation, authenticity, and social responsibility, Zavattini's ideas remain a guiding light. His belief in cinema's potential to bridge the gap between art and life, between image and reality, continues to challenge the conventions of the industry. And while his dream of an entirely democratic, truthful cinema may never be fully realised, the spirit of his work endures. His vision was never about easy answers, it was about the act of looking, the insistence on seeing the world as it is, and the understanding that, through film, we might come a little closer to grasping the complexity of human existence.

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