

## The Risk of Ambiguity

### Reconsidering Zavattini's Film Ethics

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Italian critic, theorist, and filmmaker Cesare Zavattini is perhaps best known for synthesizing the aims of neo-realism and for championing its everyday aesthetic. This notion of the everyday is for Zavattini a profoundly ethical notion that constitutes the heart of his theses on cinema. His *Thesis on Neo-Realism* (1952) reads like a manifesto not just for neo-realism, but more broadly for an ethical mode of filmmaking. In examining how Zavattini construes his notion of film ethics, I will discuss some of the major tenets as well as the problems in his articulation. Indeed, Zavattini posits two distinct and contradictory notions of ethics, one that draws heavily from phenomenological traditions and methods, and one that has more overtly political and allegorical intentions. These distinctions can be seen in his writing, but are made especially explicit in one of his major efforts as a filmmaker: the short reenactment documentary *Love of a Mother* (1953). The film reveals Zavattini's resistance and ambivalence towards his own phenomenological tendencies on account of the communicative risks and ethical ambiguities that this subtler aesthetic implies.

Zavattini's film ethics must first be understood in terms of an ethics of seeing or of

perception. In the first paragraph of his *Thesis*, Zavattini discusses the common misperception of the everyday as a banal and unworthy site of attention, cinematic or otherwise.

There is no doubt that our first, and most superficial, relation to daily existence is boredom. Reality seems deprived of all interest as long as we cannot succeed in surmounting and overcoming our moral and intellectual sloth. It is, therefore, not surprising that the cinema has always felt the “natural” and practically inevitable necessity of inserting a story into reality in order to make it thrilling and spectacular [...] Yet, in fact, we are now aware that reality is enormously rich. We simply had to learn how to look at it.<sup>1</sup>

According to Zavattini, our relationship to the quotidian is marred by a passive mode of perception that flattens our full comprehension and appreciation of it. This notion bears close resemblance to the concerns of phenomenology and its methods. In one respect, phenomenology is oriented by a desire to unmoor and loosen conventional and habitual ways of perceiving the world. For Merleau-Ponty, for example, the fundamental phenomenological objective is to overcome the *natural attitude* towards things, our tendency to see the world through a congealed veil of clichés.<sup>2</sup> As Vivian Sobchack puts it, “the radical reflection of phenomenology attempts to *reanimate* the taken-for-granted and the institutionally sedimented.”<sup>3</sup> The boredom that Zavattini sees in our relation to daily reality represents one example of sedimented, taken-for-granted perception. For phenomenologists, then, the everyday is an important site of attention and investigation because it is the site most subject to habitual modes of perception and thus in most need of re-animation.

For Zavattini, however, cinema complicates the problem of habitual perception. The majority of narrative cinema, as he sees it, reinforces these negative tendencies through the excision of the everyday and the insertion of artificial spectacle, further deepening our prejudice against the everyday. As a way of marking the difference between Hollywood and neo-realism, Zavattini gives the example of an American producer who describes the differences between an Italian neorealist film and a typical Hollywood film: “In America, the scene of a plane passing over is shown in this sequence: a plane passes, machine-gun fire opens, the plane falls. In Italy: a plane passes, it passes again, and then again.”<sup>4</sup> This brief description exemplifies Zavattini’s concern with conventional narrative cinema and offers a good example of his own filmic aims. In the American example, the plane’s passing (a routine, relatively banal event) is artificially broken up and punctuated by gunfire and the plane’s subsequent crash. The shooting down of the plane privileges the spectacular action happening *to* the plane and ignores the reality of the plane itself. By having the plane shot down, the film treats the plane merely as a vehicle for narrative action, a means for the creation of dramatic spectacle. For Zavattini, this familiar narrative sequence only reinforces our dependency on ‘artificial’ spectacle and disables our capacity to see the world outside of this conventional schema: to see the plane on its own terms.

The proper task of cinema, for Zavattini, should not be to reinforce these weak, clichéd modes of perception, as Hollywood does, but should work to loosen these tendencies by re-focusing our attention to the habitually elided regions of reality. As he argues, this requires the almost Nietzschean task of *overcoming* – to transcend “our moral and intellectual sloth.”<sup>5</sup> Cinema must abandon “trick photography, process shots, the infinite subterfuges so dear to Méliès” for it no longer needs them; it can locate and tease out spectacle within the most basic environment.<sup>6</sup> This overcoming of our habitually entrenched perceptions

must come not through the lazy action of cutting the “boring” scenes out of the frame, but rather, the challenge is to expose and unearth the spectacle already present *within* the seemingly banal. Commenting on the American producer’s remark, Zavattini exclaims: “It is not enough to have the plane pass by three times; it must pass by twenty times.”<sup>7</sup> Cinema must not just turn towards the seemingly banal, but it must *stay* there. In staying with the phenomenon for longer, more deliberate time, the phenomenon has “all the potential of being reborn.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, in a method similar to that of phenomenological *thick description*, Zavattini suggests that a more deliberate, temporally drawn-out cinematic treatment of banal objects will create new associations and enliven those objects. In the American example of the plane being shot down, for example, the plane retains a common military association: the plane as a mechanism and object of war. If the plane were to pass twenty times in front of the lens, however, the plane would slowly begin to shed those typical, rigid associations. Perhaps anticipating the time-experiments of Andy Warhol, the repetition of the passing plane invites a much more subtle perception of the plane, opening up possible meditations on movement, rhythm, modernity or on time itself. Whatever the associations, the objective here is to visually resuscitate phenomena that have become weighed down and deadened with clichés.

This ‘ethics of seeing’ of course recalls André Bazin’s famous description of cinema’s capacity to re-vivify perception: to strip the “object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it.”<sup>9</sup> For Bazin, a writer whose reading of Zavattini I am greatly indebted to, one of the best examples of this phenomenological treatment is the oft-described ‘maid sequence’ in De Sica and Zavattini’s<sup>10</sup> *Umberto D* (1952). In this brief, unspoken scene, the ethics of this approach are made most apparent. The scene occurs midway through the film, where for a few minutes, the film presents the silent activities of one of the film’s minor characters, Umberto D’s maid. In the scene, Maria slowly and deliberately performs the mundane tasks of her job: ridding the ants from wall, cleaning the kitchen, grinding the coffee. Under the sensitive eye of De Sica, what would perhaps normally be excised is instead brought to the foreground for the viewer to contemplate and inspect in what feels like real-time.

From the point of view of *Umberto D*’s broader narrative, the scene seems to stand outside the rest of the film. It does not move the plot forward or contain any narratively pragmatic function. The maid appears, performs her activities, and just as subtly as she entered, she recedes and the scene folds back into the rest of the film. Bazin describes the maid as “the invisible subject,” referring to the fact that the maid’s actions are dissolved once the action of her sequence is over. “(T)he subject exists before the working scenario, but it does not exist afterward. Only the “fact” exists which the subject had itself forecast.”<sup>11</sup> There is a ghostly, ephemeral aspect to the scene, not only in the trance-like character of her actions, but in the scene’s function within the film, as it manifests subtly but suddenly, gently dissolving into the rest of the film without any causal links. Her presence, therefore, holds meaning only for the instant that she appears and does not come into the service of another link in the plot or grand narrative meaning. In this way, there is an extra-diegetic, existential aspect to her appearance. In an expression borrowed from Dudley Andrew, the maid appears “lifted” out of the frame of the film;<sup>12</sup> she is meaningful only as a temporary trace, a brief and mysterious flash in continuum of the film. Similar to the example of the passing plane, the scene does not invite us to consider her as merely one event in a series of continuous narrative events. Rather, the scene treats the maid in an autonomous, singular manner, indexing her enigmatic sorrow and emotional weight and allowing her to exist in a space not entirely bound by the narrative limits of film.

For Bazin, it is precisely this effort to represent a character beyond both narrative function and political allegory that makes it an ethical treatment. In lauding neo-realist aesthetics, Bazin suggests that their strength lies in their sensitive, phenomenological treatment of profilmic reality:

[The recent Italian film] all reject the implicitly or explicitly, with humor, satire or poetry, the reality they are using, but they know better, no matter how clear the stand taken, than to treat this reality as a medium or a means to an end [...] They never forget that the world *is*, quite simply, before it is something to be condemned.”<sup>13</sup>

Bazin argues that while the reality the Italians were filming was often ugly and unjust, they did not simply denounce and reject reality *in toto* by resorting to crude political allegory. While Bazin acknowledges the obvious political motivation of the neo-realists, he observes that this political intent is muted or restrained in their film treatments. The filmmakers may have justifiably rejected the reality they faced in the post-war landscape, however, their representations did not engage in a simple process of political allegory. They did not use the reality before them as a means to an end, a vehicle for expressing a political position. For example, the maid in the film does not simply become a blunt symbol of Italian social reality, standing as an example of poor social services or the class struggle. This is precisely the ethical terrain for Bazin, as the tendency to allegorize necessarily does violence to the profilmic reality by over-inscribing it with an overt, and very often didactic message. The rejection of that reality, if there is to be one, must follow, and be secondary to, a detailed *encounter* with profilmic reality, so as to preserve the ambiguities and mysteries embedded in the phenomenal world. The richness of the maid scene, as Bazin argues, is precisely its asymptotic properties, the fact that as viewers, we are never fully able to apprehend the images in a definitive way with a fixed meaning or association. Rather, there is something enigmatic about her gestures that index a generalized melancholia beyond our full scope. Gilles Deleuze perhaps best captures the depth of this enigmatic quality in his reading of the film’s final moment: “And her eyes meet her pregnant woman’s belly, and it is as though all the misery in the world were going to be born.”<sup>14</sup>

If the scene from *Umberto D* embodies the more phenomenological aspects of Zavattini’s film ethics, then his short film, *Love of a Mother*, displays his competing tendency toward allegory and determinate political meaning. In 1953, roughly the same time as Zavattini’s thesis was published,<sup>15</sup> the omnibus film project *Love in the City* was produced, assembling several well-known Italian directors in order to produce a series of short films drawn from the newspaper headlines of the day. Constructed as a visual “magazine,” each vignette intended to highlight a particular event in city-life drawn from the “anonymous pages of the newspaper.” The film employed the services of non-actors to reenact events from their daily life as a means of bringing a more humane approach to the cold daily headlines. Zavattini’s film, *Love of a Mother*, concerns Caterina Rigoglioso, a woman who abandons her child because of the burden of poverty and unemployment, only to seek him out again after enduring the pain of loss and remorse. In the narrated preamble we learn that Caterina has “consented to re-live her hours of agony before our cameras, step by step.”

In a strange parallel to the maid scene, *Love of a Mother* is meticulous in its careful re-tracing of the banal events that precede her climactic decision; we see her looking for a job, waiting at the welfare office, pacing through the city, and finally, waiting with her child in a field before slowly taking her leave of him. Unlike the maid scene with its subtle rendering, the protagonist in *Love of a Mother* produces none of the rich ambiguities experienced in

*Umberto D.* Rather than a provocative and undulating sense of empathy and detachment, *Love of Mother* strikes us as immediately cold. Caterina proceeds through her actions with a stiff awkwardness that bespeaks of her discomfort with her 'performance.' The film conveys the content of the original headline event, but lacks intrigue or suspense and instead feels artificial and staged. The repeated references by the voice-over to the fact that this is a "real woman" and a "real story" seem to overcompensate for the wooden quality of Caterina's performance. As David Overbey reminds us, Zavattini had so vilified the role of the "star" that he had in turn neglected the performative requirements of the medium. Citing *Umberto D* as example, Overbey stresses that it was not the fact that Umberto was, in *reality*, an aging professor that lent authenticity and sensitivity to his role but was rather his performance *as* Umberto that did so – "The professor was very effective in the convincing *performance* he gave, but not because "he was the character."<sup>16</sup> The premise, for Zavattini, is that a legitimate character (with a real name) "liberates" the screen from the artifice of acting, no doubt by virtue of their intimate *proximity* to the character.<sup>17</sup> What Zavattini overlooks is the fact that the illusion of "non-acting" is ultimately an effect of style and technique and not that of "absolute reality." What is ultimately responsible for conveying the truth of the character is not the person or personality him or herself, but the presentation – the visual rendering - of that character on the screen.

What lends authenticity to Caterina's performance, ironically, is not the performance itself but the viewer's prior knowledge of her as a real woman plucked from the pages of the day's news headlines. The film cannot convey this 'authenticity' (between event and reenactment, actor and character) through the quality of the acting alone, and instead relies upon the supplementary index of devices such as the film's opening narration - "this is a real girl." If the film *does* have an emotional appeal, it lies in the empathy the viewer feels for Caterina, however, it is an empathy that anticipates her performance. From the moment Caterina appears onscreen she bears the assigned mark of both negligent mother and economic victim. She is thus already inscribed in an allegorical structure before she even begins to reenact the event. If the film is compelling, it is because of our anterior knowledge of the woman and our attempt to reconcile the woman who has been described to us and the woman who we see onscreen. We do not watch on account of Caterina's particular performance - what we actually see onscreen in front of us -but because of what we *might* see or might discover, based upon what we have been foretold. Therefore, it is the narrator's introduction and coding of Caterina that holds our gaze and not Caterina's performance on its own. In employing a 'real' person and thus in trying to move away from allegory and abstraction, Zavattini has introduced them at a different level. Since the woman's performance alone does not arouse any sense of immediacy or direct contact, as Zavattini desires, the viewer must seek *beyond* the woman herself - to her status as a real person - to find sympathy and meaning. It is thus the inverse of what Zavattini feared for in the representation of the actor, where our extra-diegetic knowledge of the actor would sever us from the reality onscreen. In this case, the unconvincing and heavy-handed performance forces us outside of the story, to our knowledge of her as a "real living person."

The film fails, therefore, precisely because of its over-arching focus on message at the expense of phenomenal content. As Ivone Margulies argues, as an exercise in reenactment, the film aims to produce a reflective meditation on the part of the subject themselves, a conscious coming-to-terms with the reasons and conditions of the event – filmic psychoanalysis.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, the reenactment orients to an audience as moral *exemplum* with an overtly prescriptive function - "The screened life provides a corrective mirror or a model for social action."<sup>19</sup> In a piece describing the difference

between example and exemplum, April Alliston argues that “the text’s status as exemplum takes precedence over its status as representation [...] the text asks to be read as an example capable of generating real action through imitation, rather than as an imitation of real action.”<sup>20</sup> Caterina’s methodical re-tracing is not intended merely to induce a contemplative reflection of the event by the viewer, but indeed aims to produce *social action*: watching the film should discourage child abandonment and promote family unity. The film concludes, after all, with Caterina and her son happily re-united in the orphanage, confirming the moral victory of the film. The film thus not only figures Caterina as symptom of certain negative social structures (the failure of the welfare state) but adds a second aspect of social instruction. The film’s rigid moral agenda, in other words, is transparently on display, inviting the viewer either to accept or reject the film’s proposition.

As a result of the film’s tightly governed moral framework, the film slips into the territory of cliché. Ironically, the last sequence of the film, with its over-emphatic happy ending, seems to echo the worst of Hollywood cinema and its moral manipulations. As a result, the rich phenomenological freeplay intended by the example of the plane sequence and actualized in the maid scene are closed off in the film. Within this moral tale, the everyday has again congealed into a fixed, indexical meaning; the subtle, banal gestures that Caterina performs do not open up new associations of the phenomenal world but point soberly in a single and decidedly un-ambiguous direction.

How do we read these contradictions within the broad spectrum of Zavattini’s work? How do we reconcile his phenomenological tendencies with his rigidly allegorical ones? Rather than seeing *Love of a Mother* simply as an aberrant failure or departure from his writing, I believe the latter film exhibits the precariousness at the heart of Zavattini’s film ethics. Toward the end of his *Thesis*, Zavattini makes an interesting, if unintended, admission. In describing how a director might properly capture the ambiguous, world-in-flux before the lens, Zavattini, using himself as example, acknowledges the problem of *will*:

I must constantly pull myself to a halt with both hands so as to refuse my imagination entrance into my work. I have enough imagination in the traditional sense of the word to sell and resell, but neo-realism requires us to allow our imagination to exercise itself only *in loco* and through reality, for the situations increase their natural imaginative force when they are studied in depth.<sup>21</sup>

What is interesting here is that the obstacles that Zavattini points to are not, perhaps strangely, external phenomena. In trying to achieve an “in depth” study, the obstacle he mentions is not tied to the mechanics of film practice, such as working with actors or forging a script. Rather, the principle obstacle for his method lies at the level of his own personal will: a conflict between intention and restraint. For Zavattini, there seems to be a split tendency between the desire to apply his “imagination” to the reality before him, to inscribe an argument, to build an allegorical tale, and the desire to hold back, restrain and allow things to happen “on the spot,” through a spontaneous “encounter.”<sup>22</sup> In the plane or maid sequence, we witness this restraint and yielding of the director before the profilmic reality: what Bazin describes as letting the world *be* before condemning it. In the latter case of *Love of a Mother*, it is Zavattini’s over-reaching and unrestrained imagination, his tendency to over-code and to inscribe the film with his own argument that predominates. Why this contradiction? It appears that the difficulty of the phenomenological instinct is that it leads to ephemeral, enigmatic treatments; it risks merely passing before the viewer’s eye and disappearing without marked effect. In other words, it risks being socially ineffectual. With

moral allegory, at least, the political message and social intentions are clear if not didactic and over-stated. Zavattini's film, therefore, is representative not simply of a flat-out failure, but perhaps a fear on his part of losing the message within the delicately restrained approach of the maid scene. It seems that in *Love of Mother*, it is Zavattini's more pragmatic, communicative desires that triumph over his desire for subtlety, ambiguity and a more humanist film ethic.

## Notes

1 Zavattini, Cesare. "A Thesis on Neo-realism." *Springtime in Italy: A Reader On Neo-Realism*. Ed. and Trans. David Overbey. London: Talisman Books, 1978, p.67.

2 In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the aims of his method in terms of a break with our "familiar acceptance" of the world in order to begin to grasp the world as "strange and paradoxical." Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 2002, p. xv.

3 Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye*. Princeton New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992, p.28.

4 Zavattini, p.70.

5 Ibid, p. 67.

6 Zavattini, Cesare. *Sequences From a Cinematic Life*. Trans. William Weaver. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1970, p. 2.

7 Zavattini, Cesare. "A Thesis on Neo-realism." *Springtime in Italy: A Reader On Neo-Realism*. Ed. and Trans. David Overbey. London: Talisman Books, 1978, p.70.

8 Ibid, p.71.

9 Bazin, André. *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*. Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California P, 1967, p.15.

10 Zavattini was the screenwriter of the film while De Sica directed.

11 Bazin, André. *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*. Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California P, 1971, p. 77.

12 Andrew, Dudley. *André Bazin*. New York: Colombia UP, 1978, p. 114.

13 Bazin, André. *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*. Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California P, 1971, p. 21.

14 Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Athlone Press, 1989, p.1-2.

15 The essay is actually made up of three articles by Zavattini: "Alcune idee sul cinema," *Revista del cinema italiano*, December, 1952; "Tesi sul neorealismo", *Emilia*, 21 November,

1953; "*Il neorealismo secondo me*". Congress of Parma on Neo-Realism, December 3, 4, 5, 1953, and later printed in *Rivista del cinema italiano*, 3, March 1954. Overbey, David. *Springtime in Italy: a reader on neorealism*. Ed. and Trans. David Overbey. London: Talisman Books, 1978, p.67.

16 Overbey, David. *Springtime in Italy: a reader on neorealism*. Ed. and Trans. David Overbey. London: Talisman Books, 1978, p.13.

17 Zavattini, Cesare. "A Thesis on Neo-realism." *Springtime in Italy: A Reader On Neo-Realism*. Ed. and Trans. David Overbey. London: Talisman Books, 1978, p. 73.

18 Margulies, Ivone. "Exemplary Bodies: Reenactment in Love in the City, Sons, and Close Up." *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*. Ed. Ivone Margulies. Durham: Duke UP, 2002.

19 Ibid, p. 217.

20 Alliston, April. "Female Sexuality and the Referent of Enlightenment Realisms." *Spectacles of Realism: Gender, Body, Genre*. Ed. Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 13-14.

21 Zavattini, Cesare. "A Thesis on Neo-realism." *Springtime in Italy: A Reader On Neo-Realism*. Ed. and Trans. David Overbey. London: Talisman Books, 1978, p.76-77.

22 Ibid, p.70.