

‘Theses on Neo-realism’ (1953)¹

Context

In his introduction to ‘Theses on Neo-realism’, Muzii reflected further about the question of realism, in the light of his exchanges with Zavattini. Muzii now suggested that the text he titles ‘Theses on Neo-realism’ could foster a debate among Italian filmmakers, functioning as a position paper, which is exactly how it reads. Indeed, ‘Theses on Neo-realism’ is a bold statement, a rallying cry in defence of Neo-realism, and a call for unity among Italian filmmakers, in what was, for Zavattini, a crucial period of experimentation and development.

‘Theses on Neo-realism’ draws a distinction between historic Neo-realism and Neo-realism understood as a banner for a movement, active in a collective struggle for socially engaged cinema, and, by doing so, rescuing Neo-realism from the contingencies of the immediate post-war period. The theorist claims not only that it expressed ‘a new attitude towards reality’, but also that it is a needs-based cinema.

Its publication was very timely: only a month before an important conference on Neo-realism which Zavattini was involved in organizing and at a time when he had taken his ideas and applied them to two projects which made it into production and release, in both cases, the ‘flash film’ about Caterina Rigoglioso, the single mother, which became an episode of *Love in the City*, and *We Women*, also non-fiction, and revolving around the idea of developing the personal camera or what Zavattini referred to as the ‘diary film’, or even the ‘confession film’.

Zavattini’s response is a robust rebuttal, almost point by point, to Muzii’s initial polemic, which was part of a burgeoning attempt by Italian orthodox communists, which meant that they were Stalinists, at the time – Zavattini was a communist – but not a Stalinist or a card-carrying party member – to change the direction of committed Italian New Cinema.

Since the second half of this text was translated into English by Overbey, it has been deemed necessary to include a critical apparatus, from that point on.

¹ Zavattini, ‘Tesi sul neorealismo’, *Emilia*, no. 17, November 1953, in *Neorealismo ecc.*, 114–19.

Text

Two preliminary observations:

1. Today, Neo-realism is our only flag. If we move away from the critical scope of this term, we risk a communication breakdown among us. Neo-realism is the foundation of the single, vital, movement that exists in Italian cinema. Therefore, any serious and thorough discussion should take place *within* Neo-realism itself. There can be many approaches inside Neo-realism, but unity is the outcome of a common front of struggle and inspiration and social awareness.
2. Neo-realism is not a historical movement – in the sense that it draws on grand ideals rooted in Italian nationhood – it emerged from a new attitude towards reality. Therefore, it would be erroneous to believe that the existence of a movement of this nature is to be identified with a transient episode of social upheaval which characterized the post-war period. It would be wrong to dispense with it with a few words: 'We've had enough of Neo-realism; the situation in Italy has gone back to normal.' It was precisely as a result of the reflections induced by the war that we made the discovery that, on the contrary, life has not gone back to normal and that the rule of our society cannot be *normal*² life – but what would be considered the *exception*: from extreme poverty to injustice in their manifestations, blatant or yet to be exposed.

It follows that we should seek to establish precisely where Neo-realism stands in respect of the discovery of *current affairs*. Previously, the cinema was based on the scenario which issued from the imagination and was entirely oblivious of events that were not inspired by a novel. As far as the cinema was concerned, only major events existed. But the war led us to discover the ongoing values of everyday life. 'This is the reality of war', we said, when we came into contact with the realities of devastation, and became pacifists in our outlook.

The first Neo-realist films opened up a problematic which dealt with large-scale human issues, films that would never have been made, had it not been for the relation between time-based, contingent facts (historical, social or political) and the interest in timelessness which had matured in us.³ The connection with the best of historical tradition – the *Risorgimento* element of our outlook – reflected our

² The italics in this text are Zavattini's emphasis, unsurprising in the context of a polemic and a programmatic rebuttal.

³ Zavattini is drawing the distinction between the particular and the general, pointing out that the general, universal, overarching themes were tackled by Neo-realism through contingent events, thus dispelling the myth of Neo-realism equating with an anecdotal kind of cinema, dwelling in detail, for the sake of detail alone; the driving force being adopting an ethical stance towards reality, stretching to a political outlook, in the broad sense of turning public attention towards the social sphere.

entirely human and *antirhetorical* concern, determinedly and polemically pitted against the hypocrisy and tyranny of fascism. The other connection was due to the contact between Neo-realism and the reality it had discovered – especially hunger, extreme poverty and exploitation by the rich. As a consequence, it was *naturally* socialist. (I really cannot take seriously those who are reactionary and Neo-realist. For they forget that Neo-realism coincides with the population's extreme needs.) I am certainly in no position to say how it will develop, because I can't know how our society is going to develop. However, Neo-realism will continue to narrate these developments ceaselessly, because Neo-realism is as attached to the present as sweat is connected with the skin. It never delays becoming acquainted with a contemporary event and this, I believe, is its ethics and its style.

Let's be clear about this. Neo-realism cannot proceed from predetermined content, but rather is dictated by an ethical stance: getting to know one's times with the aid of specific cinematic means. Our shared preoccupation is seeking to know what is going on around us. It is far from a banality to say that, for many, the truth is of no concern or, at least, that they have no interest in making it known. For coming to know translates into taking steps.⁴ This is why the Right, to a greater or lesser extent, obstructs any intelligence of the masses' vitally important problems. For how many years has the problem of the *Granili* in Naples been put off?⁵ It's just an example. The point of contact between the Left and Christianity is not hope but the urgency, emergency and responsibility which are ignored by every single procrastination, as in the case of the *Granili*, in which the process of coming to know knows no boundaries.

I can agree to be shown how to make *banderillas*, provided the whole manufacturing process is explained to me, including the human and social relations it involves. This is the only way for an investigative approach not to turn into something monotonous. In connection with such a research-based method, I am surprised that I need to explain that it encompasses all creative potential. If, for example, a poet of the *Decadentismo* School is describing a bottle, most of the emphasis will be on the light reflections in the glass, at the expense of other elements which are significant, from a human and social point

⁴ *Conoscere per provvedere*. Field research as the first, vital stage towards change, placing an ethical onus on those who come to know.

⁵ The reference is to the housing emergency in Naples in the 1950s, of which the 'Granili' was a prime example. The 'III and IV Granili' was a huge rat-infested, stinking, building – a former military barracks during the Bourbons' rule, a hospital, an arsenal, hundreds of metres in length. After the Second World War, it became a refuge of sorts for displaced persons or evacuees. In the early 1950s, it was still populated by homeless DPS, or 'displaced persons'. Cf. Zavattini, *Diario cinematografico*, '19 November 1953', *Cinema Nuovo* no. 24, 1 December 1953, then in *Diario cinematografico*, in *Zavattini Opere. Cinema*, 2002, 171–80. Zavattini mentions the recently published book about Naples by Anna Maria Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, Turin: Einaudi, 1953, in which a woman tells Ortese, who was visiting, 'This is no home, madam, as you can see, this is where the oppressed live. Wherever you go, the walls wail' (*Questa non è una casa, signora, vedete, questo è un luogo di afflitti. Dove passate, i muri si lamentano*).

of view.⁶ So, to give you an example, a worker has no choice; he must blow glass day in day out, to make that bottle, and thousands of bottles like it, and, at forty years of age, his lungs will be shot, just to point out the most important fact.

But knowing is not enough. Artists need to look at the real through cohabitation with it. The need for cohabitation may arise from ancestral experiences; yet, what matters most, for writers like us, who write scenarios and screenplays, and for directors, is to establish meaningful relations with other people, and with the real – so meaningful as to create new relations of artistic production, something which does not only have an impact on our art but also on our lives, to the point that it generates a deeper quality of shared living among people. Few have the patience to observe and to listen. Yet, all you need to change a relationship is a gesture or a word.

I don't like the man sitting opposite me in the, otherwise empty, compartment. Then he says: 'Can I open the window?' and everything changes. The fact is that the more you deepen your awareness of reality, the more you *analyse* people and situations, the more the relations of coexistence become apparent, and the more the focus of attention is the commonality of purpose. To put this differently, the work in hand serves to free ourselves from abstractions.⁷

In the novel,⁸ the protagonists were heroes; the hero's shoe⁹ was no ordinary shoe. In stark contrast, we are trying to identify what our characters have in common. It takes the same human labour and the same materials to make my shoe, his shoe, the wealthy person's and the worker's shoe. (Neo-realism always constitutes a process of non-differentiation, seeking to make the association between common rights and fundamental needs.¹⁰ And, in this respect, it expresses a sentiment of love towards life. Moreover, it seems to me that its anti-war protest is deeper and more natural, less 'political', than that of the Germans, of the French, let alone of the British. Perhaps the Italian quality of Neo-realism lies in this.)¹¹

⁶ The reference is to *Decadentismo*, the Italian expression of a European literary movement inspired by the French poet Paul Verlaine. The movement's epigons in Italy were Giovanni Pascoli and Antonio Fogazzaro.

⁷ In this and many other passages, Zavattini reveals his materialist approach which is neither utopian nor idealist.

⁸ Zavattini, 'A Thesis on Neo-realism', translated by David Overbey, in Overbey, *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-realism*, 70–1. Overbey78, 70: 'a novel'. But Zavattini is referring to the novel in the sense of the Italian nineteenth-century literary form which Muzii, Aristarco and orthodox Stalinist-communists considered a model of cinematic practice. 'A Thesis'. There is no foundation for the singular. It is a mistranslation, since the Italian refers to the theses, *le tesi*.

⁹ Overbey78, 70: 'shoes'. The use of the singular in Italian is deliberate, as it becomes a symbol containing an allusion to storytelling.

¹⁰ Overbey78, 70 skips the next paragraph, the first part of which, about needs and common rights, is central to Zavattini's argument, from: 'Neo-realism always constitutes ... lies in this'.

¹¹ Overbey translated about 360 words from Zavattini's 'Tesi sul neorealismo', from: 'We must extricate ourselves from abstractions ... as they exist today.' Only errors or interpolations are listed below.

Let us now turn to the *modus operandi*.¹² How to express the specific nature of reality before us through cinema?¹³ Here too,¹⁴ I wish to restate that the content one seeks to express has a way of always discovering its own technique.¹⁵ Then we also need to consider the role of the imagination,¹⁶ provided it is applied to reality and not to somewhere in Limbo.¹⁷

Let me elaborate. I wouldn't want to create the impression that, as far as I'm concerned, the only events which count are those covered by current affairs.¹⁸ I have endeavoured to fix my attention on these kinds of events too, with a view to reconstructing them as faithfully as possible, and using the imagination balanced with an extensive knowledge¹⁹ of the event in question. I think²⁰ it would make even more sense²¹ to film them at the very moment they are taking place. This is what I would like to do with *Italia mia*.²²

Let's be clear once and for all. How can anyone possibly believe that I am talking in terms of mechanical photography?²³ However astonishing this might sound, the fact is that it is impossible to capture reality automatically. If it were possible to do so, then mankind would be so full of grace that there would be no need for art any longer, since human beings would be entirely engrossed in their lives. Consequently, every single relation with the object one wishes to communicate implies a choice, which coincides with the subject's creative

¹² Overbey78, 70: 'style'. But from what Zavattini goes on to say, style is interchangeable with technique.

¹³ Overbey78, 70: 'this reality (truth)'. As in his translation of 'Some Ideas on the Cinema', reality is systematically replaced with 'truth'. However, in this instance, both are given. Once again, Zavattini, as a materialist, is not thinking of the general, but of the particular: 'this' specific, and tangible, reality, knowable through my five senses.

¹⁴ Overbey78, 70: 'what I have often said'. But N79: '*anche qui*' ('here too').

¹⁵ Overbey78, 70: 'expression'. But N79: '*tecnica*'.

¹⁶ Overbey78, 70: 'Imagination, therefore, is allowed'; N79: '*c'è l'immaginazione*' (lit. 'there is the imagination').

¹⁷ Overbey78, 70: 'on the periphery'. But 'periphery' is misleading for Zavattini's choice of word, 'Limbo', which is the Christian no-man's land where unbaptized babies were once believed to reside after death. Zavattini's analogy refers to a timeless, spaceless, ultimately, abstract dimension. Whereas, the 'periphery' only changes the spatial location to somewhere distant. He could equally have said 'outer space', the meaning would have been the same. But the use of religious analogies (Christ, Limbo, the humble for the subaltern, etc.) is a deliberate ploy. Zavattini himself was an atheist.

¹⁸ Overbey78, 70: 'news items'.

¹⁹ Overbey78, 70: 'perfect understanding'. N79: '*profonda conoscenza del fatto*' ('in-depth knowledge of the event'). To call it a 'perfect' understanding is somewhat twisting the sense. Understanding, however 'profound', does not equate with 'perfect' understanding.

²⁰ Overbey78, 70: 'obviously'; N79: '*credo*' ('I believe').

²¹ Overbey78, 70: 'more coherent'. Calque for 'consistent'. Consistent with the theory expounded, not coherent. N79: '*coerenza sarebbe*' (lit. 'the consistent thing to do').

²² Overbey78, 70: 'my film on Italy'; N79: '*Italia mia*'. Zavattini names the title of the proposed film.

²³ Overbey78 omits this important distinction, dispelling the very idea that he believes the camera can capture reality automatically or purely mechanically. From '*intendiamoci ... nella vita*'. It is also an unambiguous statement that distances Zavattini from notions of 'naïve realism', mistakenly attributed to him, and to Neo-realism, by generations of film historians.

act.²⁴ But in our case the intimate relation between subject and object is entirely consummated in filming in the street, instead of merely making contact there and then going on to film in the studio. This is what I call a *cinema of encounter*.

Adopting such a working method should lead to two results.

1. From an ethical point of view, filmmakers would *go outside*, leaving the studio to get in touch with reality, dispensing with any mediation.²⁵ Doubtless, there will be filmmakers who only go as far as the first, or the second, or even the third stage in this process. However, in putting this into practice, by being in the thick of life, filmmakers will be *lying in wait* for the golden stag, that is, for a social reality which can inspire their creativity. Each person will elaborate on reality in a unique way. But we can be certain of two things: that the search will take place outside the office and that we will have added an ethical constant to the camera eye.²⁶
2. This is how a new production system can come into existence, breaking out of the boundaries of the existing moral matrix, bringing into existence a novel collective awareness.²⁷ It is also a question of numbers. If we make one hundred films a year which are inspired by such criteria, we will change the relations of production.²⁸ Whereas, if we only make three a year, we will continue to be subjected to existing relations of production.

If I have been expressing these concepts in a vehement way – concepts express without the precision of a theorist, that is to say, of a systematic thinker, expressed as they are by someone who is doing his best to understand the root causes of what Italian filmmakers have done and what they are able to do – it

²⁴ Overbey78: 'it should never be forgotten'. N79: '.'. This makes no sense, replacing a colon (indicating explication), as it does. Overbey's interpolation serves to make a link with the next concept. Overbey thus drops the premiss of the argument in this case. Yet this passage is important, for it conveys Zavattini's realism which is both critical and participative.

²⁵ Overbey78: omits the resto of point 1 and all of point 2. From N79: '*Qualcuno si fermerà ... macchina da presa*' replacing all this text with: 'Therefore'. But his previous sentence began with 'first'. It doesn't follow.

²⁶ N79: '*l'occhio della macchina da presa*' (lit.: 'the camera's eye'). A reference and response to Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Glaz* or *Camera-Eye*. In the 1930s, he had seen Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Cf. Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Berkeley, New York and London: University of California, 1984. Zavattini doesn't develop the point. However, the argument for doing so is implicit, creating a distinction between Vertov's City Symphony-type *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), as opposed to an analytical 'cinema of encounter' which goes beyond the mechanical dimension of filmmaking, to establish relations between subject and object, empathy, cohabitation and a patience of getting to know the Other in a specific, concrete context of a real-world situation, whether directly witnessed or recreated.

²⁷ Overbey78: 'we will create a system of production which will bring with it the freshness of collective awareness.' N79: '*una produzione che esce dalla stessa matrice morale del nostro tempo, recando la novità di una coscienza collettiva*.' The ethics have been omitted, thus crippling the scope of Zavattini's conclusion.

²⁸ Overbey78: '*conditions of production*'. But N79: '*rapporti di produzione*', a technical Marxist phrase, relating to the wielding of power and decision-making, as the whole second point makes very clear.

is because I sometimes get the impression that the whole point of what Neo-realism has taught us could be lost, to the extent that what I see as the prevailing influence is that of those who endeavoured to make Neo-realism appear like a mirage, or a dead body.²⁹

We must recognize the fact that there have been many desertions, some taking place even now, and also that there has been a great deal of disorientation. This has led to films which don't spring forth from consciousness, but from the wheeling and dealing of the film industry, which sometimes coincides with advantageous social contributions, whenever the industrial environment perceives 'a tangible gain', if you catch my drift. Those who plan ahead are few and far between. Yet anyone who is active in the film industry should follow a plan, not because I think that different people should act in the same way, but because I think it would give each artist the confidence in the critical awareness, in the decisive, and immediate, power of the cinematic medium. Paradoxically, you could say that any filmmaker who has a programme – a direction – already operates within a Neo-realist framework. Regrettably, even some of those directors to whom Italian cinema owes so much have, in light of their later development, allowed the suspicion to insinuate itself that they had been Neo-realists without even realizing it beforehand – that is to say, that they had never consciously followed a plan of action. This is how they handed their enemies implicit proof to support their denigratory thesis; and namely, that Neo-realism only lasted the length of a morning, or even worse.

Setting aside my polemical tone – at times a paradox can be more effective than subtle reasoning, as a tool to effect radical change – what I meant was that there is, and always was, only one alternative: either a new cinematography is going to develop out of Neo-realism, taken to its extreme consequences, or the other type of cinema will prevail, the one all of us are resisting, or that is, at least, what we say they are doing. Nor do I state this with only the artist's best interests in mind. Together, we must prevent the public from growing accustomed to the cinema's hypocrisy and from becoming socially ineffective.³⁰

Fortunately, despite attempts to shelve it, Neo-realism has bequeathed on us a narrative technique which is implicit in the events that it brought onto the big screen. Indeed, Neo-realism has begun to bring to prominence the sort of heroes who used to be ignored or misrepresented. Ordinary people have been the protagonists of our best films, but nobody ever wondered why that was. It was simply generally taken for granted. But now we have been forced to compromise.

²⁹ The references are to accusations of advocating a utopian cinema or statements relegating Neo-realism to the immediate post-war period.

³⁰ Overbey78 omits the whole paragraph, N79: 'Se ho affermato ... costretti al compromesso'.

As to style in a strict sense of the word, it seems to me that *analytical* narrative is what typifies Neo-realism,³¹ in opposition to bourgeois synthesis.³² I am referring to an analytical practice in which the human factor is a constant feature (and feel free to draw your own conclusions). But no one can escape our current responsibility, or at least, it would prove increasingly hard to do so. Synthesis within bourgeois cinema was the tastiest morsel, the best cut of the steak.³³ By this analogy, I meant to say that filmmakers selected the choicest aspects of life, the most representative aspects within a situation of privilege and well-being.³⁴

It is also necessary to critically analyse the contribution³⁵ of Neo-realism – and this is something that is just beginning – in truth, with the growing participation of Italian culture. Nor could it be otherwise, given the increasing involvement of professional authors within the film industry.³⁶ As to the nature of this collaboration, writers should not limit themselves to supplying novels for the screen, but should contribute to the language of cinema, which is as full of potential as the language of literature. Their collaboration is bound to result in a vast improvement of the cinema, with the proviso that writers take less of a short-term approach³⁷ than they tend to adopt.³⁸ They should consider that

³¹ This is a rebuttal of the imputation of *bozzettismo*, sketchy, patronizing populism, levelled by Muzii whose accusation is contradicted by the analytical nature of Neo-realism, which is contingent. What Zavattini is stating is that synthesis, advocated by Muzii and the Italian Lukácsians, is, by comparison, bourgeois, not oppositional to the system. Overbey78: 'this principle of analysis'. The interpolated 'this' refers not to the previous paragraph, as the reader might suppose, but artificially links the argument to a paragraph about critical analysis in 'Some Ideas on the Cinema'. Cf. Zavattini (Overbey), 'A Thesis on Neo-realism', *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-realism*, 71. But Overbey then cuts the sentence immediately following, N79: '*analiticità ... attuale responsabilità*'.

³² The distinction drawn by Zavattini is between Neo-realism, understood as materialist critical realism, as opposed to bourgeois idealist realism. Emphasis in italics in Italian.

³³ Overbey78 omits the middle of the sentence, N79: '*il boccone migliore, il cuore del filetto*' (lit. 'the tastiest mouthful, the best cut of the steak').

³⁴ Overbey78: 'directors', but N79: '*cineasti*' means filmmakers. The Italian for director has always been '*regista*'. Zavattini is accusing the film industry, not just directors, thus screenwriters, directors and producers who form the film production cycle.

³⁵ Overbey78: 'the range'. 'Range' conveys a neutral value (Wide range? Narrow range?). Whereas, N79: '*portata*' (li. 'range') signifies aesthetic importance, overall contribution (from a critical perspective).

³⁶ Overbey78 misunderstands the whole sentence: Zavattini does not say: 'To understand critically the range of Neo-realism, one must stress the role played by Italian culture.' Rather, Zavattini is pointing out that, first, a critical evaluation of Neo-realism is necessary; second, that it is underway; third, that Italian culture is participating; and fourth, that it could not be otherwise, given the growing professionalization of screenwriting, with the influx and contribution of professional authors who work in both areas (the cinema industry, literature and journalism).

³⁷ Overbey78: 'tentative'; N79: 'provvisorio'. Zavattini's point is about contingency and short term.

³⁸ Overbey78 omits N79: '*Pensino che come ... sono vari*'. Overbey's omission cuts out the original context for the text which was primarily a direct and critical response to Enzo Muzii's 'Realismo adulto'. Zavattini goes on to discuss the nature of the next stage in the development of Neo-realism, reportage and the contemporary moment, effectively a proposal for mainstream documentary features and essay-based films.

the word has no limits and that there are no limits to linguistic style. Equally, there are no limits to the cinematic image and its styles either. Lamentably, by the time the debate over Neo-realism will have come to full maturity in all its critical aspects, we will discover a chasm, an enormous valley of tears, between our theoretical frameworks and our production.

If we reflect on our need for truth, on the urgency in us to see all the things which were never shown to us before, the cinema will appear to us as the fatal medium, providential as far as our urgent need for the *contemporary*³⁹ is concerned. For the cinema is the only medium capable of grasping the object exactly how you wanted to, since the space between intuition and production⁴⁰ is *minimal*. The cinema can convey the nuances of words in a more immediate and convincing way. Should there be a competition, timed to the second, the cinema would come first. However, the cinematic lens can do even more: when a person's image is projected onto a screen before a public, it can reveal the scope of that person's humanity far more than how it is expressed by the person in normal circumstances. And, if it is true to say that art consists in man's efforts towards self-knowledge, then let us flood Italy with *awareness films*.⁴¹

I have reviewed the variety of *approaches*⁴² the Neo-realist front has adopted. You must not believe, Muzii, that I reject outright a cinematic novel in the sense that you have described in *Emilia*. My point is that while you regard it as the *only*⁴³ form to which Neo-realism should aspire, I consider it *one* of the forms. The relation between the past and the present – in other words – the correlation with tradition, which you speak of, can indeed exist; rather, it should exist, even in its other configurations, such as the *investigative film*, in which reconstructions of contemporary events made with authentic characters, taken from real life, hinge on authors' archaeological talent.⁴⁴ However, even if we accepted your point of view *without reservations*, all the current expressions of Neo-realism cannot be considered other than an indispensable, preliminary basis – an experimental laboratory – for the subject matter that would find its application in a cinematic version of the novel you have proposed.

Furthermore, it is worth adding that of course the results vary in quality. Some of my films fit into the Neo-realist order of being, others don't. In this respect, you wish to know about *Stazione Termini* [1953] (*Indiscretion*

³⁹ N79: '*attualità*'. Emphasis in italics in Italian.

⁴⁰ N79: '*realizzazione*'; '*il minimo*', emphasis in italics in Italian.

⁴¹ N79: '*lotta per ... identificarsi*'. 'Self-knowledge' in the sense of 'individuation', though Zavattini was not familiar with C. G. Jung's theories, thus 'self-knowledge'. N79: '*film di conoscenza*'. By '*conoscenza*' Zavattini does not mean a collection of facts, of information. The context is not knowledge in general, but cognition, apprehension, insight, awareness. There is a sense in which Zavattini's call was answered independently twenty years later by Roberto Rossellini in films like *Augustine of Hippo* or *Socrates*. Rossellini attempted to impart knowledge, while remaining within the limits of traditional didactic documentaries.

⁴² N79: '*modi*' emphasis in italics in Italian.

⁴³ N79: '*sola ... una*', emphasis in italics in Italian.

⁴⁴ N79: '*scavo*', lit. 'excavation', an archaeological metaphor, applied to current affairs and succinctly arguing that investigative filmmaking requires, of necessity, the filmmaker to deal with the past. Emphasis in italics in Italian.

of an American Wife) and other recent works of mine. All I can say is that I don't consider *Stazione Termini*, as far as my contribution as a film writer is concerned, a document belonging to my Neo-realist career, in so far as the Italian-American co-production significantly watered down⁴⁵ whatever Neo-realist seed⁴⁶ it contained, namely the scrutiny of a very limited time frame and space. *Umberto D*⁴⁷ does belong, but only partly, to the extent that it seeks to study a very modest contemporary character. My next film, *Italia mia*, is a closer approximation to the Neo-realist programme, as I see it. It arises from the need to get to know our nation and from the absolute faith that *encounters* worth narrating are going to happen (worthwhile opportunities will increase the more the quality of perception increases, at a national and an individual level).⁴⁸ *Luzzara-Venezia*,⁴⁹ the scenario [Luigi] Zampa is going to film on the Po river and which will be interpreted by my fellow villagers from Luzzara, falls within the Neo-realist order of things, but only as a point of departure I read it to his friends from Bologna, together with some other material. Aspects of Neo-realism can be discerned in the main concept behind *Love in the City* and the Caterina Rigoglioso episode, which was intended as a genuine investigative film. Equally, *We Women*, despite the gross oversimplification the project suffered during production, belongs to the same Neo-realist impulse, if only for its profound ethical core⁵⁰ exhibited in the need for dialogue, stated by women who are also actresses and who place themselves in the hands of the spectators.⁵¹ Faced with these confessions, the audience should be in a position to become aware of its own inferiority complex in respect of the actor-myth.⁵²

⁴⁵ Overbey78: 'reduced to practically nothing'. But N79: '*ha molto annacquato*'.

⁴⁶ Overbey78: 'the basic and original inspiration'. But N79: '*quel qualche germe neorealistico*'. Overbey chooses to ignore the specific context of Neo-realism which the whole passage is about.

⁴⁷ N79: '*Umberto D ... di oggi*'. Inexplicably, Overbey 78 also deletes this specific and very important reference.

⁴⁸ N79: '*la bontà delle occasioni ... nazionale e umana*'. Last part of the sentence omitted in Overbey78. Overbey78 interpolates: 'my need to know and understand my own country thoroughly, and my absolute confidence in the adventures and encounters I would meet'. Zavattini's point, though, is far subtler; the filmmaker's personal growth affects the ability to perceive, and is ongoing. This is the idea that the physical and geographical journey, right across the country, is also a personal journey of growth. An important point, surely, testifying to Zavattini's reflective diary film poetic, at the core of *Italia mia*, such that personal diary and fact-based research are combined.

⁴⁹ N79: '*Luzzara-Venezia, il soggetto che Zampa ... nell'ordine neorealistico*' ('Luzzara-Venezia ... other stuff'). Omitted by Overbey78.

⁵⁰ N79: '*un profondo senso morale*' is mistranslated by Overbey78 as 'a certain moral idea'.

⁵¹ N79: '*si insegnano nelle mani del pubblico*.' Overbey78: 'which inspires actors and their confessions to the audience.' This wrongly anticipates the 'confessions' of the following sentence. In this sentence, Zavattini conveys a sense of vulnerability shown by the actresses who are willing to show themselves for what they are as human beings.

⁵² N79: '*il mito-attore*'. Overbey78: 'the mythic idea of the 'star''. Zavattini would have used the word 'star', current usage in Italian at the time, had he wished to do so.

On this point, it is worth saying that there is no room for the *high priest-style actor* in the struggle against *spectacle* and *scenario make believe*.⁵³ As I have said before, an actor should be a real person, such as Tonio, the man who puts his job on hold, for the time being, in order to face the camera, before going back to work. However, for as long as the cinema costs millions, or rather, billions, these are pipe dreams. Yet let us not forget that this condition, of being partly, in the Neo-realist order in one respect, but not *totally* (is a natural outcome dictated by an inevitable logic) is the proof of the *ambiguity* of all our film production and indeed of our society too. You can see all these aspects in any one film: its courage, its cowardice, its social preoccupations, its censorship, its self-censorship, in brief, all its *compromises*.

There has been much criticism of the type of film I have called *investigative film*. Someone said it was ‘monstrous’ to make Caterina Rigoglioso repeat her deed. Well, it is precisely this kind of resentful reaction, this accusation of monstrosity that reveals the fear of looking carefully at every aspect of the truth, and the tension in many people about making such disclosures, albeit with circumspection.⁵⁴

In future, realism will find other forms, but in the meantime, its purpose is *to know*, even if this requires cruel methods, to enable society to take positive action. Let us put an unemployed person in front of the camera and then watch the public for five minutes, while it looks at that image projected onto the screen. This is not allowed. They shout: ‘Cut!’ to ensure that the images flow, that the general public’s knowledge remains superficial, and ensure that the truth is not investigated. I am suggesting an unemployed person, but I could be proposing anything which requires an urgent intervention and for which the duration of our attention is always less than the necessity to really get to know it.

This is the reason why my ethical commitment is completely directed at actuality, even if I carry the past within me. For I believe that to make an activity effective, one needs to circumscribe it, just like a surgeon carrying out an operation. The fact that such a categorical imperative of the *contemporary* is not far-reaching damages the development of Neo-realism.

I have been criticized on the grounds that my preoccupation with the *particular* is excessive and risks distorting reality. I would like to point out that my work is not motivated by a search for the *particular*, but rather by an intense polemic against the *general*, in the sense that it has been understood up until now.⁵⁵ It could well be that this is because I have lived through an era – and take my share of responsibility as its accomplice – in which everything was dictated by autarchy. Consequently, nowadays, if I am to carry out my work, I need to be

⁵³ N79: ‘*A questo proposito ... costantemente tutto*’. Overby78 omits several paragraphs. The first sentence omitted follows on to explicate and theorize the Neo-realist critique of the actor-myth. Italics for emphasis in Italian.

⁵⁴ This consideration should be read in light of 1950s mores and outlooks.

⁵⁵ The statement clears up a recurring misunderstanding about Zavattini’s Neo-realist outlook and its materialist foundation, squarely anti-idealist, anti-Crocean. (Benedetto Croce [1866–1952] was an Italian idealist philosopher.)

attuned to the *anti-hierarchy* of situations and I refuse to see everything in terms of lighting effects. I look at small events and find everything in them. If I were to proceed by making broad generalizations, I would never become familiar with the lives of real people and with the deeper meaning of each of their actions. Let's get to know ourselves in our everyday actions, for this is how we can contribute to the defence of humanity. Should my investigation, observation and analysis lead to nothing more than a *sketch*,⁵⁶ then it means that I have been superficial, or that the act of making compromises – due to pressure from the producer and the public, or due to bad conscience or to financial circumstances – has prevailed. Everyday events appear small, if our vision is restricted. Just as a poet doesn't wait for inspiration, Neo-realism doesn't wait for deadlines; it shadows reality, which is everything all the time.

I have been working in Italian cinema since 1934 and I know full well that I have contributed to breaking down some of its clichés.⁵⁷ If I can count myself among the few who believe Neo-realism is the most powerful appeal⁵⁸ which exists today to turn our attention towards the real world, it is certainly not for any lack of imagination. I have too much imagination, in the traditional sense of the word. On the contrary, for me it is a struggle not to be carried away by my imagination. The fact of the matter is that Neo-realism demands that we apply our imagination to *the street* and to the *contemporary moment*, to the reality we are striving to understand, because social facts reveal all their natural imaginative power, when they are subjected to a thorough scrutiny. Only then do they become spectacle, because only then do they become revelations.

⁵⁶ This is the point at which Zavattini deals with Muzzii's accusation of *bozzettismo*.

⁵⁷ N79: '*schemi usati*', Overbey78: 'usual and traditional schemes'. Zavattini is referring to clichés.

⁵⁸ N79: '*neorealismo come nel più potente richiamo alle cose*.' Overbey78 mistranslates as: 'neo-realism is one of the most powerful forces to which we can address ourselves'. There are two errors: first, 'one of' is not the same as 'the most', introducing a distributive term, where there is, unequivocally, a superlative. Second, it is Neo-realism itself which Zavattini equates with 'a call' ('*un richiamo*') for a radical change, another '*rottura*' or 'break' for Zavattini. This is what Michel Foucault would have described as an 'epistemological break' and Alfred Kuhn, before him, 'a paradigm shift'. In stating that Neo-realism is one of the most powerful forces to which we can address ourselves, Overbey, not Zavattini, completely misreads a crucial passage and the closing reflection of the essay.