



DAVID BRANCALEONE

Cesare Zavattini's
Neo-realism *and the*
Afterlife of an Idea
An Intellectual Biography

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Introduction

Cesare Zavattini is well known as the author of famous screenplays for major post-war classics, recognized as milestones of cinema history, namely, *Sciusià*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan* and *Umberto D.* Less generally known is the fact that he was also, during a life that spanned most of the twentieth century, a driving force of Italian Modernism in the Milan of the 1930s, a public intellectual, a theorist, a painter, a tireless lobbyist and organizer for change within the film industry, a campaigner against colonialism and for peace, who, jointly with the documentarist Joris Ivens, was awarded the 1955 Lenin Peace Prize by Moscow (at the height of the Cold War), a man of letters, and a poet.

This biography is for anyone interested in cinema and its histories, who may or may not be a specialist in the field. Everything is spelt out. The biography assumes that the general reader, the student and the film historian, all have one thing in common: they share the same curiosity about cinema and its fate, and Cesare Zavattini's life's work tries to change that fate, a testament to ethical and political cinema. The bias towards his contribution to Italian, European and World Cinema is in keeping with the Bloomsbury Academic film studies publishing series, where this *Intellectual Biography* and its companion, two-volume *Selected Writings*, are situated.

It was only in 2006 that the first scholarly biography was published in Italian.¹ After his death in 1989, an exhibition in honour of his life achievement was held at the Centre Georges Pompidou, from 5 December to 7 March 1991. A similar retrospective exhibition, *Cesare Zavattini: una vita in Mostra*, took place in Italy, from 21 May to 27 June 1997, containing informative essays on his many achievements in different fields of activity.² In 2006, Orio Caldiron, the author of a very informative anthology of Zavattini's scenarios, asked this question: 'How many Zavattinis are there?'³

Stefania Parigi answered Caldiron's question, by demonstrating how the filmmaker, the short story writer and master of humour, the theorist and pioneer of cinema, and the painter all coexisted in the same person, in a number of intriguing ways.⁴ It might come as a surprise, for example, to know that some of his gags in the Neo-realist *Miracle in Milan* were originally jokes, written as early as 1927, several years before Zavattini became a screenwriter in the early 1930s.

In Italy, his literary comic streak is still mistaken for Surrealism, but, as in this telling example, it is closer to a nonsense tradition of writing, with a peculiar, Italian genealogy, partly rooted in the popular tradition of *scemenze* (illogical statements, literally, the thoughts of an idiot), partly in Aldo

Palazzeschi's Florentine Futurism, partly in Massimo Bontempelli's whimsical realism, but also in Laurence Sterne's wit. The outcome, Zavattini's minimalist prose, with undercurrents of gentle irony, sometimes spilling over into satire, is quintessentially Modernist. His short stories or advocate of visual culture in Italy? *Raccontini*, as he called them, were collected in three books in the 1930s and early 1940s, which provide a different model to the kind of literature in vogue, during the years of Fascist dictatorship. They were a runaway success on publication, sold out immediately, and went into several reprints. His first book came out ten years before Elio Vittorini's anthology of American literature in translation, *Americana* (1941), which was later credited for its vibrant influence in renewing Italian prose, after the war.

To dwell for a moment on Caldiron's question, 'How many Zavattinis are there?', in addition to the screenwriter, one must acknowledge the film theorist, the desk editor, the film editor, unofficially working in the cutting room, the editorial director; indeed, the publisher who knew how to turn an ailing publication into a whopping bestseller. Someone who understood what dizzy layouts could do for a magazine, when they broke out of the typographic grid with photographs, or what could be achieved through judicious commissioning of illustrations from major artists and designers of the day, such as Saul Steinberg, Bruno Munari or one of the Rationalist architects from the *Domus* circle. The person who knew how to launch a successful campaign and cajole his authors and artists, not to mention his publisher, was the very same acclaimed author of literary texts. And, in 1939, Zavattini became a painter who exhibited his work in public and won prizes. This man, who spent hours, even days, at the moviola, was also the campaigner for socially engaged cinema; not to mention a tireless campaigner for world peace, which involved endless phone calls, meetings, letters, discussions and organizing. What about Zavattini the cinematic ethnographer? What about the advocate for Outsider art in Italy? What about Zavattini the pioneer and advocate of visual culture in Italy? This *Intellectual Biography* has always kept in mind the various areas of his endeavours, while concentrating on Zavattini the filmmaker.

Inevitably, to write about Zavattini has also entailed taking on the vast historiography concerning cinematic Neo-realism, to establish how the movement or non-movement, depending on points of view, has been 'framed', bearing in mind all the questions along the way.⁵ As Judith Butler explains:

To call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. Something exceeds the frame that *troubles* our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.⁶

Trinh T. Minh-ha asks this question: What is left out of the frame? In relation to Zavattini, the fact of the matter is that most of his activities have been ignored, which has inevitably affected the way he has been 'framed'.⁷

Consequently, this *Intellectual Biography* seeks to tease out some, if not all, of these Zavattinis, as different as their pursuits, or as parts of a composite, complex, character, all feeding into a contribution towards disparate fields and various spaces of public intervention. Francesco Casetti rightly wonders in timely fashion about *il cinema a venire*, the cinema to come. Yet, we also need to reassess the cinema that has been, *il cinema che è stato*, in this expanded sense suggested earlier.⁸ Henri Lefèbvre or Michel de Certeau, cited by Casetti, can also be used, not in a literal sense of pondering over new physical and virtual cinematic spaces, but to explore existing cinematic space, understood in Lefèbvre's and de Certeau's ethnographic sense, of space of Self and Other, taken as the space within and without the frame, both equally cinematic spaces, a crucial area of Zavattini's contribution to film theory and practice.

Much of Zavattini's thought travels outside the existing cinematic frame or across different media. Take the colossal Reggio Emilia Zavattini Archive. Zavattini doubled up as a competent archivist of his life work. He collected and stored everything, even hotel telephone messages on slips of paper, visiting cards, all his notes, even lowly press cuttings, and scribbles on the back of an envelope. Almost all this material, comprising his private archive, still exists, and, thanks to his eldest son, Arturo Zavattini, was made available to the author in its entirety. The thousands and thousands of letters from and to Zavattini complement the entire collection of scenarios, treatments and film paperwork, adding to vast expanses of box files tracing his journeys, his conferences, what I would call his interventions which are the organizing principle underlying both this biography and the two, separately published anthologies, contained in the companion, two-volume, publication, *Zavattini, Selected Writings*, which were produced alongside it.⁹ Since this biography builds on the research, translations and interpretation of these selections and ordering of texts – each preceded by an extensive critical and contextual frame of reference – here is some further detail about the *Selected Writings*. Volume One provides a substantial anthology of scenarios, incorporating Caldiron's selection, but adding to it, where deemed necessary, encompassing the full arc of Zavattini's enterprise, from the 1930s until the 1980s. Volume Two translates the core texts published in *Neorealismo ecc.* (1979), which is the only published anthology of Zavattini's writings, interviews and conference papers concerning Neo-realism, and includes many additions to that central corpus, and namely, a significant selection of Zavattini's pre-war literary prose, as well as other texts deemed useful to the reader, in terms of the filmmaker's critical interventions in the public sphere. Editorial choice and organization followed consultation with, and advice from, that anthology's editor, the late Mino Argentieri.

The main reason for publishing the two anthologies of Zavattini's writings is that because English is the modern *lingua franca*, it is necessary to close the gap between Italian scholarship, which provides a student, a researcher or a general reader with a significant library of published texts, and scholarship abroad. Working on a biography alongside editing and translating a large selection of Zavattini's writings has brought the author much closer to the

driving preoccupations of the filmmaker's life, by virtue of having to grapple with his thought, to grasp it, with consideration for its original context, then translate into a cogent English equivalent, and, when necessary, attend to the many particularities and niceties of philological textual criticism.

One example: some of the files and press clippings in the Zavattini Archive made it possible to effect a reconstruction of the major 1955 Mexico Conference. Why? For the simple reason that there are no other records. Another example. On more than one occasion, Zavattini's marginal, handwritten notes in unpublished production papers shed a different light on his relations with the director Alessandro Blasetti. The same is true of his relations with Giuseppe De Santis, as their correspondence bears out, and, of course, with Vittorio De Sica.

A selection of Zavattini's Cinematic Diary was originally published in periodicals, then collected as *Straparole* (1967), and translated into English, over forty years ago, by William Weaver, as *Sequences from a Cinematic Life* (1971), which is long out of print. However, even when it was in print, any reader who was unfamiliar with twentieth-century Italian history and culture would have been challenged, faced with no introduction or notes to situate the cross-section of Italian film history, emerging from even the most superficial reading of *Straparole* or, for that matter, of the later *Diario cinematografico* (1979). This state of affairs suggests, in the English-speaking world, scarce curiosity, concerning the vast majority of his scenarios, the ones written before, during and after the years associated with historic Italian Neo-realism.

Such a lack of interest can partly be explained by a similar response to the ideas of Siegfried Kracauer or André Bazin, since the 1960s, both mistaken for naïve realists, until relatively recently.¹⁰ This raises a knotty problem which cannot be avoided, and namely, how Neo-realism has been situated within film history. This issue is still complicated by old debates about the *realism* of Neo-realism, dating from the 1960s and 1970s. They coincided with the rise of post-structuralism, and its problematizing of 'the real'. The aesthetic validity of historic Neo-realism was partly critiqued in relation to its degree of adequation, or lack of it, as a screen image in respect of the material world. Such a critique pointed out, for example, inconsistencies in doing away with sets, studios and professional actors: on criticizing re-enactments.¹¹ But paradigms eventually change, as Alfred Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) has shown.¹²

The project as a whole is dedicated to Ansano Giannarelli, a documentary film director, who worked on more than one of Zavattini's ambitious projects. In 2009, Giannarelli envisaged the kind of international project this book seeks to carry out. It is worth citing him directly:

It would be an amazing project to reconstruct Zavattini's thought about diverse aspects of cinema (and thus including also what nowadays we call 'documentary'). For this to be done thoroughly and with extreme accuracy, such an undertaking would require a re-reading of his extensive production: from his interviews (both radio recordings and those recorded on film),

to the public statements, the conference speeches, the diaries published in *Cinema Nuovo* and other journals, to the book reviews and the prefaces for catalogues and other books, and also the projects, treatments, screenplays (including all his annotations) and Zavattini's narrative writing.

Because Zavattini is not a systematic and rigorous thinker. Rather, he extracts the theoretical implications from practice, but not in the same way as Eisenstein and Pudovkin, who shared this approach. Zavattini was chaotic, seemingly casual, and extremely prolific. He is, in a sense, closer to Vertov, with whom he shares a strong association of ideas: Zavattini is probably the most important film theorist Italy has ever had.¹³

Another valuable methodological pointer, as to how to tackle a biography about Zavattini, was suggested a few years ago by a book written by film historian Gian Piero Brunetta, who confirmed the validity of Giannarelli's plan for multidisciplinary research methodology. In relation to the sphere of cinema, Brunetta speaks of 'parallel filmographies' of ideas which, for whatever reason, never went any further than expressing an idea, but may be, in some instances, more interesting than what he calls an 'effective' filmography.¹⁴ This book has considered such parallel filmographies, which allow a historian to piece together known and previously unknown areas of Italian film history. These are, as he puts it, 'Sometimes independent, sometimes connected'.¹⁵

Inevitably, as intimated earlier, to write about Zavattini has required a sustained enquiry into Neo-realism, to observe how Neo-realism has been 'framed'. Zavattini would have agreed, insisting on breaking out of the frame, by pointing the camera elsewhere: towards the social, the here and now. This is how he put it:

I guess that if Christ had a cine-camera to hand, he wouldn't make up parables, however marvellous these might be, but, censorship permitting, he would show us who the good and the bad are *right now*, and he would confront us with close-ups of those who make their neighbour's daily bread, and of their victims, taste a little too bitter.¹⁶

As for the world-famous Zavattini, the screenwriter and principal theorist of Neo-realism, this biography contextualizes his interventions outside the frame, reconstructing the three main conferences on Neo-realism, bringing back to life the debates of the day to situate his ideas, and thus adopting a stance comparable to what is meant by Michael Baxandall by 'the period eye'.¹⁷ In particular, Zavattini's thought has been pieced together and contextualized, from intervention to intervention, making use of interviews, conference papers, his gargantuan correspondence – mostly unpublished, his field research, his published Cinematic Diary, his campaigning for an ethical, popular and critical cinema. Bearing in mind existing historiography, this biography pieces together his thoughts and interventions within the cinema, a site of theory and practice, drawing together the many threads of his *praxis* of cinema.

Discussions about Neo-realism tend to be about a purely historic phenomenon, often dwelling on the number of films defining the Neo-realist canon, often centred on when the movement began, when it finished or if it is even to be considered a movement at all, or just a film style or perhaps a genre, as opposed to considering it a broader phenomenon, in terms of film theory, film philosophy and film history. This biography contributes to recent re-evaluations of Neo-realism, which have striven to investigate its relevance to contemporary film theory and practice today, and to evaluate its impact beyond the conventional framework of national cinema. The 2008 conference, 'Ripensare il Neorealismo', suggested it was time to reconsider.¹⁸ Post-structural or post-Modernist tenets have been challenged in recent years, by new perspectives. Recent attempts are being made towards a re-evaluation of Neo-realism (albeit without ever questioning the consensus of understanding regarding *mimēsis*), addressing its impact, beyond a conventional framework of national cinema.

A groundbreaking anthology, *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (2007), showed the spread of Neo-realist ideas across continents and began to question the physical, geopolitical and temporal boundaries of the movement.¹⁹ Geoffrey Newell-Smith's *Making Waves* (2012) distinguished between the first Neo-realist new wave and subsequent new waves, which latter he considers heavily indebted to Neo-realism. Nowell-Smith has overturned existing orthodoxies and reductive approaches which reduced Neo-realism to a style recipe, dictated only by external circumstances (location shooting, non-professional actors, loose plot and so on).²⁰ In this respect, in terms of Neo-realism and its influence on global cinema, four of the chapters trace the direct transmission of Zavattini's idea of cinema to Spain, Mexico, Cuba and Argentina, drawing on the author's case study, *Zavattini, il Neo-realismo e il Nuovo Cinema Latino-americano* (2019).²¹

Even before *Umberto D.* (1952) – generally considered a canonical Neo-realist film – was screened, Zavattini had begun to formulate an ethnographic, socially engaged non-fiction cinema, which drew on investigative journalism and on Ernesto de Martino's innovative ethnography, based on the Marxian notion of the human being as a social being, and being as an inter-being, as a guiding principle for interaction. This biography traces the genealogy of this idea of cinema in Zavattini's works and its development, beginning with his scenario *Italia mia*, up until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it reached its ultimate expression in putting into practice grassroots cinema, a 'guerrilla cinema', 'by the many, for the many', as he put it.

Early days

1.1 Luzzara

Cesare Zavattini was born in Luzzara in 1902, a place that was always shrouded in fog during long cold winters. The town is situated less than a kilometre from the banks of the river Po, in Reggio Emilia. His family owned a coffee bar and a bakery. This place was often mistaken for somewhere else, as Zavattini remembered: ‘My hometown, Luzzara on the shores of the Po, is so common. Even if you write “Luzzara”, the mail will be sent to Suzzara, a nearby town.’ Petrarch, who spent a night there, stated that it was marshland inhabited by frogs.¹ While his mother was giving birth to Zavattini, the village band began to play outside the door.² When his grandfather stepped out to have a quiet word, the musicians moved up the road.

Zavattini lived in Luzzara until he was six, surrounded by the constant chatter in the family-owned patisserie, with its two large mirrors, advertising *Bitter Pastore* and *Cordial Campari*, and its velvet seating and white furniture, decorated with gold arabesques. In the billiards room, the Zavattinis occasionally had their meals. He remembered the rows of shiny liqueur bottles behind the bar; the cakes and extra treats on the menu, such as rice and *tartoufes*, veal cutlets *alla milanese*. The first moving image he ever witnessed was at the age of five, in 1907: he saw dogs chasing after rats in a *Pathé Journal* documentary.³ The monochrome shapes on the large screen made a huge impression on him. The projector ran on petrol, and Zavattini remembered its pungent smell in the makeshift picture house set up in the village square. He became a regular visitor, because his parents ran a makeshift coffee bar inside. The following year, he was sent to Bergamo to stay with an uncle and his daughter, Silvia. From then on, he only saw his parents during the summer holidays.⁴ Silvia taught in a primary school and Zavattini became her surrogate son. Her mothering was also influential in another respect, her atheism.⁵

It was during the years he spent in Bergamo with Silvia and his uncle that the two loves of his life, cinema and literature, developed. In Bergamo he witnessed the early years of cinema. There were two cinemas in town, the *Teatro Sociale*, in *Bergamo alta*, the hilly side of the town, and the *Cinema Nazionale*, at the other end. Nick Winters, Nick Carter, Nat Pinkerton, Petrosino and Max Linder

were all regular characters who appeared on the screen at the *Nazionale* and whose photographs were on display at the newsagents, in illustrated magazine supplements. As for literature, he was moved to tears listening to Silvia reading verses like: 'Stronger than God's love is a mother's love.'⁶ He also shed tears when she recited Pascoli's 'La cavalla storna', from his collection *Canti di Castelvecchio*.⁷ This poem, on the school curriculum to this day, is about the murder of Ruggero Pascoli, the poet's father. In a flashback, a riderless horse and trap makes its return to the Pascoli homestead where the poet speaks through the character of Ruggero's wife. Pascoli heightens the tragedy of loss, using the plain music of children's rhymes to convey the expression of strong emotion. Almost unbearable.

There were children's stories – Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Once the characters came to life, when he saw *Pinocchio* in Silvia's puppet show, for her infants' class, based on the *Pinocchio* drawings by Attilio Mussino. Cesare would use a torch to read in bed under the blankets, adventure stories, whether by Alexandre Dumas or by Emilio Salgari, or detective stories by Maurice Leblanc, featuring the character of Arsène Lupin or the goings on of the fictional characters in the illustrated supplements linked to the detective films he and his friends saw at the *Nazionale* cinema.⁸ Then his father introduced him to the theatre, giving him Pietro Goldoni's comedies in Venetian dialect.⁹ And to a theatre of sorts, a theatre of attractions, belonged the performances of an actor called Fregoli, whom he watched for the first time in 1912. Fregoli was famous for his sudden costume changes, constantly taking his audience by surprise, switching from male character to female character, from the representation of an old man to that of a child. What particularly enchanted Zavattini was when Fregoli let the audience into his secrets, laying bare the illusion, to reveal his tricks. Two years later, in 1914, he and his middle school classmates joined one of several packed interventionist demonstrations, in protest at the Italian government's reluctance to get involved in the First World War.¹⁰ Little did he know at the time, that in later life he would become an ardent pacifist.

However, by 1917, Silvia had had enough of her ward's insubordination and sent him back to Luzzara. In the meantime, his parents' financial difficulties were so severe that they were forced to let the coffee bar in Luzzara and take up employment elsewhere, near Rome, to run a factory canteen and a hotel.¹¹ Zavattini was enrolled in the second year of high school in Rome, at a *Liceo Classico*, the kind of college where you learn Latin and Greek and some history of philosophy. But Zavattini hardly attended. Like Collodi's *Pinocchio*, that year, he played truant, spending most of his time enjoying himself. What fascinated him weren't the archaeological sites of ancient Rome, but the world of show business, of famous comedians in the revues and variety shows, such as the great Petrolini, Armando Gil, Pasquariello, Lyda Borelli, Za la Mort and many other performers. He couldn't stay away from the attractions of light entertainment. He spent all the money his mother sent him on whatever performance was on offer. He attended the *Sala Umberto* shows day in and day out; from matinées, to afternoon and evening performances. When he wasn't gambling, he liked to

spend his time on streetcars, just for the sheer excitement of watching Rome pickpockets at work.

By the end of his first year in the capital city, his parents, Arturo and Ida, who had been assuming their son had progressed to the next year of college, began to wonder about his studies. They sent one of his aunts to see how he was getting on. It turned out that he had to repeat the year. ‘He doesn’t like studying? Fine. Then get a job!’¹² But his illiterate mother interceded and persuaded Zavattini’s father, Arturo, that if they really wanted their son to be a lawyer, he had to be given a second chance. So they decided to send him to Alatri, near Frosinone, not far from where they were working.

1.2 Alatri

His move to Alatri, far from serving as a punishment, led to even greater personal freedom, for now he could stay in a *pensione*, a small guesthouse, which provided lodgings to students. The custom was that boarders had to stay in after dark. But not Zavattini. Since there were no cabaret reviews to keep him entertained in Alatri, he devoted much of his time to gambling.¹³

Yet the reason he was in Alatri was school, but school was boring. He remembered his unsmiling Italian teacher, Ezio Lopez Celly, reading Guido Gozzano’s ‘Invernale’ from *I colloqui* (1911), surprising for the way in which this poem freezes a small event, an incident, a dare among two young skaters on a lake, or Sergio Corazzini’s melanchonic poems, copied out in the teacher’s notebook, in his slow deliberate voice – perfectly suited to Corazzini’s self-commiseration and sense of loss in, for example, the opening lines of his famous ‘Desolation of the poor sentimental poet’, which begins:

Why do you call me a poet? I am no poet. I am nothing more than a young child who is crying. Can you not see? I have only tears to offer the Silence.¹⁴

‘Something like a momentous earthquake happened that night, when I was seventeen. Herds of cells shifted around, or entirely changed their substance.’¹⁵ He had come across a consignment of books in his local grocery store which had been delivered to the wrong address. It included Giovanni Papini’s *Un uomo finito* (1913) (*Finished Man*). Many years later, he told Papini: ‘I read it in a single night. What a cataclysm! From the next morning, a new life began for me.’¹⁶ Zavattini’s reference to ‘a new life’ (*vita nuova*) suggests that he remembered the book well enough to drop a hint to the author who had used the conversion analogy several times.¹⁷ The hint references the famous *Incipit* of the *La Vita Nuova* (‘The New Life’), written by medieval poet Dante Alighieri, which charted the poet’s conversion from self-centred love to disinterested love.¹⁸ A triple conversion then: Dante’s, Papini’s, Zavattini’s. For Zavattini it marked a new direction and sense of purpose. No more gambling, no more aimlessness; instead, the realization of what writing can express, of the ways in

which it can convey a distinctly personal voice, addressed at oneself, but also at an audience of readers.

But what was it about this book which could make such a lasting impression on him? Doubtless, the country boy from Luzzara would have appreciated statements such as: 'The words I choose and prefer, my words, have to be as hard as granite, dry as stones, sparse.'¹⁹ From the very beginning of his career as a writer, in his humorous stories, Zavattini adopted a personal tone and linguistic register, apparently informal, seemingly spontaneous. This is exactly what *Finished Man* had to offer. There was no other contemporary literary model for such a literary style. Papini's book charts a work in progress, taking on the form of an ongoing confession, leading to a conversion, but not a religious one.²⁰ *Finished Man* showed Zavattini how anti-rhetorical writing could be, when it adopted the tone of a seemingly intimate, touching diary; comprising a candid account of how an autodidact can fall in love with learning – a diary of reflections and reminiscences, for example, how, as a child, Giuseppe Garibaldi, the hero of the fledgling Italian state, and the writers, Alfieri and Plutarch, became Papini's imaginary friends and rescued him from loneliness.²¹

In Papini, he found someone who could sound openly confessional: 'I feel the need to confess out loud';²² 'I'm no longer a victim.'²³ *Finished Man* carries the urgency of self-expression in a reflection and justification of a person's life choices. Papini refers to 'the diary of my dreams'.²⁴ He can sound candid: 'I'm ignorant.'²⁵ He also knew how to sound prophetic: 'In a world in which everyone only thinks about eating and making a living, about enjoying themselves and being in control, there needs to be someone, sometimes, who looks at the world anew, who makes us see the extraordinary in ordinary things, mystery in banality, beauty in waste.'²⁶ Papini is never mentioned by Zavattini in this regard, but it is undeniable that Zavattini later adopted and expanded upon the diary-form he discovered by chance, at the age of seventeen, in Papini.

1.3 Parma: Zavattini, writer and journalist

Two years later, in June 1921, Zavattini passed his school-leaving final exams and returned to his hometown, Luzzara. He then enrolled in the faculty of law at Parma University. It was this move to Parma that brought him into direct contact with budding and established writers. Not that it was an equal partnership, for he had everything to learn from his new acquaintances. This is something he later acknowledged. As far as he was concerned, the population of Parma comprised only eight people he felt very close to, all of them writers.

Ugo Betti was one of them. He'd fought in the Great War and was practising as a judge when Zavattini met him. But he was also writing poetry – the book *Il re Pensieroso* (1926) – and writing for the theatre. His first play was *La padrona* (1926). What he and Zavattini had in common was a respect for ordinary people. Unlike Zavattini, however, rather than pitting fantasy against reality, in

startling and unprecedented ways, Betti faced the reader with ethical dilemmas. What they shared is apparent from Betti's Introduction to *La padrona*:²⁷

At night, as I listen to the silence which little by little stills the humble dwellings all around me, my heart fills with sadness. I know only too well what a painful burden the day has been for my neighbours; I look at the books that helped while away so many lonely hours. But now I come to understand that these writers sought only to shine a light on their intellect and subtlety, while everything else was but a pretext.²⁸

Zavattini and his friends would often go to Betti's home in Parma to listen to him reading his plays and engage in endless discussion about his idea of the theatre; for example, in *La padrona*, the dramatic tension caused by a situation in which a young woman is dying from cancer, after her mother's death, while her father is busy remarrying a beautiful, sensuous woman. Pietrino Bianchi introduced Zavattini and his friends to Gino Saviotti, his schoolteacher at the Liceo Romagnosi, where Saviotti taught Italian literature and Latin.²⁹ They convinced Saviotti to go to the cinema for the first time. They watched a French adaptation of a novel by Émile Zola, and went again and again, to watch Chaplin's comedies and films starring Greta Garbo. It was Saviotti who gave Zavattini access to his own contacts of established writers and to a prestigious literary review, for Saviotti was also the opinion columnist for *La Fiera Letteraria*. Saviotti also edited the Parma review *Pagine critiche* and was the author of two books on art and aesthetics: *L'arte e la critica* (1924) and *Il pensiero estetico ed il gusto* (1925). Betti and Saviotti were influential members of their literary circle and Zavattini's first mentors and informal teachers. Zavattini later wrote to Saviotti, thanking him for the real education he had received in the literary discussions at his home: 'to G. S. in whose home I attended university.'³⁰ 'In those days, my ignorance was equal to my enthusiasm', Zavattini admitted to Saviotti much later.³¹

But the reason why Zavattini was in Parma was to attend law school. Then, in June 1922, he secured a position as an instructor at the Maria Luigia, a boarding school where he supervised homework and gave private lessons. That year, particularly the summer months, represented a critical moment in Italian politics. During the first six days of August, hundreds of Fascist Black Shirts descended on Parma. In a concerted action, their comrades were taking over local government all over the country, meeting little or no resistance. This was the only episode of fierce armed opposition against the Fascist coup taking place all over Italy. Italo Balbo and his Fascist militants arrived by train to destroy the new working-class union and quash the general strike, called for 1 August to protest and oppose Fascist nationwide aggressions. Barricades were put up on 3 August, when the town braced itself against the Black Shirts.

While all this was happening, on 4 August, Zavattini was moving house from the outskirts of San Pancrazio to Via Mazzini, near the Ponte di Mezzo, the bridge that spans the new Parma centre and the old Parma district, known

as Oltretorrente.³² There is no mention of this dramatic episode in Zavattini's reminiscences, spread across letters and articles, yet it was happening on his doorstep. His side of the town was sealed off from the bridge by the Fascists who tried repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, to break through to the working-class Oltretorrente, on the other side of the river. The shops closed down and the city was deserted. They attacked again and again, but met such a strong resistance by the population, though vastly outnumbered, that by 5 August the locals were regaining control of their town. The following day, the *squadristi* conceded defeat and left the city in drips and drabs, while lorries drove through the two sides of the city, Parma Vecchia and Parma Nuova, decorated with fluttering red flags and Italian tricolours.³³

Long before and after this event, the working-class quarter of Oltretorrente had been, and continued to be, a regular meeting place for anarchists and socialists. This is where Zavattini's third mentor, Sebastiano Timpanaro Senior, held court. Timpanaro was an anti-Fascist intellectual, a physicist and a philologist. At the time, Timpanaro was already editing the first critical edition of Galileo Galilei's works, while teaching physics at Parma University. Timpanaro was also a contributor to *La Fiera Letteraria*, *Letteratura*, *Pan*, and the very prestigious Modernist *Solaria*.

Among Zavattini's students at the Maria Luigia boarding school were Attilio Bertolucci and Pietrino Bianchi, both far more interested in writing than Zavattini at the time, and both very knowledgeable about contemporary Italian literature. They were only fourteen, but they had already read Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust and stories by James Joyce. Bertolucci had also read Eugenio Montale's first collection of poetry, *Ossi di Seppia* (1925), published by Piero Gobetti, and still hot off the press.³⁴ And yet it was a fair exchange: while they had read far more than he had, he possessed the confidence to make new contacts and knew how to make use of them; he was a natural. When Zavattini read Attilio Bertolucci's early poems, he realized that this boy was a poet, endowed with great talent, and gave him frequent feedback, encouraging him to publish the poems in a range of literary magazines and, eventually, as a collection in book form, entitled *Sirio* (named after a soap brand of the time), published by their mutual friend Alessandro Minardi.

Sebastiano Timpanaro, the founder of *L'Arduo*, a literary review which attracted contributions by Piero Gobetti, among others, was the lynchpin between Zavattini's Parma circle and Gobetti's open opposition to Fascism.³⁵ And Timpanaro is most likely the influence that led Zavattini to take out a subscription to Gobetti's *La Rivoluzione liberale* when it was first published.³⁶ Nothing more is known about Zavattini's political allegiance in these years. But it is a fact that Gobetti and Antonio Gramsci were among the very few who understood the dynamics of contemporary Italian politics and were able to communicate its complexities in a cogent and accessible way. Gobetti inspired his readers to take action and renew Italy's political and cultural life.³⁷ In his earlier *Energie Nove* ('New Energies'), Gobetti had spelled out the problems Italy faced immediately after the Great War.³⁸ That first issue of *La Rivoluzione liberale* Zavattini

purchased contained a manifesto tackling the Italian crisis and its root causes: first, the fact that Italian political liberalism and its leader, Giolitti, were not up to the task; second, that there was a lack of freedom; third, that Italian citizens lacked a social consciousness and, finally, the need for a competent technological class, to run the country effectively.³⁹ Gobetti's political project put up a stiff intellectual resistance to the rising Fascist dictatorship. When harassment, house searches, imprisonment and repeated confiscations of *La Rivoluzione liberale* made it virtually impossible to distribute his review, Gobetti had to close it down. But he then founded *Il Baretto*, in December 1924.⁴⁰ *Il Baretto* resisted the aesthetics of *La Ronda* review, which tended to reduce literary criticism to a discussion of stylistic choices. Gobetti was most likely another source of mentorship for Zavattini in these years. Gobetti was a very supportive editor towards new writing, poetry or prose, and literary criticism. *Il Baretto* attracted the philosopher Benedetto Croce, poets such as Umberto Saba and Eugenio Montale, and the critics Sergio Solmi and Natalino Sapegno. It also published monographic studies, such as one on Proust by Giacomo De Benedetti.⁴¹

In the meantime, the regime was also being criticized from a different quarter: the Left-wing satirical paper *Il Becco Giallo*, a favourite of Zavattini's and his friends. Zavattini later recalled how the Fascist squads prowling around Parma assaulted anyone they encountered reading *Il Becco Giallo*.⁴² After confiscations and harassment, *Il Becco Giallo* was also forced to close down in 1926.

Zavattini, Bianchi and Bertolucci would rush to Parma railway station to be the first to read Telesio Interlandi's lead article in *Il Tevere*, the review Interlandi edited, and to look out for the latest contributions by the hermetic poet Giuseppe Ungaretti or the prose writer Ercole Patti. Once, the three of them went to Milan, and, in Piazza San Carlo, stood for ages in front of the red neon sign of *La Fiera Letteraria*, a literary review they admired and whose editor, Enrico Falqui, would soon begin to publish scores of Zavattini's book reviews.⁴³

In 1926, the headmaster at Maria Luigia boarding school encouraged Zavattini to contribute an article to the anti-Fascist provincial daily paper, *La Gazzetta di Parma*. On 29 April, after sitting an exam in Civil Law Zavattini dropped out from his law degree course, despite the fact that his academic record shows that he had passed most of the examinations required to complete a degree. The degree was well within reach, but he had come to realize that a legal career was not for him.⁴⁴ On 19 August 1926, he filed his first article.⁴⁵ In the meantime, Gobetti had escaped to Paris, but after the last of several severe beatings, he died of his injuries.

Zavattini's career as a journalist and writer took off when Priamo Brunazzi, the editor-in-chief of *La Gazzetta di Parma*, appointed him the editor of the daily paper's cultural page three. Zavattini immediately brought in his former students and friends Bianchi, Bertolucci and Minardi. His first editorial task was to convince Brunazzi that their idea of turning the cultural page into a virtual literary circle was worthwhile. He got his way.⁴⁶

In addition to commissioning articles and developing a Modernist approach to the cultural page, Zavattini invented and wrote a range of new features,

including one entitled 'Dite la vostra' ('Express your Opinion') begun in October 1927, as well as other contributions on other pages.⁴⁷ This is where the first signs of Papini's unusual approach to writing, a mixture of philosophical musings and personal confessions, appear, since Zavattini devised a very personal literary or better, anti-literary, style of writing, in which the Italian mainstream style of narrative writing was rejected outright, in favour of compression. He condensed his content into a few lines, telling a story or an anecdote, and conveyed dialogue by a quip or two, eschewing the kind of high drama he heard Ugo Betti declaim within their literary circle, which was more in tune with the period.

The recently published anthology of Zavattini's early writing shows how, by comparison with Achille Campanile, a leading comic writer of the day, Zavattini's eye is constantly on the lookout for genuine news stories, comments in the media, not excluding the radio, or taken from press agency reports, which, however insignificant they might have seemed to others, Zavattini considered symptomatic of 1920s modernity and its shortcomings. His approach subverted the stories with a touch of the absurd, creating distance and conveying more than a merely amused and amusing gaze on contemporary Italy, owing something to the *Becco Giallo* brand of Italian popular humour. Zavattini also used humour as a weapon for an ethical and social critique which afforded him the freedom to single out, not only cinema myths and the star system but also the seedy side of journalism, censorship, hypocrisy in marriage, mass tourism, sex, changes of gender and even animal rights, and succeed where *Il Becco Giallo* had failed. For, somehow, he managed to avoid incurring the restrictions of Fascist censorship.⁴⁸

On 14 March 1927, Attilio Bertolucci and Pietro Bianchi persuaded him to watch Charlie Chaplin's *Goldrush*. This was when Zavattini came to the realization of what else cinema could be, besides pure entertainment.⁴⁹ The very next day, he published an admiring review in *La Gazzetta di Parma*, pointing out how 'Chaplin's well-known mask had revealed profound human qualities'.⁵⁰

1.4 Zavattini's 'Hollywood' in *La Gazzetta di Parma*

It was in these Parma years that the cinema became a focus for his journalism. He published 'Hollywood', a nightmarish representation of an industrial machine which grabs reality to then recycle it into a simulacrum.⁵¹ But is it a simulacrum? The word, as Jean Baudrillard has shown, denotes something that appears to be real, to the point of resembling a real object, but is, in fact, unreal.⁵² Zavattini's Hollywood is presented as an unreality, in relation to the everyday world, but one which is, paradoxically, a reality in itself. In that first standalone story, published in 1928, the narrator is presented as an objective eyewitness, a journalist, who has travelled to 'Hollywood' to file his story. Try as he might, time and again, he fails to reach the hotel where he is staying. At each attempt, he barges into a studio set.⁵³ The entire space is taken up by the cinematic stage. Two policemen forbid him to cross the set, in order to get to his hotel, because *The Deserted City* is being filmed.

'Hollywood' is one large, deserted set, with the exception of the cameraman shooting *The Deserted City*. Two hours later, he is allowed to leave, only to bump into extras wearing animal skins on the set of *The Barbarians' Escape*. The narrator and journalist is now part of the crowd and also being filmed, which prompts the screenwriter to add an intertitle saying 'precursor' (literally, someone running ahead of everyone else). When he finally makes it to the hotel, he discovers that the forecourt is the scene of another film, *A Revolution*. He is told he mustn't cross the square. So, he persuades two stretcher bearers to carry him across, with the agreement of the director who adds an intertitle: 'Dead man.' The stretcher bearers slip and fall, but the journalist convinces the director to change the intertitle to: 'Dead?' And when he gets up, another intertitle answers the question: 'No!' He finally reaches the hotel lobby, only to be told that they're shooting *Lonely Women*. Can he please get out of the shot? His presence makes them change the title to: *Almost Lonely Women*. He thinks he's going mad. He runs back to the railway station, barely in time to catch the train. They're shooting another film on location: *The Emigrant Arrives*. It's not too much of a problem to add the rubric: *Painful Departure*.

This early stab at writing rehearses humour and parody, to bring out the underlying nature of the dream factory, couched in the terse language of a news report, pretending to give his readers an authentic account. The reality of experience blurs into the unreality of the studio set. Zavattini later remarked in a letter to Bertolucci: 'I can see more and more clearly what a formidable publicity machine Hollywood is and how nobody can avoid the pervasive attractions of advertising.'⁵⁴

But in these early years, Zavattini also appreciated the potential of cinema as non-fiction. This is clear from one of his stories, inspired by Buster Keaton's film *The Cameraman* (1928), entitled 'Rodenstack and Co.' It features a reporter endowed with such extraordinary powers that he is able to capture amazing moments of everyday life, at the very instant they are happening, and turn real events into amazing stories, in a blurring of non-fiction and fiction.⁵⁵

This was also the thrust of Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). But in Zavattini's literary version, the camera obeys its master. He tells the reader that instead of putting good middle-class Italian families in the frame, the camera will focus on bootleggers, Wall Street stock market agents – significantly, Zavattini published his story the year after the 1929 Wall Street Crash – and also, he adds, on a Pirandello-style enquiry into ourselves, as well as on Hollywood studios screen tests. Zavattini imagines an early morning take of the metropolis, shot from the dizzying top of a building. In this story, the reader becomes a character in what Zavattini himself describes as a 'documentary' (*un documentario*). He tells the reader: 'you're in the story, and you don't even know it.' Somehow, through a subterfuge, even a trial behind closed doors ends up in Rodenstack's frame. Using high angle or low angle shots, Zavattini shares his appreciation of what the modern photographer can do. His imagined filmmaker films what goes on in the street, where he can witness 'the scene of the crime' (*il luogo del delitto*). Somehow, he has an instinct for news

events. He may even be on the spot before the event takes place. He might even influence a situation, just when it is unfolding, using photography to show the two sides of an argument, and how ugly the opponents' behaviour is, there and then.

This is when, in the late 1920s, Zavattini's idea of a filmmaker finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, filming in the street, focussing on real events, and the concept of cinema as a means of self-reflection for the viewer, who is considered a participant, first crops up in his early fiction.

1.5 From Parma to Florence

On 30 June 1928, *La Gazzetta di Parma* was to cease publication. This happened after the daily was taken over by a pro-Fascist newspaper, the *Corriere Emiliano*. That evening, Minardi, Zavattini and Bianchi leaned over the balcony of Minardi's home after dinner, awaiting the first copies of the final edition, and discussed their future, well into the night.⁵⁶

Not long after dropping out of university, Zavattini received a letter instructing him to report to *La Fortezza* army barracks in Florence. He was no longer in a position to defer his military service. In the interim, having lost his job at the newspaper, he went home to Luzzara, to serve the tables in the family *trattoria*. In a letter to Ugo Betti, he reflected: 'Farewell Parma. The truth is that our group was a really good one.'⁵⁷

The whole Parma group disbanded: apart from Zavattini going to Florence, Saviotti was transferred to a school in Genoa, Timpanaro was also transferred to Florence and judge Betti was transferred to a new job in Rome.⁵⁸ Although Parma was a provincial town, in those years it was a hub of cultural debate. The Parma years provided Zavattini with a crucial formative experience in his cultural education; Parma was where he first developed his anti-Fascist views; Parma was where he became a journalist; and Parma was where the late flowering of Futurist ideas influenced his own very particular brand of absurdist, nonsensical humour, closer to Italian Futurism than to any kind of French Surrealism.⁵⁹

Florence was the living museum of Renaissance art treasures, churches, buildings, paintings and statues. However, not once during his ten months of military service in a sapper regiment was Zavattini tempted to visit Michelangelo's *David* at the Uffizi Gallery or any of the other major artistic Florentine artistic attractions. But Florence was no less lively a centre of contemporary intellectual life than Parma. It was also where Papini's Futurist *Lacerba* had been published. But, more importantly, it was where some of the best writers of the day lived and worked. These anti-Fascists had already formed a Gobetti-influenced cultural circle, before Zavattini's arrival.

Zavattini spent most of his time in the army barracks where he was assigned to administrative duties.⁶⁰ However, this enabled him to read over 100 books and review them during office hours. When he was found out, his punishment

was to be appointed the regiment's courier.⁶¹ Falqui guaranteed a steady flow of novels to be reviewed, most of them of a very low standard, which Zavattini reviewed and immediately sold off for a couple of liras each to Sergeant Gervasoni.⁶² Most of his book reviews were written and published in these years spent in Parma and Florence. He later disowned them, but at the time, they were accepted for publication in *La Fiera Letteraria*, a highly esteemed literary magazine. Book reviewing provided a practical and economical focus for developing his skills as a critic of sorts, who had strong misgivings about most contemporary output.

Yet, some of his book reviews are as short as they are sharp-witted. Enter Zavattini the hatchet man. One review is only three sentences long: 'Justice means justice. Which triumphs. All the rest is clear and moving.' Another, only two: 'Fragments of a gentle soul. But don't persist.' He criticizes a writer who relies too heavily on unusual typography and remarks that the author of a Preface has been unkind to the novelist whose book he is prefacing, for offering him encouragement and recommending his book. Another one contains this observation: 'verse and prose which keeps chugging along like those depressing trains our Gieppi takes;⁶³ their hyperbolic chimneys making a lot of noise and too little progress.' Elsewhere, he makes throwaway observations: 'Compared to this writer, Salgari was a genius, or Verne.'

Sometimes only wit can convey his exasperation in, for example, reviewing a booklet by an author 'who took seven years to write a thirteen-page work of art in 13-point type. Diderot could do it, but not the author of *Vagabondi*.'⁶⁴ Most, but not all, of his book reviews are damning. The hatchet man knew when to cast aside his weapon. He was also the first, or, perhaps, one of the first, to review and acclaim Alberto Moravia's first novel, which he praised for the important contribution it was.⁶⁵ As Zavattini later admitted, his Parma friends helped him to include some literary references, but he himself was convinced of the novel's worth. Zavattini liked Moravia's novel and, as he later put it quite candidly: 'to tell the truth, all I could say about a book was: I like it or I don't.' But, to his regret, swayed by other writers, he toned down his review.⁶⁶ Zavattini sent Falqui his review of Moravia's novel, stating: 'I really would like to be the one to review *The Indifferent*', adding that he was willing to re-write it entirely, if the editor felt it was required. But by then, his review had been accepted.⁶⁷

Florence's major attraction for the young Zavattini was 'the poet Eugenio Montale and the other members of the literary journal *Solaria*, whose circle met in the Caffé Giubbe Rosse'.⁶⁸ Montale's poetry reviews appeared on the same page of *La Fiera Letteraria* as Zavattini's book reviews, and his first collection of poems, *Ossi di Seppia*, had earned him instant recognition.⁶⁹ When Zavattini first went to meet the *Solariani*, he met Montale in person, in the company of Raffaello Franchi. They discussed Alberto Moravia's work, whom they also admired and whose novel they were in the middle of reading. Zavattini mentioned Bertolucci's first collection of poems, *Sirio*, which Franchi reviewed in *Solaria* in December.⁷⁰ He told Alessandro Minardi, one of his Parma friends: 'I really enjoy myself in their company. They're very unpretentious and friendly.'

We shall see.⁷¹ This is how Elio Vittorini, one of the regulars, described the bar at the time:

Why it is that this small bourgeois coffee house has become so indispensable to the lives of writers and artists based in Florence, I have no idea. It's uncomfortable, it's dark, with long corridors that remind you of waiting rooms in provincial railway stations; it's freezing cold and funereal in winter, populated by people who spit under the table, brandishing local newspapers. Once it was a good haunt, I've heard. Once, that is, in the days of [Giovanni] Papini and [Ardengo] Soffici.⁷²

After seven in the evening, the stuffy, crowded, bar of the Giubbe Rosse regularly attracted no fewer than twenty writers and painters, Italians and foreigners alike. Among the regulars were Alessandro Bonsanti, one of *Solaria's* editors, and Vittorini, who said Italo Svevo's melancholic smile still lingered in some of the bar's mirrors. From time to time, the bar's fame also attracted other writers: Umberto Saba and Sergio Solmi among the poets, the novelist Guido Piovene, seeking support from fellow writers, and Valéry Larbaud. These were 'people who graced them with an hour of their humanity', as Vittorini put it. The Caffé Giubbe Rosse was the best refuge in Florence for contemporary writers, including Alberto Moravia, Aldo Palazzeschi, the academic Mario Praz, Gianna Manzini, the novelist whose work Zavattini admired, even the flamboyant editor of *La Fiera Letteraria*, Enrico Falqui, who would come down from Milan dressed in startling blue, pink or orange suits. Vittorini had the impression that the whole of Italy made a beeline for the Giubbe Rosse.⁷³

As for *Solaria*, it was the best and the most significant literary review of the time. It was also the only one to have followed the example of Piero Gobetti's *La Rivoluzione liberale* and *Il Baretto*. Indeed, it was in the pages of *Solaria* that many of Gobetti's distinguished former contributors had gathered. *Solaria* defied Fascism by adopting the same editorial line and critique of literary formalism, a critique which had characterized Gobetti's reviews and which contributed to form Zavattini's. Far from being provincial, *Solaria* adopted Gobetti's international Modernist scope, in its appreciation of the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Rainer Maria Rilke, its championing of Marcel Proust, André Gide, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway.⁷⁴ As for Italian novelists, it promoted the work of Italo Svevo, little known at the time, but of central importance within twentieth-century Italian literature.⁷⁵ Years later, Elio Vittorini summed up the literary group:

And so it was that I became a member of *Solaria*. The word *Solariano* meant, in the literary circles of the day, anti-Fascist, Europeanist, universalist, anti-traditionalist. Giovanni Papini insulted us from one end of the spectrum and [Roberto] Farinacci from the other.⁷⁶

To put it differently, *Solaria* attracted the disapproval of both Fascists and Catholics. For, in the meantime, Papini had converted to Catholicism.

When Zavattini first met the *Solariani*:

They noticed me and my green, uncomfortable, army bicycle come into the Giubbe Rosse. The very first time was in the spring of 1929 at Piazza Emanuele, where the famous coffee bar was situated. They were sitting round an iron table having a friendly discussion. The first words I heard were about a short story by [Alberto] Carrocci (*Narciso*, I think).

– Now it is time for him to choose, Right or Left.

Then Carrocci turned up. Nervous, disgruntled, but civilized. They were also, talking about someone's upcoming journey to Rome, to see [Emilio] Cecchi. Then they mentioned names I had never heard of: Hölderlin, Jouandaux ...⁷⁷

He wrote to his friend Bertolucci that 'one evening in the Giubbe Rosse is equal to a month's worth of reading'.⁷⁸

In among the tables of the coffee bar, all I can see are foreign books being exchanged, some in Italian translation, others not. What names! We'll talk about it later. I listen patiently, but, you see, among men of letters, you're *always* a bore when you talk, never when you listen.⁷⁹

By October 1929, he had been welcomed into the circle, which admired those witty four-line book reviews of his, published in *La Fiera Letteraria*. Eventually, he was able to overcome his stuttering and shyness and read out a few of his published short stories, already acclaimed by critics. In December, Montale told him: 'When you first came, you were so very humble. But look at you now. You're streets ahead of all of us. You're a Trojan Horse of a kind' and Raffaello Franchi said: 'I'm getting envious: for the past week, all we ever talk about is Zavattini.'⁸⁰ Once Montale invited Zavattini to dinner at *Da Aglietti*, where he tasted caviar and Chianti for the first time.⁸¹ On 16 December 1929, Zavattini wrote to a friend that 'Montale says that many of my stories are prose poems, either in terms of form or of expressing a frame of mind'.⁸² The poet was right.

Solaria invited Zavattini to publish three of his brief short stories or *raccontini*, which were being regularly published in a range of Italian magazines. His stories duly appeared in the December edition of 1929, *Avventura*, *Nome* and *Se potessi* ('Adventure', 'Name', 'If I could'). 'Name' builds on vigorously stating one's name, only to deny it in the next breath. His humour produces an afterthought, inviting the reader to reflect on the power of persuasive, theatrical rhetoric, a gentle satire of Fascism, in all probability. 'Adventure' is the tale of a man who succumbs to the allure of a siren, but then resorts to deception, by resorting to a children's game, Blind Man's Bluff, to return to the real world, with barely a suggestion of allegory, a rejection, be it of fantasy, of art for art's sake, or of literary escapism. The *Solaria* circle also encouraged him to publish a collection of them in *Solaria* itself, in book form, but he decided against it.⁸³ Many of Zavattini's stories debunk journalism and the workings of reportage, adopting

an evidence-based style, using whimsical reflection to subvert it. Sometimes, his humour touches a deeper chord which outlives the duration of a joke.

Zavattini's absurdist, colloquial, but terse and heavily compressed writing is certainly at odds with the kind of fragmentary and precious art prose that *La Ronda* had supported. Neither did it follow *Solaria's* 'Dostoyevsky + durational narrative style + poetic aura', announced as an ideal in the first issue of the literary review in 1926. But it is absolutely Modernist, and at odds with the prevailing *Ronda* art prose which it sometimes evokes, only to then deride it. Later, when Zavattini collected and edited his stories to form a book, *Parliamo tanto di me* (1931) ('Let's Talk about Me'), three *Solaria* regular contributors reviewed it very favourably: Elio Vittorini, who pointed out that 'the book's humour emerges in short stoppages, ever so slight laughter, as if such things were almost ridiculous, but only for the brief moment in which their absurdity is made apparent'.⁸⁴ Sebastiano Timpanaro Senior (welcomed into the *Solaria* circle in October 1929, after his move from Parma to Florence) also noted the rhythm and the poetry in the prose, its subtle humour and its underlying melancholy. Timpanaro too rejected out of hand any comparison between Achille Campanile and Zavattini, in agreement with Vittorini's reading, and Raffaello Franchi's. Zavattini was unique, and not under the influence of Campanile's humour.⁸⁵

Zavattini's time in Florence came to an abrupt end, when his father's ailing health suddenly took a turn for the worse. Being the sole provider for his extended family at the time, he was exonerated from completing his military service. He went home to Luzzara, where he spent months 'wiping tables with his cloth, uncorking bottles of Lambrusco, and balancing four plates in one hand'.⁸⁶ While he was back home, he made a selection of his best *raccontini*, with a view to bringing them out in book form, but not for *Solaria*. Initially, the title was to be *Viaggio nell'Aldilà* (*Journey to the Afterlife*), a clear indication of the proposed structure, based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to locate his stories in abstract time and space.

Editorial director and screenwriter in Milan

2.1 Milan, the Modernist publishing Mecca

Zavattini decided to look for work in Milan, already the epicentre of an ever-expanding Italian book and magazine publishing industry in the so-called industrial triangle. He arrived one afternoon, on 31 March 1930.¹ He had visited Milan during his Parma years, encouraged by one of his mentors, Gino Saviotti, and was already contributing to *Secolo XX*, a weekly magazine published by Rizzoli and edited by Filippo Piazzì, the editorial director, who introduced him to Enrico Cavacchioli, who edited *Il Secolo Illustrato* and *Novella*, which had already published some of Zavattini's stories.

Although Zavattini's reputation as a writer preceded him, when he went for a job as an editor at Rizzoli, Cavacchioli submitted him to a writing test on the spot: a story for *Novella*. He rose to the challenge and was offered a permanent job for a generous 2,000 liras a month. However, a telegram informed him that his father wouldn't last very long, so he had to leave town:

[He] lay in bed with a bloated stomach, caused by all the Fernet Brancas and Bitter Camparis. Just before he died, I read him two or three stories from the book, and he'd laughed.² It happened one afternoon in June 1930.

People came and went, and the moon went back to its place behind the shutters. The room was at peace again and despite the smell of Lysoform, I could go back to my literary reviews. No event was so important as to put me off completely from writing reviews, which had to get to Rome on time. They were never late on my account, never, in three years.³

Only a few hours earlier, his father had got out of bed clutching a gold chain, in a confused attempt to placate the creditors. The Zavattini family inherited a paltry fifty liras in cash and a mountain of debts. So they were forced to close down the tavern, despite the landlady's protests, and La Gabellina, their small hotel in the Appennine Mountains, as well as their Luzzara bakery and bar.⁴ They were left with nothing. Even the furniture was taken away in part payment for their bankruptcy. Meantime, the locals would walk past his window and see

him scribbling away and gossip that he'd hidden away a lump sum, which led them to the conclusion that the Zavattini family's bankruptcy had to be pure nonsense.⁵

As luck would have it, Zavattini's family was taken in by relatives, who were also bakers and Cesare, Olga and their two sons went to Milan, thanks to a loan from one of his friends.⁶ On his return to Milan, he discovered that Cavacchioli had been fired, and that the prospect of a job had vanished into thin air. He told the Rizzoli editors he was willing to accept any job. The best they could do was to offer him a proofreading post for 600 liras a month for one of their titles, *Il Secolo Illustrato*. It represented half the living wage. He started on 15 October 1930, proofreading the galleys of a novel by a writer called Brocchi.⁷

However, he supplemented his day job with a constant flow of articles written after work, for *Secolo XX*, *Novella*, *Il Secolo Illustrato*, *Commedia* and *Piccola*. In those days, there were times when he and his family were entirely dependent on one of his articles getting into print.⁸ However, as he put it:

The smell of printing ink given off by the roto-gravure press at Rizzoli's printworks in Piazza Carlo Erba, the huge rolls of paper, the bulk of the press, very attentive printers, all these impressions, gave him the feeling that he'd landed on his feet and that he'd never do without again.⁹

Zavattini described his new life in Milan to the editor of *L'Italia Letteraria*, Enrico Falqui:

My life? Going around from time to time to Savini, to Bagutta, having a chat with whoever drops into the publishers. Milan is a city, but you have to pretend to be less intelligent than you really are. I often think about the peace and quiet of Florence with nostalgia. I get strange postcards from there covered in signatures.¹⁰

2.2 Editing the Bompiani Literary Almanacs

To get his collection of stories into print as a book, Zavattini needed a publisher. In those days, Rizzoli, Zavattini's employer, published only magazines, so Zavattini decided to look elsewhere. His friend, Giovanni Titta Rosa introduced him to Count Valentino Bompiani, who had just started publishing the year before, in 1929, specializing in contemporary narrative literature.¹¹ Bompiani remembered their first meeting:

When Zavattini came to see me, I didn't know him personally nor had I heard of him. This large, shy person didn't inspire any confidence. He sat down and was silent, methodically pulling at his eyebrows. He pulled out of a pocket or perhaps from a sleeve, a roll of press clippings.¹²

Bompiani's first response was to tell him to edit the clippings and come back to see him when he had. Later, Bompiani came up with the title and helped shape the book into its final form. Zavattini's meeting with this publisher soon led to Zavattini's involvement in editing and producing a Bompiani *Literary Almanac*. In an article published in 1942, Zavattini remembered:

In those days, my time was split in half: I spent the daytime with Rizzoli, and the evenings with Bompiani. On any given morning, twenty people would come and see me at my desk. I liked that. [...] I was barely in time to finish my dinner, when I had to go to Via Durini and get there five minutes early. Bompiani would be bang on time. The doorway loomed large, but his office was cramped and had a low ceiling. Just two rooms. Bompiani had only recently started his publishing enterprise and we often had to work until two in the morning, because the *Almanac* was really hard work and required such humiliating patience.¹³

The *Almanac* was an annual publication, partly a commercial vehicle to attract publicity, but also, as a contract between Bompiani and Zavattini makes clear, an ambitious Modernist project.¹⁴ Zavattini told Falqui that this 'high print run publication will be another venture of mine'.¹⁵ The print run for the *Almanac* was 10,000 copies.¹⁶ It is the first striking example of Zavattini's activity as a desk editor, but also as a publisher, one equipped with a Modernist vision, which he shared with Bompiani, who, in those years, was the first to publish Vittorini's novels and other new writing.

The three editions of the *Almanac* published in 1931, 1932 and 1933 were paperback format, and numbered over 500 pages each. Their glossy sections feature highly imaginative layouts, closer to mass-produced magazine publishing, combining text and photographic images in many imaginative ways. Even some of the plain paper pages feature line drawings or headlines, set in among the text. These pages open up the space, breaking out of the grid. The first glossy page, 'The Almanac behind the Scenes' ('Retrosцена dell'Almanacco'), presents the reader, not without a gentle touch of editorial irony, with a startling behind-the-scenes montage of snippets taken from letters to the editors, praising or criticizing the previous *Almanac*.

The *Bompiani Almanac* for 1932, edited entirely by Zavattini, brought European and American experimental and fashion photography to Milan, publishing portraits by Edward Steichen, by the Dadaist Man Ray, who was also a fashion photographer working for the American *Vogue*, and Surrealist portraits by Maurice Tabard, a French Surrealist photographer, and by freelance fashion photographer and artist, George Hoiningen-Huene, based in Paris, originally published by Condé Nast magazine publishers. Experimental photographic portraits in double exposure appeared in this first *Almanac*.¹⁷

Zavattini and Bompiani also appropriated American visual culture, including photographs by the Modernist Edward Steichen, and originally published by Condé Nast magazine publishers, giving them new captions alongside the credits,

and relating the images to characters in contemporary Italian literature. What is striking about some of these photographs is that they are experimental and in a few cases Surrealist, for example, featuring eyes and faces inside cracked open eggs.

In the following *Bompiani Almanac*, the glossy double-page spreads reveal a tighter structure. Montage and large headlines appear in capitals under the strapline: 'Atmosphere 1933' ('Atmosfera 1933'). Each has a subtitle, for example, 'They've Elected Roosevelt' or 'Sex Appeal', with a montage by Bruno Munari, a Modernist illustrator and designer, and line drawings by the sculptor Marino Marini. The glossy photography reveals more Surrealist scenes: mannequins and dolls, experimental shots, a child shot from below looking like a frog and on the same page as an illustration of a frog in the bottom right-hand corner. They adopted Modernist typography, making shapes out of type. Yet Zavattini was unhappy with the results, as he told Falqui:

At least I can see clearly enough to whisper in your ear: 'it's ugly. Just like last year's, and the one from the year before. Or, if it's less ugly, that doesn't mean it isn't ugly all the same.'¹⁸

Zavattini told Bompiani that he was prepared to edit the next *Bompiani Almanac* only on condition that all the editorial decisions would be his and his alone, so that the end product would stand up to European scrutiny.¹⁹ He then increased the format, from paperback to magazine size, and changed the text-to-image ratio. The new *Almanac* would be two-thirds the photographic image. Apart from the review of the new writing of the previous year, it would be exclusively news-based and would include commissioned photographs of writers photographed in the street and artists in their studios.²⁰ This was Modernist design.

2.3 Zavattini at Rizzoli

As for his daytime job at Rizzoli publishers, when his first collection of short stories or *raccontini*, *Parliamo tanto di me*, came out, one of Rizzoli's team asked Angelo Rizzoli if he knew who the author was: 'Did you know that you employ a proof reader who is a successful writer?' Angelo Rizzoli was so impressed that he invited his employee to lunch, but didn't give him a more favourable contract.²¹ In addition to his proofreading job, in 1931, the publisher gave him a magazine to edit, *Il Secolo Illustrato*.²² That year, a typical week also involved writing short stories and articles for *Il Secolo XX*; *Cinema Illustrazione*, *Piccola*, *La Massaia*, *La Gazzetta del Popolo*.²³

When Giuseppe Marotta, the editor of *Cinema Illustrazione* was fired, as Zavattini found out from Marotta himself, Rizzoli offered Zavattini Marotta's job, but denied him an official promotion to journalist status and the

corresponding salary. However, by 1934, Zavattini was carrying out the work of an editor-in-chief on a number of Rizzoli's popular magazines: *Piccola*, *Lei*, *Novella*, *Cinema Illustrazione* and *Il Secolo Illustrato*. While working at Rizzoli, he was given the additional responsibilities of a commissioning editor. In all but name, he was a publisher.

His inner circle of friends and contributors included, among others, poets Salvatore Quasimodo, Leonardo Sinigalli, and Alfonso Gatto; the architect Edoardo Persico; the designer Bruno Munari; the illustrator Mino Maccari; the sculptor Arturo Martini; the cartoonist Saul Steinberg; the publisher Giovanni Scheiwiller; and the critic Sergio Solmi.²⁴ These were all people Zavattini had to keep chasing for their editorial contributions. Once he was so desperate to secure a commissioned drawing which Martini had promised him, but which never seemed to materialize, that, faced with an imminent deadline, he tracked down the sculptor at midnight in Via S. Radegonda and persuaded him to do the drawing on the spot.²⁵ Edoardo Persico was a particularly interesting Modernist who moved to Milan around the same time as Zavattini. Persico was also an anti-Fascist, and had contributed several articles to Gobetti's *Il Baretto*. Like Zavattini, he too was interested in the interdisciplinarity of the arts and literature and their relation with the new industrialized mass society.²⁶ Together with Giuseppe Pagano, Persico co-edited the architectural magazine *Casabella*, a magnet for what was going on internationally and, according to Victor Pevsner, the most beautiful and the most intelligent architectural journal in the world.²⁷ In a clear reference to the Fascist and Nazi rhetoric of scale, Pagano asked: 'Can we save ourselves from false traditions and monumental obsessions?'²⁸ At the time, *Casabella* stood for the kind of Modernist anti-rhetorical style to be found in the Bauhaus-style Bocconi Milan University, in Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini's industrial BBPR Group design (e.g. their radio-gramophone design of 1933) or Franco Albini's radio of 1936.

This was the Milanese Modernist milieu to which Zavattini belonged. The rise of mass publishing and the emergence of industrial design and architecture were all part of a new visual culture to which he contributed.²⁹ Zavattini saw the potentialities of the new popular media and visual culture, of illustrated journalism, photography and illustration, of cinema and radio, and was daring enough to experiment with them and persuade his publisher to invest in his ideas.

Since his move to Milan, and throughout the period of his employment by Rizzoli, Zavattini also did radio broadcasts at EIAR, the national radio, with a rubric entitled 'Parliamo tanto di me' ('Let's talk a lot about me'), echoing his bestselling first book by the same title, rejecting the bombastic mainstream approach to radio broadcasting, by taking mundane issues seriously and serious issues lightly, as one film historian has put it.³⁰ Radio, alongside cinema, was a new mass medium at the time. His interventions on radio involved a series of conversations with the listeners, like fireside chats, intimate and direct, something very unusual at the time, because it was at variance with 1930s formality. In one of them, he broke the anonymity and feigned objectivity of the new medium

with a theatrical scream, followed by musings about the new medium and his role as a broadcaster, adopting a Pirandellian story-within-the-story approach. His endless conversations in Parma, with playwright Ugo Betti, to discuss Betti's plays and the use of dialogue, stood him in good stead. Zavattini experimented with the new medium to see if the personal touch, ordinary language, and the absurd, could be applied.

2.4 Zavattini's Hollywood at Rizzoli

In Milan, Zavattini soon produced a regular fictional feature, based on what he'd originally published in *La Gazzetta di Parma*. His new version ran from 1930 to 1934, as 'Letters from Hollywood'.

For years, I wrote 'Letters from Hollywood'. I invented everything from A to Z, weddings of actors who were already married, fires, thefts, divorces, quarrels. It was all made up. I once wrote: '*In the evening, after leaving the studios, the stars get into their powerful automobiles and have a good time in New York*' which is thousands of kilometres from Hollywood.³¹

In his daily job, Zavattini was editing high print run illustrated film magazines, inventing stories and combining fact with fiction to create a fictional version of Hollywood for the Italian public. All Rizzoli's magazines were illustrated with photographs and stills from press packs sent by American agencies to promote the cinema, their cinema, Hollywood.

Writing as Giulio Tani, one of his many pseudonyms, Zavattini mused: 'Hollywood is as immortal as the dreams and the weaknesses of men.'³² It was the closing sentence to the full-page regular feature 'Recentissime' ('The Most Recent'), which reveals his ambivalence towards Hollywood and 'Ultimissime' ('The Latest'), a compilation of invented gossip. He also edited the Letters page. After Marotta's departure, Zavattini revolutionized the overall look, design and layout of *Cinema Illustrazione*. It featured photographic portraits of the stars from the studios, to help promote their new films and create a false perception, or *glamour*, around actors and actresses, commodifying stage performance into a mythology. The stars also appeared in photo-stories, providing the reader with an illustrated scenario, which was then published in instalments. Zavattini's full-page features counterbalanced the promotion of the Hollywood mythology with a hilarious sendup which slotted in perfectly with the rest of the magazine, thanks to the unifying design style, characterized by the same big splash typography, layout and use of photographs.

In the provincial cultural climate of Fascist Italy, Zavattini drew on the medley of facts, news, and gossip, to be found in what was, essentially, promotional material churned out by the film studios about their upcoming releases and distributions abroad. His features were a cross between what is known in the

magazine publishing industry as ‘advertorial’ matter, and what seemed to be a genuine journalist’s reportage from Hollywood, following a ‘From Your Own Correspondent’ slant, apparently non-fiction, camouflaged in the same editorial structure, to mimic filed reports, supposedly written on the spot.

His allegorical Hollywood equals the unreality of the real Hollywood. It is an invented reportage, a representation of an ideal representation of reality, entirely imagined by Zavattini, and a serious reflection on *mimēsis*. The invented fires, thefts, divorces, interviews with stars, impresarios and middlemen are all grist to the mill of his humour, aimed at demythologizing Hollywood’s star system and the so-called dream factory. He crafted his lookalike features, in the idiom and editorial structure of press releases, a combination of facts, quotes and lively descriptions. His fictive reporter is akin to an outsider observing with detachment urban modernity. Zavattini transforms himself, as if he were a Fregoli onstage, into a Baudelairean *flâneur*. For example, in one of the Hollywood stories, Erich Von Stroheim throws money from his hotel window and agrees to give an interview to the imaginary reporter, inviting him to appear in one of his films. The fictive Von Stroheim claims that only the depiction of reality could possibly be the way forward for contemporary cinema, adding that René Clair was doing exactly the opposite.³³

Thus, Zavattini puts words into the mouth of his Hollywood actors and actresses, whose names coincide with their genuine real-world counterparts. One of the stories packs in references to Greta Garbo, Rodolfo Valentino, Barbara Stanwick, Buster Keaton, Norma Shearer and Richard Dix, all reinvented characters, simulacra of simulacra.³⁴ These names serve as signifiers of an ideal life in a fantasy world, which his narrative disrupts, by using comedy as a lethal weapon. They no longer signify that world, but a different practice of filmmaking, which has little in common with Hollywood’s mainstream film industry. It is only when you read the text that you begin to realize how Zavattini appropriates language, style and structure, and repurposes them for his own ends. It seems no different to the practice of what was later described by Guy Debord and the Situationists as *détournement*, or, more recently, as ‘culture jamming’.

In a feature entitled ‘Rottami’ (‘Burned Out’), he describes unemployed men selling apples on the roadside. One of them recognizes Louis Sassoon, Zavattini’s imagined reporter, and invites him to write about the real story of Hollywood in exchange for an apple:

Extras work like manual labourers. They go in at 7am, change into their workers’ togs, and are on standby until 5pm. They issue instructions with a whistle. Our bosses are more stupid than a Prussian corporal. They say: ‘Shout! Fight! Run away! Destroy everything!’ And we go ahead and do it.³⁵

He answers the reporter’s question:

What do you specialize in? Unfortunately, I’m neither blind, nor a hunchback, nor a midget, nor deformed nor disfigured. I don’t even have the looks to be

a janitor or a waiter: I'm the extra to make up a crowd, one of a crowd, in a fake crowd. Is there anything more humiliating?

Another fictional reportage features Wynne Gibson: 'To be an artist, you have to experience life', the Hollywood actress tells the press reporter, thus serving as a mouthpiece for Zavattini's cinema of the real.³⁶ This story opens with an interview, the bread and butter of many a press release, creating a strong impression of an authentic statement of what the star is quoted as saying. Fictional Wynne complains that actresses begin too young and too soon to have an experienced life and to know how to portray it in their work. She goes on to say that the world of cinema forces them to see life in such a way that has little or no resemblance to the real world. Their screen performances are unique, but flawed, since they portray conventional stereotypes. The reporter narrates how Wynne had decided to live in incognito for ten days, in an attempt to experience what it was like to be an ordinary person. Working as a typist, a shop assistant and in a bar, she witnessed the lives of others, their joys and suffering, quite divorced from the 'standard' screenplays she was used to performing. In another story, Zavattini appropriates King Vidor, whose film *The Crowd* (1928) he admired. Vidor is made to say what Zavattini wants the reader to hear.³⁷ The director tells the Italian reporter that the reason film directors are unable to make the films they would like to make is the fault of producers and of the public. Vidor is made to say:

My ideal would be a film that describes a day in the life of a man, from the moment he gets up to when he goes to bed. I'm talking about the man in the street. The length of the film should be the same as the length of my hero's day. And the whole thing should be faithfully reproduced.³⁸

In 'A terribly honest article makes Joan change her mind', his imagined reporter cites an imagined source by the name of 'Trottenam'.

It has taken years and years, lies, sacrifices, noble enterprises – some less noble – and all the passion of a nation and the credulity of all nations, to create a myth: Hollywood, and to let rivers of gold fill the coffers of state and populate dreams all over the world. We have succeeded in idealizing mediocre men like Ramon Navarro, mediocre women like Marlene Dietrich. But on condition we don't see them too close up. Or else their disappointments and shortcomings would really begin to show.³⁹

This was how Zavattini put the distinction between fiction and non-fiction to the test and problematized Hollywood, while at the same time generating humour, at the expense of Hollywood's self-glamourized image, and drawing attention to some of the concerns about mainstream cinema he was to voice in his post-war interviews and articles.

2.5 From Rizzoli to Mondadori

In 1934, Zavattini convinced Angelo Rizzoli to diversify from printing exclusively popular illustrated magazines on a rotary press, by breaking out into fiction. The first book Rizzoli published was on Zavattini's recommendation, inaugurating a new series, *I giovani*, edited by Zavattini. It was a novel by Carlo Bernari, entitled *Tre operai* (1934) (*Three Workers*), set in Naples. This, the first Neo-realist novel, offered an alternative to mainstream Italian prose writing. The prose of *Tre operai* is akin to Vittorini's writing. The book is set in Naples, which Bernari frees from its customary fictional stereotype and colourful backdrop. It is about two male workers and a woman who are faced with the problems of survival, after the defeat of the workers' revolts in the early 1920s, unemployment and disillusionment after the victory of Fascism. On its publication, Mussolini wrote to the Italian periodical press, demanding that it should not be reviewed, since it was 'a Marxist book', but he didn't go as far as preventing its publication.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the regime's reaction caused Zavattini to panic and destroy several boxes of correspondence and other potentially incriminating documents he had filed away. From the very beginning, possibly as a result of his legal training, he maintained a private archive. In Florence, he had shared the Left-wing views of the Giubbe Rosse circle, and in Parma his mentors Betti and Saviotti were socialists, as were his extended family in his hometown.

In 1936, Zavattini came up with a new magazine for Rizzoli, *Il Bertoldo*. His plan was to compete with *Marc'Aurelio*, the twice-weekly satirical periodical published in Rome.⁴¹ It was Zavattini who appointed *Il Bertoldo*'s new editor, Giovanni Guareschi, a former student of his at the Maria Luigia boarding school who also became a good friend during his Parma days.⁴² However, just when *Il Bertoldo* was approaching its launch, the problems between Zavattini and Angelo Rizzoli came to a head.⁴³ Apart from being underpaid, and not being recognized as a publisher in all but name, there was also the fact that his boss was unwilling to invest in many of his new ideas. For example, Zavattini recommended the purchase of the ailing *Le Grandi Firme* ('Articles signed by Famous Writers') and turning it into a weekly publication.⁴⁴ That publishing proposal consisted in modernizing the magazine, by overhauling its content, increasing its format up to illustrated magazine dimensions, printing in photo-gravure for large print runs, and making its layout more flexible to accommodate a more imaginative use of images, in short, changing not only its look and feel but its content and ensuing identity altogether. But Rizzoli decided not to go ahead with the acquisition. The same happened with another magazine titled *Il Milione*. But the main problem Zavattini faced was his status and a salary which did not reflect the range of his responsibilities as the publisher and editorial director which he'd become in practice, if not in title. Consequently, when Rizzoli refused to give him a new contract, Zavattini joined the journalists' union. No soon as Rizzoli heard about this, he told him to resign from the union immediately, which Zavattini refused to do and then Rizzoli fired him on the spot. Twenty-four hours later, Alberto Mondadori hired him. Zavattini recalled:

We had large offices in the brand-new building at San Babila, telephones, Dictaphones, megaphones, the magazine titles in neon flashed in the windows. Outside my office, a red light flashed when I was busy.⁴⁵

Proposals from freelancers were either suitable or unsuitable for their publications. What was Zavattini looking for? 'The event. I was looking for events for my clients and nobody could change my mind.'⁴⁶ The point to any story had to be rooted in facts, or events; literary style came second. This was journalism as he practised it.

Zavattini's editorial vision comes across in the kind of advice he gave one of the editors of *Marc'Aurelio* – despite the fact that it was in direct competition to Mondadori's periodicals. *Marc'Aurelio* was one of three highly successful 1930s fortnightly illustrated magazines, the other two belonging to Rizzoli (*Il Bertoldo*) and to Disney-Mondadori (*Il Settebello*). *MAD* would be an example of an equivalent in English, with its mixture of zany prose, regular features and outright jokes, accompanied by any number of cartoons. Founded in 1931, *Marc'Aurelio* was so successful that it came out twice a week and somehow escaped the Fascist regime's censorship which had suppressed its predecessor *Becco Giallo* in 1926. *Marc'Aurelio* inherited many of its writers. A number of filmmakers began their careers at *Marc'Aurelio*, including Federico Fellini, Ettore Scola and Mario Camerini.⁴⁷

The fact that Zavattini was Mondadori's editorial director didn't stop him from being a regular contributor to the competition, namely, *Marc'Aurelio*. For example, he invented a regular piece entitled *Cinquanta righe* (*Fifty lines*), which he kept up throughout his career at Mondadori, from 1936 to 1940.

You told me: 'I'm giving you the space for fifty lines or so, every Wednesday. You can write what you like'. Then you left, after placing me under lock and key. Fifty lines! There are so many things I can do in this space; this is real happiness: I can feign deep sorrow for the demise of a lizard and fill so many lines with exclamations of suffering. I can write that Homer was a small alabaster swan. O heart, O soul, there is nothing else that I desire more than this small white space, where I can even piss in a beautiful autumn afternoon. [...] Fifty lines! Let me take my friends by the hand and dance around this half column my elders have put at my disposal. Let me contemplate it like the peasant his field. Three thousand lines a year, my God! What a dream, what sweet folly.⁴⁸

Zavattini's valuable professional advice to *Marc'Aurelio* suggests that he cared a great deal about their future and success. In 1937, he suggested that the editors commission high-profile writers, offering to help *Marc'Aurelio*, by sharing his own contacts with the editorial team. He also suggested that they introduce interviews, which they then did. He later told them that the way they had followed his advice wasn't going to help keep up their circulation figures. Their approach to interviews was wrong: they should be interviewing the man in the

street, feeling the pulse of everyday life. Now that would make the magazine more cutting edge.⁴⁹

He subsequently gave them technical advice. He had no doubt that Vito De Bellis could improve the magazine's quality. They had to modernize and Zavattini knew how. What he proposed was nothing less than a remake, suggesting that the editor change the overall layout and design; that he reverse the balance between image and text, by including more cartoons; and that he publish shorter articles, connoting a new snappy editorial style for *Marc'Aurelio*.⁵⁰ Zavattini made it clear that he was alarmed by the prospect that the competition, included his own, would destroy *Marc'Aurelio*, especially in light of the fact that *Il Bertoldo*, his former employer's comic magazine, had switched to colour and adopted a typographic style that was very pleasing to the eye. Even implementing just these two changes could tip the balance in *Marc'Aurelio*'s favour, regardless of the magazine's content. It would help if they commissioned only the best writers, including himself and Achille Campanile (who, incidentally, also worked for Mondadori publishers). Branding, by using their names, would increase their recognition value and the public's ongoing allegiance to the magazine. They could use name dropping as a regular feature of writing, to highlight how contemporary and well informed a magazine *Marc'Aurelio* was. They could create more reader participation, by launching a writers' competition to invent a new comic character; going so far as to suggest luring a successful contributor away from Rizzoli's *Il Bertoldo*.

Three months later, he came up with further ideas for *Marc'Aurelio*, which were also adopted; a full sixteen-page pull-out section, envisaged as an independent publication from the rest of the magazine. He suggested they design a separate masthead and cover page, entitled *The Forbidden Book (Il libro proibito)*. *The Forbidden Book* would employ humour, to touch on censorship throughout the world, but aimed at innocuous films, at invented court cases held behind closed doors, directed at imagined secret police stories, cooking up jokes and photographs which were anything but forbidden. Such suggestions provided his own recipe for a bullet-proof critique under a Fascist regime. What made it so funny? That it would be related to entirely innocent endeavours, using the nonsense technique of mismatching a general idea and its particular example.⁵¹

What comes as a surprise is that Zavattini knew Rizzoli planned to demolish *Marc'Aurelio* altogether, by employing its entire pool of contributors in one fell swoop. His support is extraordinary, and his advice is revealing for the extent to which it shows in practice how he operated as a publisher and a pre-war Italian press mogul, in this case, to the benefit of the competition. *Marc'Aurelio* mattered to him and he wanted it to survive.

2.6 Zavattini, Disney-Mondadori and other comics

As the reader will have gathered, by comparison with other writers of his generation, Zavattini was far from prejudiced against popular culture. A case in point is his involvement in science fiction comics, after he was sacked and was

hired by Mondadori publishers. Illustrated science fiction was first imported into Italy in the shape of the adventures of the superhero Flash Gordon, in 1934. These became an immediate success in children's comics, leading to original comics by Italian writers.⁵² When Disney-Mondadori was established in 1935, the new company took over the Italian version of *Mickey Mouse*, *Topolino*, from Nerbini publishers, who had never acquired the rights from Walt Disney.

In 1942, Zavattini remembered that, back in 1936, Federico Pedrocchi, 'a tall, dark, a man of few words who worked on the periodicals published by Mondadori, came into my office and said: "I need a story"'. Zavattini was his boss, but had no background in comics. However, in his position as editorial director, he oversaw the full range of Mondadori magazine publishing.⁵³ With one foot on his desk, 'American style', Zavattini dictated the first story of this kind to his secretary, inventing what he thought would be a one-off, *Saturn against Earth* (*Saturno contro la Terra*), illustrated by Giovanni Scolari.⁵⁴ When it sold out, he was asked to create a series, which he did. It lasted until 1946, was translated into English and published in the United States, by Future Comics in the 1940s.⁵⁵ Nor was *Saturn against Earth* the only scenario for comics Zavattini wrote. He also created *Zorro from the Metropolis* (*Zorro della metropoli*), *La compagnia dei sette* (*The Company of Seven*) and *The Mystery of Airport Z*.

2.7 From publisher to editorial director

Le Grandi Firme (*The Great Writers*) was another publishing success story of his. After his proposal to purchase the magazine had been accepted, he turned what was a boring looking anthology of new writing, which showcased short stories, into one of his biggest successes as a publisher. He did so without trashing the content. He commissioned the best high-profile writers for stories and interviews. He increased the format to large magazine dimensions. He replaced the film star photographic cover with an invented female character, a Vargas-like leggy character, drawn by Boccasile, which immediately boosted sales. Zavattini introduced photography, interviews and reportage, combined with photojournalism. And once again, he counterbalanced fame with a focus on ordinary people, whom Zavattini considered far from ordinary. He commissioned excellent writing to complement the everyday stories and illustrated them with photography. The centrefold was devoted to photo-reportage and headline-size titles and text. Culture and visual culture could combine forces. In 1930s Italy, this overall concept was both bold and innovative. The images told the story and the sales increased tenfold.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Rizzoli subsequently regretted sacking Zavattini. In 1937, he offered him 100,000 liras a year, an astronomical salary, considering that he was on 30,000, plus 2 per cent on magazine sales. But he turned down the offer.⁵⁶ Mondadori was so worried that he would lose him to the competition that he doubled his salary. The difference between the two publishers was that, whereas Rizzoli had ignored Zavattini's advice, Mondadori

followed it. For example, Mondadori purchased *Il Settebello*, a satirical magazine, well placed to become stiff competition to *Il Bertoldo*. Its title was borrowed from the name of a popular Italian card game, suggesting its playful content. It began its life in Rome in 1933, where it was published by an editorial team which used anonymity to protect itself from censorship or worse.⁵⁷ It had survived several confiscations but had decreased its extent from eight pages to six. Zavattini's move brought Mondadori into the flourishing popular market of weekly and twice-weekly satirical magazines, alongside *Marc'Aurelio* and Rizzoli's rival *Il Bertoldo*. The trouble with the old *Il Settebello* was that it hadn't kept up with the times. The writing was so dense on the page that it overshadowed the illustrations. It contained few cartoons and a back page of sport. After Mondadori's acquisition, the cover was printed in full colour, the amount of text drastically reduced, and contained more cartoons, more features and a flexible layout. The new editorial formula created by Zavattini was a commercial success.

Zavattini followed his own advice given to De Bellis a year earlier. He introduced 'The Diary of a Shy Person' ('Diario di un timido'), on the last page and a Letters page. With the introduction of interviews with high-profile figures such as Massimo Bontempelli, Zavattini modified the conventional formula for humour-based magazines, based on a combination of jokes, witty stories and cartoons. There was sugar and spice, a literary element, but also journalism. The additional twist consisted in his idea of interviewing ordinary people going about their business.

OUR MAJOR REPORTAGE. In this section of the magazine, each week we'll offer the public a piece of authentic journalism about a real event. Not the kind of events covered by the rest of the press. We are going to cover events which are extremely important for those people who live through them; events which could happen to all of us. Names and other information are all authentic.⁵⁸

Bruno Munari, the designer who had worked with Zavattini since the first *Bompiani Almanac*, invented illustrations of improbable, Heath-Robinson-like machines for *Il Settebello*.⁵⁹ Mino Maccari delighted in expressionist caricatures of people and Vito Boccasile produced sexy Vargas lookalikes. Zavattini invited Saul Steinberg, a Romanian artist living in Italy, whom he had pinched from *Il Bertoldo* and other magazines, to join the salaried editorial staff.

'The Lady Janitor' ('La portinaia') is a typical example of Steinberg's humorous drawings for *Il Settebello*. In some ways, they translate into images the nonsensical humour of some of Zavattini's observations in his short stories. The Lady Janitor is a huge woman with eyes all over her body, on her arms, ears, dress. She is a nosey parker, who spends her time spying on everyone living in the apartment block. Often Steinberg's people move in the surreal urban space of modernity. However, Steinberg didn't last long at Mondadori. Zavattini's friend and protégée was fired that same year by Mondadori. By September 1938, there