

make allusions to reality. For, although there were similarities and elements in common between fantasy and reality, they weren't so strong that you could point them out with any precision.⁵⁷

8.3 *Rome, 11 o'Clock*

No film could be more different from *Miracle in Milan* than *Rome, 11 o'Clock*, directed by Giuseppe De Santis, and based on a contemporary news story. A single job for a typist was advertised in the paper. Ten to twenty candidates were expected to apply. In the event, nearly 300 women queued up for the interview. The stairs in the building collapsed under their weight. In that building, sited in via Savoia in Rome, there were several fatalities and many casualties. According to Giampiero Brunetta, this is the most Zavattinian of De Santis's films.⁵⁸

In his private diary, Zavattini recounts the genesis of the scenario and screenplay.⁵⁹ De Santis confirmed that 'His participation was total, to the extent that it triggered endless lively discussions between us'.⁶⁰ One can see why. De Santis shared Carlo Lizzani's orthodox Communist vision of a popular cinema, based on Lukácsian typology, which veered away from the real into an idealism of sorts, whereas Zavattini pursued a genuinely materialist vision, based on a careful scrutiny of real-world events, and their causes, discreetly mediated through poetic rendering. De Santis was looking for a novel on screen, with a plot, twists, and dénouement. As for Zavattini, in his Modernist approach, he envisaged an allusive, anti-novel. Thus, the tensions between the two filmmakers, which De Santis hints at, were less to do with clashing personalities and more to do with clashing visions of cinema.

Before Zavattini's involvement, De Santis's initial plans to make a film about the event had got him nowhere. He soon decided to involve the screenwriter, who came up with the suggestion that they hire a press reporter to carry out background research on the real event and interview eyewitnesses and the candidates, with a view to collecting their impressions, relate to the witnesses and empathize with them, and their feelings, and look for anything that might concern the event.

Gianni Puccini suggested Elio Petri, a very young reporter working for the Communist *L'Unità*. As it happened, the previous year, in 1950, Petri had interviewed Zavattini at length, for *Filmcritica*.⁶¹ Their meeting meant that Petri was schooled in Zavattini's ideas. The crucial insight was that personal, face-to-face contact with the Other can become an exchange, enabling a deeper contact, a participation in making meaning, through facilitating in the respondent a process of self-reflection, on condition that the filmmaker approaches the Other through empathy and respect.

As far as Zavattini was concerned, *Rome, 11 o'Clock* offered him an opportunity to visualize a fragment of *Italia mia*, his enquiry-film project. This would be a fragment of *Italia mia*, a subject's view of Italy as it is, not as one would like it to be. In this light, the film could reveal, through field research,

the contradictions surrounding these fatalities and the human dimension, by giving voice to the people involved, the young unemployed typists, to present their case, talk about their lives, constraints, hardships, about what it was like to be a female working in a male environment, exploring the lives of the real people behind the names and statistics, by means of interviews and later a re-enactment, by inviting them to a casting for the film. There would be minimal intrusion and an attention to detail and accuracy in terms of social context. What he envisaged was more akin to non-fiction, than fiction. What De Santis planned as a fictive story, loosely based on real life, Zavattini planned as an ethnographic enquiry into Italian society, where under the surface of a fatality lurked social contradictions of gender inequality, which could, and should, be addressed. Hence the clash of wills in their personal correspondence.

Under Zavattini's guidance and encouragement, Petri followed the screenwriter's advice and framework: embarking on a total immersion into the reality of the street to confront the contemporary moment. As he said in the 1950 interview: 'These young people, then, should be chucked out into reality, empty handed. No prepared scripts in their pockets, no preconceived ideas about reality.' There was an agenda, a need to know, as a first step, but no script. Petri interviewed all the women, the firemen, the neighbours, the magistrates involved in the case, and anyone else who was in any way involved.

In this ethnographic approach, the results were a revelation. Petri produced an impressive sample of oral history, mistaken in film archives as the first draft of the screenplay for the film, and catalogued in this way in the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia di Roma archives. The Zavattini-led team discovered that women from all social classes had applied for the job, at a time when in Italy there was a growing demand for economic independence coming from women. Petri's research was shocking for how his questioning teased out from the respondents the poverty and living conditions of many of the women, the sexism they had to endure in a male-dominated office environment, their housing problems, the commuting difficulties, travelling hours to reach the centre of Rome from the *borgate* and shantytowns where most of them lived.

At a 1996 Conference, De Santis described Petri's field research as a novel, written in collaboration with the protagonists. It wasn't in the sense he intended, but it was in another sense, for it could be classed as a testimonial novel, the kind of writing that emerged in Italy in the early 1950s, most notably in Danilo Dolci's books, in which the author takes second place, to let his characters and witnesses, real people, not figments of the imagination, a chance to speak their mind.⁶² The director's clash with Zavattini came down to the fact that De Santis and his writing team wanted to forge Petri's raw material into a cinematic novel, understood in the traditional sense of a fictional story. According to De Santis, Zavattini pressed him to stick to Petri's research and remain faithful to it, without going into personal stories.⁶³ But that is not quite so, since Petri's extensive and detailed research is about nothing but personal stories, including those gleaned from interviews with doctors and nurses, passers-by, the police and the journalists who rushed to the scene.

Zavattini's reaction was that the research was going in the right direction, but more field work was needed. For Petri's initial findings didn't reveal what it was like to be in that situation. In keeping with his theories, Zavattini wanted to get closer still to the reality of the disaster, and move away, as far as possible, from De Santis's imagined cinematic novel. Was there a way to gain access to their direct, tangible, experience? What was it like to be in their shoes? To feel the humiliation of waiting in a long queue for a typing speed test, to experience a growing apprehension, the mounting anxiety for results; what kinds of conversations were they having while they were waiting in the queue?

To address these questions, Zavattini suggested to the team that they put a similar advertisement in the Rome daily, *Il Messaggero*. Their advert would be for a real secretarial job, working for the film production team for the duration. But it would trigger a situation, simulating, by involuntary re-enactment, the original situation and then allow the filmmakers to observe the candidates and collect ideas for the screenplay. They chose a ground floor office in Via Po, in the same area.

To aid the reconstruction, each candidate would do the same typing speed test required in Via Savoia. Would the original witnesses apply? The filmmakers were counting on it. As it happened, they did, though they weren't told about the film. For their simulation, the team chose a ground floor office and seventy candidates turned up. As Zavattini had predicted, the interviews afforded screenwriters, the director and now assistant director Elio Petri an insight into the plight of the candidates. True to their plans, the successful candidate was employed for the film production job advertised.⁶⁴ In 1955, Zavattini wrote to Petri from Cuba where *Rome 11 o' Clock* was proving to be a great success and Petri published his letter as a Preface to an abridged version of his research for the film.⁶⁵ It was a mistake not to publish all the field research and what all its voices had to say about 1950s Italy, since the result would have formed a testimonial novel, on a par with Danilo Dolci's ethnographic work in the same period about a Sicilian village and its inhabitants.⁶⁶ This is what Zavattini wrote to Petri:

We met those girls who fell from the stairway after the event and listened to their stories. If we hadn't possessed a more developed socially engaged conscience, one provoked by the new events of Italian history and subsequently by cinema, we would have seen and heard far less than we did. There wouldn't have been that contact with places, with the protagonists of the news event of Via Savoia, and you wouldn't have gone to interview them, the typists, I mean; you wouldn't have produced the booklet that is about to come out in print, a document that reveals an entire outlook on life, a modern way of relating to other people.

Do you remember that morning in Via Po, when we carried out that experiment, which was called 'cruel' by respectable people, of attracting a hundred typists with an advertisement, identical to the one which caused the tragedy? A girl left the queue in a rush, and weeping, because she realized

that the others were better than her, but she needed to get a job, and she was leaving with her face hidden by her hands.⁶⁷

8.4 *Bellissima*

That same year, *Bellissima* (1951) came out. It has little, if anything, in common with *Rome, 11 o'Clock*, or with *Miracle in Milan*, yet all three films were based on Zavattini's writing. Some critics have considered *Bellissima* central to Luchino Visconti's oeuvre and marking the beginning of the end of Neo-realism, arguing that Visconti's formalist cinematography, staging and use of professional actors distanced the film from Neo-realism.⁶⁸ Is this so?

Zavattini created the scenario for Visconti's *Bellissima* between 1940 and 1942, but the film only went into production in June 1951. It was edited and cleared by state censorship by December.⁶⁹ Before his scenario was ever fleshed out by a team of other screenwriters, comprising Suso Cecchi d'Amico, the director, Visconti, and his regular assistant director, Francesco Rosi, Zavattini had written no fewer than eight versions of the story.

In Zavattini's earliest version, a widowed father wishes his young child to win a film casting competition for the main role in a film. Later, the character of the son with a speech defect becomes a stuttering daughter who has no screen presence to speak of and is offered like a lamb to slaughter, when attending her screen casting with the powerful presence of the real-world film director Alessandro Blasetti. Both imagined child characters, however, make very unlikely choices for casting and both are equally unable to satisfy their parent's ambition, hard as they try. In all the versions, there is the constant of the Neo-realist innocent eye witnessing the tawdry world of mainstream cinema.

Earlier versions and the final scenario and screenplay all feature a fixer who takes advantage of the parent's gullibility and naïve idealization of the film spectacle. In the film, this cunning character is played by Walter Chiari. Zavattini later replaced the father figure with a mother called Maddalena Cecconi, played by Anna Magnani. Maddalena almost succumbs to the fixer's bribes and to subterfuge, willing to sacrifice herself to realize her dream.

According to Lino Micciché, Visconti subverted Zavattini's scenario, transforming a linear narrative into a complex story, working on multiple levels.⁷⁰ Yet Zavattini's scenario is already complex, highlighting the behind-the-scenes production process, conflicting modes of recitation, the pulp media of popular mass-produced photo-stories and contemporary film stars, Donizetti's opera music and Howard Hawkes's *Red River* (1948), complicating the film through reflexivity and staging and dramatizing the clash of fiction and reality.⁷¹ Zavattini's various scenarios for *Bellissima* share a critical study of popular film culture and its deluded perception of mainstream cinema, teasing out the gap between imagined lifestyles and everyday life.

It was a problem which Zavattini had already explored, thematizing the plight of the non-professional actor playing the role of Antonio Ricci, Maggiorani's