

TOWARDS A DIGITAL KNOWLEDGE ECOSYSTEM: BOTTOM-UP EDUCATION IN THE NATIONAL PORTAL OF CESARE ZAVATTINI'S WORKS

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Abstract

Never before has the growing integration between media, history and digital practices profoundly transformed the ways in which historical and cultural knowledge is processed. Within the field of Digital Humanities, digital archives function as environments in which memory is renewed through innovative narrative models and flexible consultation systems capable of engaging diverse audiences and fostering active participation. In this framework, cinema, both an aesthetic and documentary medium, plays a central role in preserving and interpreting collective memory. A good model of digital film archive should therefore be conceived as a dynamic platform integrating metadata practices, multimedia resources, and exploratory pathways.

This research focuses on the National Portal of Cesare Zavattini's Works, funded by the Italian Ministry of Culture, a case study for examining the potential of digital film archives in processes of knowledge production and dissemination. Zavattini, a key figure of Italian Neorealism, based his poetics on cinema's capacity to convey an effect of reality and to reinforce social identity through practices of memory and narrative construction, shaped by the experience of the post-war period. Consequently, the portal project aims to offer a model of Public History geared to make a substantial documentary corpus accessible, particularly to digital natives, through the reinterpretation of traditional texts and the development of collaborative narratives grounded in bottom-up approaches.

The method adopted involved extensive archival analysis, cataloguing and filing of cinema documents preserved at the Panizzi Library in Reggio Emilia. Both produced and unproduced film subjects have been digitised, mapped and reorganised in a database with standard details, enriched with philological and historical-critical notes. Moreover, ongoing developments include the design of text-reconfiguration tools such as exploratory pathways based on thematic tags, Data Visualization models, integrations with new media sources, and film workshops for schools supported by Artificial Intelligence techniques.

In this perspective, digitisation and reorganisation of the materials not only broaden accessibility but also open new interpretative possibilities, fostering Data and Digital Storytelling practices that transform archival items into shared narratives and stimulate critical knowledge processes. The portal thus emerges as a dual instrument: a resource for historical-critical research and an educational device capable of enhancing the cinematic heritage, preserving its memory, and encouraging active user participation.

The study suggests that such a digital archive can serve as a powerful means of democratising historical knowledge; no longer a simple repository, but a dynamic system that generates meaning and supports critical awareness among younger generations, in an age marked by rapid change and by the need to rebuild connections between memory, place, and identity.

In conclusion, the public return of cinema papers not only restores centrality to the creative process and to cinema's social purpose, but also offers a replicable model for future projects, in which the synergy between narrative, data, and digital media becomes a key interpretative tool for understanding contemporary reality. Keywords: Digital archives, cinema, Public History, collective memory, Digital Humanities, collaborative narratives, Artificial Intelligence, accessibility.

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1 INTRODUCTION

When the media are combined with history, their role as a 'channel of communication' begins to take on greater significance, both in terms of dissemination and narration through original models and languages and in presenting direct evidence, such as sources. The web in general and digital archives in particular fully embrace this assumption, meeting the need to interact with a diverse audience and keep memory

alive by shedding light on the past. The emergence of Digital Humanities has expanded the ways in which knowledge is represented, integrating the paradigms of Data Science and influencing contemporary society's perception of decision-making processes and cultural production. Technological innovation, from digitisation to the Internet, has promoted the spread of collaborative narratives, expanding the user base and introducing practices of reinterpretation of traditional texts: new media do not replace the old, but remedy them [1], transforming the cultural experience and giving the public an active role in the construction of content [2] [3]. In this context, cinema is a key medium for structuring aesthetic, political, and mnemonic experiences, and film archives play a crucial role in preserving and disseminating film culture. No longer symbols of entertainment product collection, but dynamic and social platforms capable of integrating multimedia, metadata, and guided viewing systems, allowing active participation and the creation of innovative narratives. Creativity, understood as a different combination of something that already exists or for which the context has been changed (cf. Umberto Eco) [4], and new digital technologies are becoming indispensable tools for the design of Public History, whose main function is to present history in a multimedia and generational form. After all, every piece of digital content can be considered a cultural interface [5], as well as artificial intelligence which, although far removed from humans in terms of style and authorship, can contribute to inclusion, the democratisation of creativity and the improvement of educational processes through good practices.

Given this premise, a good digital archive model dedicated to cinema should be able to offer users new ways of exploring and innovative paths of enjoyment, so that the seventh art is no longer seen as mere entertainment, but becomes a documentary source to support teaching, history, and Media Education. Contemporary digital fluidity reduces the differences between media and opens up new areas of intersection, characteristics that find full application in the design of Public History: through targeted activities, communication techniques and cultural dissemination strategies, a real return to the new generations emerges. It is above all young people, the so-called "digital natives", who deserve particular attention and protection, as their relationship with reality is often centred on immediacy; this is why dialogue becomes essential to reconstruct and mediate relationships between facts, characters, and the public. Archival construction, therefore, is not simply an accumulation of sources, but a process of attributing meaning, which allows for a prismatic use of digital content and promotes critical awareness in navigation and active user participation. Digital technology, after all, introduces a "historiographical revolution" that redefines the writing and use of texts [6]: the public becomes an active reader, navigating through texts structured on multiple levels, whose content can be enjoyed according to the times and methods that best suit them. In this scenario, the development of critical thinking emerges as a fundamental element; for this very reason, it is necessary to focus on quality content that allows users to develop a critical approach to multimedia, instilling in them an awareness of the time factor, with a view to greater self-awareness and awareness of themselves in relation to society and the environment they experience. It follows that the preferred field of application of the digital cinema archive model includes educational and cultural contexts, where research contributes to the preservation, study, and understanding of cinema as historical and artistic heritage. The enhancement of media and digital archives is therefore part of a new communication paradigm, in which culture is constructed through sources that respond to the needs of their own era [7].

2 METHODOLOGY

A valid example that we would like to highlight in this context and whose work is moving in the direction indicated above is the National Portal of Cesare Zavattini's Works, whose Committee was established on 5 February 2018 by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism - Directorate-General for Libraries and Cultural Institutes [8] (now the Ministry of Culture). Cesare Zavattini, one of the most important figures in Italian neorealist cinema, spent his life investigating the effect of reality that cinema could convey to the viewer. His empathy for human beings allowed him to reveal the Italian people's sense of belonging in the face of the tragic experience of the Second World War and to rebuild that identity threatened by the dynamics arising from the historical, social, and economic context of the time. When the members of the Scientific Committee and the dedicated research team worked on the creation of the portal, their aim was precisely to restore to the general public an artistic and cultural heritage that would otherwise have been inaccessible, while also allowing individual works – starting with film projects that were never realised – to regain the value that the past had denied them. Just as Zavattini's method allowed individuals to better understand both the social fabric and themselves, filling the gaps in the unease that gripped them, the research group's methodology also aimed to fill a knowledge gap, providing an interpretation of these "empty spaces" in the history of cinema, which fill many shelves at the Cesare Zavattini Archive in Reggio Emilia, housed in the Panizzi Library. The cinema papers themselves were the starting point in their capacity as documentary sources, whether

voluntary (the actual subjects created by Zavattini for directors and producers) or involuntary (correspondence, notes, telegrams, in any case produced without posterity in mind), narrative sources such as subjects, treatments, screenplays, production notes, or written documentary sources, consisting of chronicles, diaries, memoirs, and accounts of events. Only after a long process of archiving, cataloguing, and filing the film subjects and their variants, mapping, and reorganising the subjects in a database that included standard personal details and a series of supplementary information, enriched by critical filing of the subjects, was it possible to bring order to the Zavattini universe, laying the foundations for the creation of the National Portal of his Works. Aware that the web contributes greatly to the development of new forms of sharing, the materials consulted in the archive have been made accessible thanks to the scanning of a selection of variants and other documents, allowing for free comparison between the different versions and opening up the sources to new modes of expression and a wider audience. The research team has scanned many of the original items directly, ensuring maximum legibility, to allow users to access all the information that the original could convey (not only the writing but also corrections, drawings in the margins, cuts and rewrites, etc.).

Furthermore, the decision to promote Zavattini's work through a digital archive is closely related to the decision to prioritise the media as new sources of information, a decision that falls within the scope of what has been defined as "new history". This manifests itself as a trend characterised by certain programmatic directions, among which the acceptance of history as a "system of explanation of society through time" and the process of integrating historical knowledge with partial historical themes that tend to constitute a whole stand out. It is above all the latter direction that has established a closer connection with openness to new sources. Not less important is the central element in the relationship between old and new media, which is the immediacy of the relationship itself and the almost simultaneous access to various information by the new reader of the digital text. In this regard, Criscione's conceptualisation of the web is useful, that of an open structure, a medium, a means or a space for interaction, communication, cooperation and production, a space where writing can also take place [9]. Zavattini stands out for his open, live writing style, which takes on a more gestural, disruptive, and intermedia character, more suited to the web and forms of digital communication. Indeed, there seems to be more space on the web for the construction of an autonomous mode of connection between texts [10].

The reader of a hypertext is, therefore, an active reader, just like the one required for the examination of Zavattini's subjects: he chooses his own path through the metatext, activating the plot of a creative hypertext and creating links between documents written by others. As a result, hypertext "reduces the phenomenological distance that separates individual documents in the world of print and manuscript" [11]. It is no coincidence that the implications of Zavattini's artistic production can be fully understood by association, untangling the web of information present in his literature, film notes, and Diary. The portal aims to restore the right order to all this, not in terms of linearity, but in terms of connections between several distinct sources, taking advantage of the freedom that the democratisation of the means of communication, including those related to the arts, has brought about. We are, in fact, in the era of the "hypertextualisation of knowledge" [11].

Digital hypertext opens up new possibilities for historical semantics, allowing the past to be represented from different perspectives and, at the same time, according to distinct temporal perceptions, different scales of observation and layouts. Willem de Koonig has stated that in our world, "content is a fleeting glance", a passing vision, a glance en passant [12], but it is also the historian's task to engage with the public arena made up of virtual users, the so-called Google generation, native speakers of digital language, in a constant struggle to continually renew themselves in an expanded and one-dimensional present. Our era is characterised by anachronism: "on the internet, our subjective 'now' flows within a continuum made up of countless contemporaneities, which seem to us to be such because they are all simultaneously accessible" [13]. As suggested by Thaïs E. Morgan, intertextuality shifts the focus from the triad "author-work-tradition" to "text-discourse-culture" [14]. It is a "referencing mechanism" [15], a structure of links to other texts whose existence is part of the network of correspondences of meaning between the texts themselves.

3 RESULTS

From the above-mentioned perspective, the National Portal of Cesare Zavattini's Works understandably becomes a point of arrival and departure: arrival allows the reader to approach a source directly through the web, without the inconvenience of going to an archive (perhaps even having to ask for special permission to access certain documents); the departure is synonymous with exploration and subsequent research, ideas, and productions. The possibility of searching through cinema papers according to the type of film subject (whether made or not) or based on a specific thematic tag that distinguishes the works; the level of detail of

each subject, each characterised by a synopsis, a philological note, and a historical-critical note, as well as being enriched by related media sources; the opportunity to consult specific film card databases within the portal, as well as the planning of educational courses, such as dedicated film workshops implemented in school contexts through the use of AI techniques, which allow portal readers/users to express themselves through drawings and storyboards; all this provides robustness to a system for archiving and visualising the data contained therein. The integration of narrative elements will allow the audience to be guided along an interpretative path, facilitating understanding of the content. It is in Data and Digital Storytelling, in this synergy between data, narration, and visualisation, that true communicative power is born: what was once “just another text” now becomes intuition, understanding, and action.

The media favoured by the project respond to the need, in the context of film archives, to bring together two different approaches, each with different users: in-depth historical and critical studies and an educational and informative approach. The aim is the same: *resistentia memoriae*, enhancing the scope of awareness and promotion of archival heritage. If the portal can be considered both an achievement and a starting point, it is also necessary to ask what factors have allowed cinema papers to develop: they represent, to all intents and purposes, the foundations of the portal, and giving them visibility means carrying out a historic operation with very specific social and educational implications. A bottom-up approach has therefore been adopted, thus carrying out an action to “recover the foundations” of Zavattini’s work, the focus of which is how an idea develops [16].

Cinema, after all, is the most direct and immediate means of understanding the reality that surrounds us, partly because the camera experiences physical contact with the world, maintaining an almost direct relationship with what it observes. For Zavattini, “the gaze is the first operational and cognitive impulse of man immersed in the matter of things” [17]; starting in the 1930s and even more so in the immediate post-war period, Zavattini’s writing focused on experimenting with perspective, rejecting any fictional representation. The choice to favour a truthful and unfiltered gaze connotes a strong sense of responsibility in writing, whose margins of freedom expand when cinema escapes its commercial destiny, but also encounter boundaries depending on the historical period. Zavattini’s work is in fact based on a past steeped in war, and for him, sharing experiences is a necessary condition for knowledge of the present to become a common good. Zavattini’s commitment is therefore imbued with a great sense of civic duty: in the space-time of the here and now, light is shed on the past to turn it into history through the practices of memory. The triad of history, memory, and territory therefore represents a support for the depth of identity and the lifeblood that drives the construction of new meanings. We can thus fully understand that reality is always matter that is critically processed by human thought [18]; Since totally objective historical evidence does not exist, during the interpretation phase of the sources, it is necessary to adopt an approach that uses precise methodological criteria in evaluating information related to the author, the environment in which the source was formed, the historical situation, and any experiences from which the author drew inspiration [19].

4 CONCLUSIONS

Zavattini’s goal was to develop the critical ability to interpret everyday life within historical events, aiming to simplify historical complexity through an awareness of the procedural dimension of knowledge. Shared knowledge is precisely that which emerges from public and social thought. While history has always been subject to the surveillance of power, from the state to the Church to the great economic powers, today, with the advent of the media and new media, communities have become infinitely large, and their dimensions are potentially unlimited. Already with the mass media, and even more so with the new media, the relationship with history translates into a profound process of democratisation in the dissemination of historical knowledge. The debate on history has been undermined by its initial assumptions, focussing on a variety of places dedicated to the elaboration and constitution of historical memory and collective identity.

Ours is an age of change, characterised by phenomenal technological innovation, the erosion of traditional values, and a certain instability in relationships. Considering change, therefore, means examining collective behaviour, seeking to investigate how people perceive time and space. According to Zavattini, vision had to be thought of in relation to our relationship with things: “sight touches things, the eyes swallow and 'ruminate' objects, the gaze listens to the 'noise of the world'. The seer is first and foremost sentient, caught in a web of contacts” [17]. From a passive element, the audience acquires the status of co-protagonist, thus aiming to counteract all those practices of distortion of the past aimed at shaping public opinion to their liking.

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