

Interview with Guido Aristarco

Edvige Giunta

Giunta: At what point in your career did you become interested in cinema, and what was the condition of Italian cinema and film criticism at the time?

Aristarco: My first article was published in 1937. I was very young then and I was not interested only in cinema. Even then I was seeking links between film and other cultural forms. I saw film as something completely new, that generated responses altogether different from the ones generated by literature or other traditional art forms. My generation as well as the previous one saw cinema as a revolutionary event, though such perception was not always clearly articulated. We believed that cinema opposed the idealism of Benedetto Croce and the concept of the unity of art, and that it proposed a new notion of art. This new art form represented a complete departure from the traditional aesthetic for two reasons: first, because of its technological nature, and second because it was a collaborative art form. Its product, the film itself, involved several "authors." During that period, the "official" culture was very suspicious of technology, and did not believe in its capacity to create anything of lasting or high value.

In the 1930's several intellectuals, even followers of Croce, converted to cinema, as did, for example, the literary critic Giacomo Di Benedetti and the art critics Giulio Carlo Argan and Carlo L. Ragghianti. The best Italian film theory is still unknown abroad. The French are typically reluctant to translate and thus are not familiar with the Italian contributions to film theory and do not know such critics as Barbaro, Chiarini, and Pasinetti, who all wrote in the 1930's and 1940's. I also believe that Italy was the first country in the world to establish the teaching of history and theory of cinema in the universities. Chiarini and I obtained the first professorships in 1969.

G: You have also worked with De Santis and Lizzani as a screenwriter.

A: Only once. I have always argued that the critic should not try to be a director or a screenwriter. The year 1946, however, was a special time in Italian history: I had been part of the partisan movement and *Il sole sorge ancora* (*The Sun Also Rises*), directed by Aldo Vergano,

based on a script by Lizzani, De Santis, and myself, was based on the Resistance (the title actually referred to a message in code). In the post-war period, I also acted as a mediator between Visconti and Elio Vittorini, for the making of *Uomini e no*, Vittorini's novel, that also dealt with the anti-Nazi struggle: that was one of many of Visconti's projects that were never realized. Years later, Valentino Orsini directed a film based on that novel, and I acted once again as a mediator.

G: I would like to go back to what you were saying concerning the history and theory of film. You have also followed the transformation of cinema, as a discipline, since you teach film at the University in Rome "La Sapienza."

A: Yes, we have about twenty professors, full and associate. Nevertheless, for various reasons, this has not really improved things. The study of audiovisual devices and film education should begin in primary school. Moreover, because of the postmodern wave, a second-class director becomes, even in the university, often more important than Chaplin, Welles, Kubrick, Dreyer, Visconti or Antonioni. The followers of *Cahiers du Cinema*, the worst kind of film lovers, dominate even in the classroom. I believe in the difference between judging culture and judging value. Thus I believe there are great artists and small directors, and in between them the average, the expert artisans and the commercial directors. Certainly purely commercial cinema, without any artistic value, should not be neglected; in fact, from a cultural point of view, it has a great value because the popularity of a certain film or certain types of film throws light on the "philosophy of the age," and helps us to understand what kind of world views are popular among audiences. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that a distinction must be made between the judgment of a cultural product and the judgment of its artistic value.

G: Are there any contemporary Italian directors that you appreciate?

A: Certainly, even though Italian cinema is undergoing a serious crisis. I loved *Ladri di saponette*. Nichetti's intelligence and curiosity enable him to merge humor, satire, and parody. Gianni Amelio and Peter Del Monte are two good directors. On the other hand, Tornatore and Salvatores are both overestimated. This happens also because of the Oscar, which is conferred by a self-serving academy of arts and sciences—although many choose to ignore that. It is an award that does not reflect the artistic value of a film; it only serves the purpose to promote a film or its director. Don't forget that Chaplin was very old when he was given the Academy Award, in an attempt on the part of

the Academy to seek a reconciliation, or to placate Freudian anxieties that the Academy may have had about him.

G: What do you think of the fact that both *Cinema Paradiso* and *Mediterraneo* have been successful in the United States?

A: *Cinema Paradiso* and *Mediterraneo* are the products of the comedy Italian style or, better, the Italian comedy. It's a terrible comedy in most cases because, as Italo Calvino said, "the more the caricature of our social behavior wants to be ruthless, the more it proves to be self-indulgent. The Italian vitality may charm foreigners but it does not touch me in the least." That's it: Tornatore and Salvatores don't touch me in the least.

G: Which Italian films should then be known abroad?

A: It's important to remember that many films made in Italy are never distributed. It's a form of censorship that stifles first- and second-time directors. So although *Ladro di bambini* is well known abroad, nobody has seen *L'amore necessario* directed by Fabio Carpi, or *Confortorio*, directed by Paolo Benvenuti, or even Gianni Amelio's *Colpire al cuore*. These are all important films, both from an aesthetic point of view and as depictions of an authentic Italian reality.

G: You seem to suggest that a certain image of Italy prevails abroad, especially in the United States. Can you comment on that?

A: These are the stereotypes that are successful abroad: the Italians as good people, very humane, able to adapt to the most diverse situations. *L'arte di arrangiarsi* ("the art of getting by"). All things that have very little to do with the real Italy.

G: *Cinema Nuovo* has followed the transformation of Italian cinema in the last forty years.

A: Yes, the journal was created forty-two years ago, although in reality it is older, since it grew out of the journal *Cinema*, and the first issue of *Cinema* came out in 1948. In 1952 *Cinema* fired me for political reasons, and I created *Cinema Nuovo*.

G: How has the journal changed?

A: Some things changed. For one thing, it is now a bimonthly instead of a biweekly. Zavattini used to say: "We are moving towards eternity." The bimonthly moves away from information and encour-

ages reflection, the essay as opposed to the review, the thoughtful debate that is not the result of an immediate response.

G: What kind of relationship do you have with Marxism now?

A: I have an excellent relationship with Marxism. But I wish to point out that the theory I believe in is Marxian rather than Marxist, that is, I rely on Marx's writings instead of the works that have popularized his theories. The Marxian method is based on a constant self-questioning and refutes the absolute. Thus it has allowed me to rely on different interpretive approaches, not just the sociological approach, but also symbolical criticism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiosis, the study of sources, stylistic criticism, and so forth. It is important to make a distinction between authentic Marxism and vulgar or popular Marxism. The real Marxism cannot be, by its nature, dogmatic: false Marxism is dogmatic, and unfortunately it has been applied much too often in the past. It is this false Marxism that is undergoing a crisis, and it is a good thing that it is being abandoned. Marxism has taught me to distinguish between stylistic virtue and subject matter. Those who believe that the Marxist theory is interested only in the subject matter, the themes, the flawless heroes, have never read Marx and Engels's writings on literature and art. Marx believed that it is important to be able to admire what we don't love. Thus, I love Pound's poetry, but I don't love—in fact I reject and fight—the reactionary ideas that his poetry expresses. In criticizing a film I have tried to keep separate the value judgment from the cultural judgment. In fact, *Cinema* and *Cinema Nuovo* have been interested in such directors as Antonioni and Bergman, who are certainly not Marxists. And I have admired though not loved Fellini; I have admired *and* loved Chaplin, the early Visconti, and Kubrick, the director of *Paths of Glory*.

G: For many years this popular Marxism you talk about has influenced Italian culture, Italian criticism, and Italian education, shaping the way in which philosophy and other disciplines were taught. You claim that now a new form of vulgar Marxism is emerging.

A: Marxism, especially this "vulgar" Marxism, has influenced only a part of Italian culture and criticism. On the other side of vulgar Marxism, there was and still is Catholic criticism. It is a critical theory that tries to claim as its own exactly the kind of cinema that it always fought against, such as neorealist cinema, and tries to make Catholic Bresson and Bergman. This is criticism that is concerned only with subject matter, it is a moralistic criticism. And although I am certainly not referring to Andre Bazin, it would be interesting to search for the

causes of the influence that his spiritualism has had, not only on French and American film theory in the last twenty years. Such influence is also due to the fact that, as I said earlier, French, unlike Italian, is a well-known language and as a result there are several French texts translated into English. For this reason, American critics have explored issues such as the *politique des auteurs*, on the basis of what had been written in the *Cahiers du cinema*, especially by Bazin, disregarding the fact that these issues had been explored by Italian critics in the 1930's and 1940's.

G: Did something similar happen with post-structuralism?

A: We translated Eisenstein. The French translated his works much later, and to lesser extent than we did. Metz regarded Eisenstein as an "old theorist;" he knew him only through the citations of Jean Mitry. Even the French critic Barthélemy Amengual points out that Bela Balaczs and the important film theorists are still not well known in France.

G: What can you tell me about the historical animosity between you and Bazin?

A: There was no animosity between me and Bazin. I want to point out that Bazin was a contributing writer for *Cinema Nuovo*. This journal has always been open to internal dialectics, to discussion of opinions and trends: I never censored or belittled Bazin's spiritualism. The ambiguity about a supposed animosity between the two of us grew out of the famous letter about Rossellini that Bazin addressed to me and was first published in *Cinema Nuovo*. This letter has been reprinted so many times, even abroad, without a reference being made, even in a footnote, to my answer. From a theoretical perspective, as it is well known, Bazin was against the so-called *montage interdit* and favored the montage without cut. He believed that the latter left the spectator free to judge what he saw, and thus offered a greater possibility for realistic representation. I believe that the uncut editing/montage also guides the spectator's eye and does not have a stronger connection with reality. However, the problem does not lie in choosing one option instead of the other and creating a rule out of it. It is up to the director to choose, each time, what method will work. And it is the critic's responsibility to trace and explore the stylistic and semantic reasons behind the director's choice.

G: You admire Antonioni, a director who has not enjoyed the same popularity as Fellini. What is your opinion of Fellini's cinema?

A: Here too I want to clarify a few things, especially in response to what Peter Bondanella has written in his book and in *Cineaste* about my negative opinion of Fellini. Fellini is a great director when it comes to images: his images are always beautiful and seductive, I admire him and I supported him at the beginning of his career. However, Fellini's Christian beliefs, his spiritualism, even his Catholicism, are becoming increasingly clear: his films express a desire that Christianity again become the ordering principle of our society. This is what originated his criticism of the Roman church as institution (this is blatant in *La dolce vita*). I admire Fellini's style, but I disagree with his ideas, his poetics, his world view. Once again, as a true Marxist I draw a distinction between value judgment and cultural judgment.

G: What do you think of *La voce della luna*?

A: It has not added anything new to Fellini's cinema.

G: As someone who greatly admires Antonioni's cinema, do you believe any of Fellini's films are at the same level?

A: Stylistically yes. For example, *8 1/2*. But I lean towards Antonioni, because of his secular philosophy. His linguistic structures, his secular epiphanies, the wave of probability in juxtaposition with the law of cause and effect, reveal the infusion—as it has already happened in literature—of Einstein's theory and language in film narrative: Antonioni is a great modern narrator because he accepts the laws of probability. He reaches in film the subtlety and complexity of the great twentieth-century writers. He is a "literary" director.

G: And Fellini is not a "literary" director?

A: Not at the level of Antonioni.

G: Many have compared *8 1/2* to Joyce's *Ulysses*.

A: The connection with Joyce can be traced to the two authors' reliance on the epiphany and their Catholicism. However, the sources for *8 1/2* must also be sought elsewhere, in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, just as *La Strada* had its predecessor in Ford's *The Informer*: even physically, Zampano is a version of Gypo.

G: What is your opinion of Italian-American cinema and especially Scorsese?

A: I find Italian-American cinema very interesting, not only for

its subject matter, but because it confirms the professional level of American cinema. Coppola, as well as Lucas and Spielberg, have been able to react to the new crisis that film is undergoing because of the effects of television on the presence (or absence) of spectators in movie theaters, by producing films with new special effects that demand the viewing on the big screen. I like Scorsese, and am sorry that *The Last Temptation of Christ* has been misunderstood by the censors and underestimated by the critics. Besides using the camera in an unusual and creative manner, Scorsese brings together religious obsession and a certain kind of Catholicism. It may be an apocryphal film, according to the New Testament, mistaken, fictitious, even counterfeited, with his new Jesus and Judas, but it is, in its own way, a Christian, even a Catholic film. I prefer it to Rossellini's *Il Messia* that I find repetitious and tired by comparison.

G: What about *Cape Fear*?

A: I found it amusing, but also interesting because of its concern with obsession and its ramifications. Everything is extreme, and the film must be seen as a series of subjective images: we see a nightmare, we see the ghosts that the protagonists sees. And it's also an ironical film, self-consciously so. It's similar to *Goodfellas* for its irony and self-consciousness and for its reliance on the montage without cut.

G: What do you think about the quality of acting in American cinema?

A: Generally speaking, American actors are always good, very professional, in contrast with Italian actors, who have no school and are often unprofessional. Often their voices must be dubbed. To perform well, they must work with directors such as Visconti and Antonioni. Italian cinema often relies on a "screaming" acting and the use of dialects, especially Roman and Neapolitan, roughly translated into Italian.

G: An article that appeared in *Film Quarterly* discussed the dangers of videophilia, a phenomenon that is occurring also in Italy. In what way do you think such phenomenon is affecting cinema? Do you think it's destroying it?

A: You can truly experience a film only in the movie theater. The format is a structural element, it's essential to film viewing. Besides, on the television screen, you don't see the full image. The videotape serves the critic, the writer of essays, who, having seen the movie in the theater, can then study it, turning its pages as if they were turning

the pages of a book, stopping on every page (photogram), on every chapter (sequence), and moving back and forth, to capture those connections that memory alone cannot. From this point of view the videotape frees the critic from a burdensome slavery, that is, from the reliance on memory alone, which does not allow for scientific accuracy. However, it is also true that it's already possible to have in our own homes the big screen televisions with high resolution. With this exception, videophilia right now is striking the heart of cinema.

G: Is cinema as a cultural experience undergoing a transformation or is it dying?

A: According to Rudolph Arnheim, cinema died with the advent of sound. In a sense he was right: silent film is very different from sound film. But I believe cinema was not dead then and it is not dying today; just like yesterday with the introduction of sound, today with electronics, film is once again modifying its language. Contrary to what McLuhan stated, the medium is not the same as the message. What I mean is that electronic cinema is not ontologically condemned to be the embodiment of utter alienation. Don't forget that cinema has already undergone two revolutionary transformations, with the introduction of sound and then color. Electronic film will be completely different. However, the nature of cinema does not change. There is no doubt that a certain kind of cinema is doomed to die, but not cinema itself.