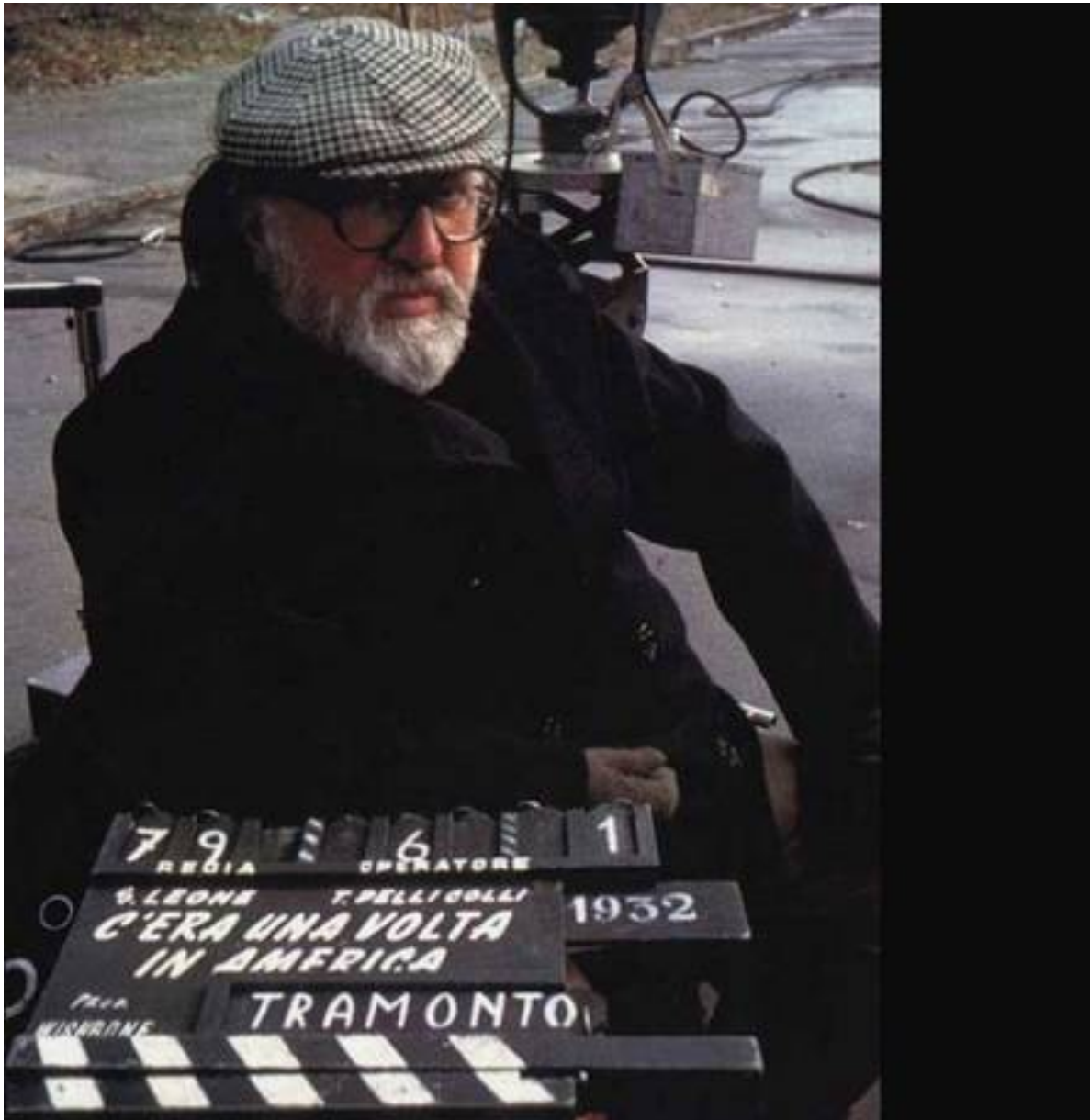


A Nostalgic Look at Sergio Leone

Marina Melchionda (December 28, 2009)



Italian journalist and writer Roberto Donati presented his book "Sergio Leone: l'America, la nostalgia, il mito" at the Italian Cultural Institute of New York. We interviewed him about his passion for the legendary director and the contents of his work



I can't think of anybody, of whichever generation, who has never heard about Sergio Leone. All of us, young people, adults, and senior citizens have seen at least once in our lives one of his best remembered movies, such as *A Fistful of Dollars*; *For a Few Dollars More*; *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*; *Once Upon a Time in the West*; and *Once Upon a Time in America*. All of us know that his favorite scriptwriter was Sergio Donati, that most of his soundtracks were written by Ennio Morricone, that Hollywood stars such as Clint Eastwood found their fortune debuting with him.

We all know that he is the Italian director who changed American Westerns.

As popular as Leone was and is, however, his country has never given him the attention he deserved as the inventor of the cinematographic genre of the "Spaghetti Western". Very few are the Italian academic publications dedicated to his works and person, while in America his talent has been much more widely recognized. We don't know why this is so, but we are glad to notice that something is finally moving in the right direction.

We recently met a talented, young and freshly graduated Italian student and journalist that has dedicated his last years of research and his final dissertation, recently published in book form, to director Leone.

We met Roberto Donati on the occasion of the presentation of his work "Sergio Leone: l'America, la nostalgia, il mito" at the Italian Cultural Institute of New York on December 15. Together with Antonio Monda, Professor at New York University 's Tisch School of the Arts, he talked about the fundamental contents and aim of his research before an intimate public of experts and people passionate about cinema and its history. New York is only the first stop of his long American tour that will bring him to Philadelphia and finally to San Francisco in January 2010.

Making an appointment with him during his stay in New York, we meant to talk with him about the origins of his passion for Leone who, although being often referred to as a "Legendary director", does not certainly belong to his generation and we ended up discovering many interesting anecdotes related to the book, and finally understanding why Roberto decided to focus his research on only three movies, that he classifies as "La Trilogia del Tempo" (The Trilogy of Time): *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), *Giù la testa* (1971), and *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984).

We certainly found his book to be an original work, a significant contribution to the Italian research on the director, but also a comprehensive collection of interviews, testimonials, and contributions by some of his closest friends and colleagues such as Claudia Cardinale, Ennio Morricone, and Sergio Donati, and by researchers and cinema experts, among whom Professor Antonio Monda himself. It offers new, interesting research keys, that will hopefully be available soon in English, since Roberto is currently considering translating it for the non-Italian readers and, in particular, the American public.

When did you first come up with the idea of writing this book?

When I graduated I realized that my final dissertation, if opportunely modified, could become a book. It was released in its version by the publishing house Falso Piano in 2005. This year, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the death of Sergio Leone, I decided to propose a new version of it, featuring a new chapter dedicated to Leone's biography and an entire section that collects memories and contributions from his friends and colleagues, or from people that have researched him before I did.

How come you decided to focus your work on only three of his movies, *Once Upon a Time*



in the West, Giù la testa, and Once Upon a Time in America?

Because those are the only three in which the theme of nostalgia is particularly strong. That's the aspect I wanted to do the most research on: nostalgia has always characterized my personal life, thus I wanted to understand how Sergio Leone managed to translate it in movie form.

When did you fall in love with Sergio Leone?

Well, first of all I must say that he is not my favorite director. My parents, however, loved him, and thus his movies are some of the first I saw in my life. They would not allow me to watch violent movies, but his were always uncensored! Thus it might be right to say that having memories related to him dating way back to my early childhood, he certainly influenced my

approach to Cinema.

What is, instead, his major contribution to the transformation of the American Western?

Classical American western pictures are completely different from Leone's. The first, as an example, focus more on the landscape, the surrounding environment, than on the character himself. Leone, instead, has introduced a new kind of shooting, the one that privileges the close up, focuses on the eyes, puts in relief even the smallest facial features of the actors.

His characters do not look like they are just coming out of a beauty spa. They have wrinkles, mud on their boots, dust on their clothes. They are cynical, disenchanted, there is not a neat contraposition between the "bad" and the "good". For these characteristics they almost seem Roman, just as Sergio was. It is also said that he imagined his movies in Roman dialect, and asked his scriptwriters to do the same!

These are some of the major novelties he introduced, and that definitely changed the way Western movies were shot from his time on.

Quentin Tarantino has often claimed that he considers Leone one of his masters, to the point that when he first started directing and didn't know many technical terms, asked for a close up by saying "give me a Leone". Do you look at him as one of Sergio Leone's heirs?

It is easier to find his heirs in the Oriental cinema than in ours. John Woo and Miike Takashi as an example, could be two. It's true that Quentin Tarantino is considered one of his disciples, but I feel that he gets inspiration from Leone just as he does from Dario Argento and others. Maybe Kill Bill I can be the only "Leonian" film he did, but the others are truly a mélange of different schools.

Are you planning to write more books about Leone, maybe focusing on other movies than these three?

No, since that would mean losing that specific cut I was able to give my research by focusing on the theme of nostalgia. There are dozens of books both in Italy and abroad that extensively talk about his biography and production, I'd rather divert my studies to a new subject.

To what kind of reader are you addressing your book?

I think that only somebody that is quite passionate about cinema can fully understand what I wrote and meant to say. Although I write in a very linear and almost "colloquial" style, in fact, I often used a specialized lexical register, my real aim being to study his movies more from a technical than a



critical point of view.

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