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Shortly after 'Once Upon A Time In America' was first released, Sergio Leone did a lengthy interview with Cahiers Du Cinema. Some of his comments are similar to ones made at other times but some of the details he gives are more specific and candid than many other quotes. Interesting to read Sergio Leone's own words, from April 1984, when the memories of events were still fresh in his mind.

Subjects covered include the cuts to the movie, the disputes, a long version, director friends, Harry Grey, the garbage truck, filming, research, sound, De Niro, Eastwood, Bronson, My Name Is Nobody, his father and mother, cinema, other genres, Blade Runner, future projects.

[Roughly translated]

Cahiers: Why did the film take so long to complete?

Leone: I already wanted, you know, to make this film before I did Once Upon A Time In The West. The Americans asked me to make a Western again first, which started me on a new trilogy.

I had many problems getting the rights to the book. They had been taken by the director Dan Curtis; then there was Genoves and Lebovici who wanted to produce it in France but they failed to get the rights; then Grimaldi managed to get them, but he went back on our deal because his recent films, notably with Fellini, had not been going well, so I went to court against him because he made me lose two or three years where I was immobilised.

Finally, Arnon Milchan purchased the rights from Grimaldi. To acquire the rights, Grimaldi had been obliged to make a replacement film for Dan Curtis in the States, a tale of terror, Burnt Offerings with Bette Davis ... that did not do well.

Cahiers: How did this disagreement over the duration of the film happen?

Leone: It's a complicated story. They gave me carte blanche to do four and a half hours with the idea that it would be made in two parts, that is to say two films coming out together.

But four months after the start of editing, they said to me no, it is not possible, because in the U.S. (that's what they told me, I do not know if it is the truth), a sequel cannot come out less than three months after the first part, for competitive reasons, because operators are not necessarily the same for both parts. If it were possible for both parts to be released simultaneously, it would result in unfair competition from operators who have a single theater. It therefore seems that some operators cannot handle a double distribution. They demanded that I cut the film.

I did not want to go back to the first concept which was three hours. I cut as much as I could, and I arrived at the 3hours 40min version which you have seen. But then they wanted me to cut a further hour, especially in the beginning. The only possibility would be to remove the flashback construction, and I did not want that. We'll see. I have retained a very good French lawyer, Leo Matarasso (the lawyer of Orson Welles), because the contract was made in France under the Napoleonic Code. I also have a lawyer in the U.S. to try to stop distribution in a truncated version. But my first course of action must be against the producer, who is in France.

I have proved my good intentions by agreeing to cut to the limits of the comprehensibility of the story, and also from parts constructed in flashback, the battle is about to begin, we'll see. But the truth, in the USA there is no-one to speak to, no boss. The Alan Ladd Companies depend on Warner, and at Warner there is not a single executive, but many people who think the same way and are bound by the rules. If they say, less than three hours, we cannot discuss further because they also need to change the mindset of retailers and everything else. They do not want to engage in a battle with the distributors or take any responsibility.

Cahiers: Have the 50 minutes of cuts been focused on a specific part?

Leone: On various parts. I cut a scene where Deborah (Elizabeth McGovern) plays the role of Cleopatra; meetings between Eve (Darlanne Fluegel) and De Niro; a love scene with Deborah as a young girl; a passage that I liked very much, the Station restaurant (it was shot at the Brasserie Julien in Paris); a beautiful scene between De Niro and the driver of the Rolls Royce who is Jewish too, but bourgeois.

I also cut a scene in 1930 where the garbage truck that we see at the end of the film is stopped in front of the house, another where a crane dredges the river, leading us back to 1968. And again a beautiful scene with Louise Fletcher, who played the director of the cemetery - with one cut, we no longer see her in the film. Many of the cuts I was forced to make concern Noodles' relations with women.

Cahiers: Will we see the long version?

Leone: On television, I hope. But the producer, Arnon Milchan, makes me hesitate, he is an amateur. I do not know how this affair will end. For the moment I am very guarded towards America. I sent two telex announcing my intentions; if the film must be cut even more, they risk trivializing it, if they restructure the narrative into chronological order, it becomes a different movie. The one I made is a film about time, memory, and about cinema too: *Once Upon A Time A Certain Type Of Cinema*.

The distributor, the Ladd Company, had a film of 3 hours 40 mins that did not work in the USA. The rule they maintain is that films must be less than three hours to do well. They decided it without regard for the film or for themselves, because if my film was released in the USA in a version of three hours, as they pre-announced, it would be a disaster. But my film is not *The Godfather*, you cannot see it in chronological order, because if I had done that, starting my story with the children, I would have chosen other details, other anecdotes.

Cahiers: With the success of your previous films in the U.S., do you not have free rein over there?

Leone: It's becoming difficult for me too, because they have given me money to make this film you have seen and then they have destroy it themselves. It's a kind of bizarre masochism. The truth is that these gentlemen are afraid, you see the changes in America in the headquarters of Major Companies: once at the Metro, three weeks later at Warner Bros.

Cahiers: They change but they go round in circles, this sounds the same?

Leone: Because they follow the rules. There are no more major producers such as Spiegel and Selznick saying: I do not care, I want to do it like this, I will take the risk. There are men who say: The distributors have said no more than three hours, so two fifty nine yes, three two, no. And it's hard to fight against an enemy that does not exist.

Cahiers: From now onwards do you think you will be working just in Italy?

Leone: Within the limits of forthcoming projects, I'll try to work without America, that means: without American funding. I am convinced that if there is a strong European producer, once a movie is finished, we can also fight to get it distributed in the U.S., but not with Major Companies. It's a losing battle, we have all lost: Kubrick, Coppola, everyone.

Cahiers: Save Lucas?

Leone: He does not need them, he keeps them. And he already restrains himself in the way he cuts his films.

Cahiers: If you want to pass by American money, however, in terms of stories and fiction, is it, for you, still in America that they exist?

Leone: Ah yes!

Cahiers: How did you reconcile this, then?

Leone: For the film I worked on an American book with Italian writers, after having spoken many times with the author, which was important for me, and constructing the film as I wanted in my own way with collaborators who understood me.

Afterwards I played it back to Stuart Kaminsky, a Jewish American writer who loves what I do, who teaches film, who writes about the noir genre within the world of cinema, and who gave the American translation of the original Italian dialogue the right Jewish American touch.

Cahiers: That is the meaning of the "additional dialogue" by which he is credited in the credits?

Leone: Yes. And then the problem was to translate the dialogue into French and Italian, as there was no question of going back to the original Italian dialogue in the dubbed Italian version. It went well with Stuart Kaminsky because he knows my films. It amazes me how well they know European cinema. At UCLA, I assisted on courses about me, it was something extraordinary, a scene analysed shot by shot. The strongest came from this University: Lucas, Spielberg, Milius. Milius had written Roy Beans for me, which I refused (Editor's note: The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean directed by John Huston) and also the scenario which was finally directed by Pollack, They Shoot Horses Don't They, but that was a mistake, it was not my world.

Cahiers: The film references you mentioned earlier are not directly visible in your movie?

Leone: Yes, but it is a tribute to all the movies that obsessed me, Hollywood and Rudolf Valentino.

What touched me the most, when I talked to Harry Goldberg, who wrote this book of memories (The Hoods) in Sing Sing under the name of Harry Grey, is that he believed he had committed an act of arrogance and revenge against Hollywood cinema. Grey told me: I have written this book because I am not happy with the movies I have seen, these are films from the period 1935-1940.

And what touched me also, apart from the story of his childhood, apart from this ideal platform of anecdotes which he offered me for use in my film, it was as if the book had been written by a bad Hollywood screenwriter, who had been influenced by films he had seen in the way of telling events, even if the facts were true.

In addition, the book confirmed it was about somebody who was not very important, a small-time gangster, captured in a book he was forced to write himself; there is not only physical poverty but also psychological poverty in the person. It is at the same time a true story and a tribute to Hollywood.

Cahiers: What is striking about the film is the very special combination of mythology and truth.

Leone: Yes, and the manner in which it is told: the person who comes back full of mysterious memories that slowly, slowly we learn about until the end, that means until death. He also may well have dreamed his future, it is the meaning of the scene in the opium den in 1933.

Cahiers: You said the childhood scenes were the most faithful to the book, and that the rest was largely reworked?

Leone: Yes, because the film goes as far as 1968 and the book stops in 1935, when he takes a bus and leaves the city.

I have other memories concerning Harry Grey: At the beginning his lawyer did not want me to meet him in person, but I passed him by. Then it was Noodles himself who telephoned me; to tell me that he was a fan of my movies and he wanted to see me - one to one - which was difficult because I did not speak English sufficiently well. We met together with a friend of mine over several years.

Physically, he looked a bit like Edward G. Robinson, short, fat, with the pink face of a child, almost ceramic, good looking, really good looking. The poor man had sold his book with the proviso that he was the technical advisor for the production, to verify details. But he died three months before shooting began.

Cahiers: The story with the union leader makes one think of Jimmy Hoffa, a union leader with links to the Mafia.

Leone: It is Jimmy Hoffa, effectively. You know that Hoffa disappeared mysteriously and for many days there was this garbage disposal truck parked in front of his home. He had probably been thrown into the truck. Like the truck we see in the film : I did it in Rome just as it happened.

Cahiers: How did you resolve the union problems to film in the USA with an Italian team?

Leone: I started as for a small film, we were originally 45, I dealt in the U.S. with the least important of the two big unions there, and we paid a number less than my technicians, to stay at home, and I worked with my team. This created a conflict between the two unions and enabled us to save a lot of money. Because in New York, filming is mad. If you have 100 parked cars, you must pay 100 drivers at 1,300 dollars each per week.

Cahiers: How much did the film cost?

Leone: I can tell you how much it cost on the line, that is to say without my salary, that of De Niro, the principal actors, and without the editing : fifteen million dollars. I can say this because I was penalized on my salary in case of overspending.

Cahiers: How were the filming locations shared? Was the whole street on the Lower East Side where the children grow up and where the action takes place fully reconstructed at Cinecitta?

Leone: Only a part. I built Fat Moe's bar twice: once in the U.S., only the exterior, and another in Italy, where we filmed all the interiors, but also the alley at the side where the fight takes place, for continuity. Many things had to be duplicated, the cabinetmaker sometimes made two copies of each piece, for Rome and New York. And it's in Montreal that I shot the scene of the fire, the deaths of the three men, the club where murder takes place, the scene on the river with boats, and the hospital and the scene outside the bank which they plan to rob.

Cahiers: Why Montreal? For reasons of economy of production?

Leone: A little, but mostly for reasons of historical truth in the places. You can find there many more details and architecture of the 30s than in New York itself. Montreal was the head of prohibition, all alcohol passed by there. But between our research and filming, many of the places I had found in Montreal had already disappeared.

As for the scenes on the beach, it was Don Cesar Palace in St. Petersburg, Florida, a real gangster hotel which had been closed for 25 years, was requisitioned by the Air Force and then reopened as a hotel for tourists. The area where we see Noodles with Deborah, after raping her, it looks like Normandy, many architectures are copies of European locations.

The feather factory was an old mill owned by a Jew in the neighborhood, where they cleaned goose feathers which were used for pillows and eiderdowns. It was terrible to shoot there, because of the smell; masks had to be worn. De Niro did the scene without a mask.

We shot some interiors at Cinecitta: the brothel, the opium den. But all the great interior decor was not filmed at Cinecitta, but the outskirts of Rome: I rebuilt the small street, the back-store, the speakeasy, the bar at Fat Moe, we filmed there for one month.

In New York, I shot mostly on the other side across Williamsburg Bridge, and there we found in the population, half Puerto Rican, half Jewish, a lot of co-operation, perhaps because we were Latin . Nothing was stolen. I had to redo all the fronts of shops that no longer existed, the inhabitants had to endure living for four months with blocked windows, entering their homes from

the rear. But if the construction lasted a certain time, the filming lasted only 25 days in this street. And in total for the film, 7 months, including two or three weeks travelling, so six months of filming for a movie which could be made into two films.

Cahiers: Aren't there films which inspired you for the reconstruction?

Leone: No, but photos, documents from the period showing the real decor. I found automobiles, for example, in Montreal where there are fabulous collectors. The difficulty for this movie was to have the right things in a broad view, not only in close framing, as we see in films of this genre. What luck we had to find this terrace in the neighborhood where children live, with these roofs, these water tanks of the period. And through 360 degrees, in place of hundreds of television antennas that we could have found, there were only twenty that had to be taken down.

Cahiers: How was the sound done in the movie?

Leone: Everything was in direct sound, with Jean-Pierre Ruh, who won an Oscar for *Tess*. But it was necessary to post-synchronize some scenes because sometimes I try shooting whilst diffusing the film music and the actors who have rehearsed with it sometimes prefer to film with it, and to dub afterwards since it gives them a certain atmosphere. I was told that Kubrick did that too, for *Barry Lyndon*.

I always have the music written and recorded beforehand, only the theme with some instruments, not an entire orchestra. I do this for several reasons: to create atmosphere; to also help create silence and concentration on the shooting. And it also assists the operators to find the necessary sweetness to make their shots, like a violin. And naturally, afterwards, we film mainly with direct sound whilst cutting music. Several times, actors like Fonda, for example, start with making fun of this process, get used to the music and they ask to film with it: it's like cocaine, it's terribly addictive. De Niro has refused many times for the music to be cut.

Cahiers: The film is advertised in the press book as Dolby stereo, gold, in the room where we saw the movie, which has Dolby equipment, it was in mono.

Leone: Indeed, this was planned for the film but ultimately it has not been mixed in Dolby Stereo, it was unnecessary for an intimate film like this.

Cahiers: And working with De Niro?

Leone: Very good, great. It changed my whole idea of the film. At the beginning I hadn't thought of him because he was engaged on a major project. And to give the sensation of time, I wanted to hire three actors for each important role: one for a child, one for mature, one for old age. For example, for old Noodles, I thought Paul Newman, and for adult Noodles, Tom Berenger.

Suddenly, De Niro whom I had contacted fourteen years beforehand for the same project (he had made *Mean Streets*, he was not yet widely known, I was, and I told him I wanted him), he remembered it, it had touched him. I think eventually he discarded another movie.

Naturally, from the moment I had him, I could make him do Noodles adult and old, which enabled me to do the same for the other actors who reappear in both periods: James Woods, McGovern, Tuesday Weld etc ... You saw De Niro's fantastic makeup for the period of 1968. What a job! At first, he was stubborn, he wanted the makeup artist for *Elephant Man*, Christopher Tucker, with whom we did two and a half months of testing. And I said, it does not work with this guy, the character is not a monster.

Finally, with us gutted, he left with one hundred fifty thousand dollars for three pieces, and I took on a young Italian, who has done something fantastic. But obviously, we needed to film the scenes calling for the same makeup together. De Niro was in makeup at one thirty in the morning to be ready at six or seven clock, and he did this for two and a half months. And he had to shave his head and cheeks, hence the hat he wore when he went to Cannes last year. He made the movie with a mad love, professionalism and total obedience. Then they told me that he was difficult. He has such love for the job he did.

Cahiers: Did you choose Elizabeth McGovern because of Ragtime?

Leone: Yes, I loved her in Ragtime, as well as in Ordinary People and a stage play. At the beginning Bob De Niro did not go with it because she was not from New York, and he would have liked all the cast to be from New York and have the right original accent, the tone of Brooklyn. McGovern, she's fantastic. To play like she did, at age 21, the scene of the makeup removal, where she was supposed to be fifty! My model for this scene was an Italian woman such as Valentina Cortese, who is always young.

Cahiers: What do you think of the movies made by your ex-star Clint Eastwood?

Leone: I have not seen the last ones. He is smart, his western, The High Plains Drifter was not bad.

Cahiers: He has a strange career, between personal films that do not work and films from the vigilante genre, à la Bronson, which do well.

Leone: You know, De Niro is an actor, Eastwood is a star, it's different. You can only use him in a limited way.

Cahiers: Is De Niro well liked by the American public?

Leone: No, they prefer actors with character, stereotypes, such as your Belmondo and like John Wayne was.

Cahiers: In your film, the children play very quickly like in American movies, and the adults more hieratic, slow, choreographed, à la Leone.

Leone: It's done a bit on purpose. It is these children who also provide these possibilities.

Cahiers: One could believe that your films call for masks rather than types.

Leone: It depends on the film that I am making; sometimes you need masks. It is said that Michelangelo saw his Moses in a piece of marble; me in Clint Eastwood, such as I chose, I saw the piece of marble. I do not say this to belittle him: he must be like that, marble like.

It's like Bronson in Once Upon A Time In The West. In that film, it was easier to direct him rather than an actor who I found sublime like Jason Robards. Because Bronson is less actor and more a mask. And De Niro, he of course, is the chameleon, in movies, and in life. Tuesday is not the same as Monday. What is closer in his interpretation in my film is what he had done for Kazan in The Last Tycoon.

Cahiers: For you, is filming always a happy moment?

Leone: Yes. And even more so on this film. Normally, arriving on set, I know all my film. But De Niro, it is not possible to direct him like that, according to marks, signs. We must let him be free, follow him with the camera. For me it was a new experience, and a surprise every day; he gave me a lot of enthusiasm. And he also gave me an opportunity for distance: I never knew the day before what I was going to have the next day.

Cahiers: In the U.S., today there are many great actors and few good directors, except people like Scorsese.

Leone: I'm good friends with him. He said he sees Once Upon A Time In The West once per week. I really liked his latest film, The King of Comedy.

Cahiers: You have rarely filmed with Italian actors.

Leone: Yes, except Gian Maria Volonte. And Claudia Cardinale, but that was for co-production.

Cahiers: And during these times, how have you seen film evolving?

Leone: I will not say it has evolved, especially in Italy. Authors like Elio Petri and others, have lost themselves in some political confusion. I am distracted by production, believing, with some romance, it was possible to do it like another time in America, where the producer was busy, taking risks. It is no longer possible. There are no more producers of this kind, so that all directors, even worse, are authors.

The producer asks them: Make me a movie with Sordi, without saying what movie or what idea. The director needs to improvise something, and in the end he thinks that he has made the film from the first to the last stone. It will be very difficult to have contact between me as a producer and director: they have to respect me and if they try to imitate me, it's worse. There is a tension, they'll keep their thoughts hidden. In America, it's easier, I am a friend of Lucas and Spielberg, working together is easier, there is less suspicion between us. But I'll never do the work of a producer.

Cahiers: What about films set in Italy?

Leone: Even those films are managed by producers who do not have an idea, who are promoters of a package from distributors. The director does his job all alone and he does not want to discuss things further. For *Un genio, due compari, un pollo*, I wanted to respond to the request of Terence Hill who told me: If you do not direct the movie, find a some-one good to direct it, indicating Damiano Damiani. Now this was a total disaster, a film without humor.

Cahiers: Is it true that you worked as a director on Tonino Valerii's My Name Is Nobody which you produced?

Leone: I led the second team. To help complete the film more quickly, I led the first battle and the final, while Tonino did the rest.

Cahiers: My name is nobody was much better than Damiani's film

Leone: Because there was in it an idea that I had, to confront the fantasy and the vulgarity of character Trinity with the legend of the West, of old westerns, represented by Fonda. This idea came to me in seeing Trinity's first film. I thought I was an idiot, everyone around me in the room was laughing, without my understanding why. I watched this thing without seeing where its humor came from, and then Terence Hill confirmed to me that I was not crazy, and that the first film was not meant to be ironic or funny. However, it was received and celebrated as such. And actually, you see that in the first film there are many deaths whilst in the second one, they made some adjustments, there is comical fighting. Trinity has avenged the public of 500 bad films which came after *A Fistful Of Dollars*, and thought they were imitating it.

Cahiers: Were you contacted for Gaumont's Carmen?

Leone: Yes, I was contacted first, and it was I who suggested Rosi, I was not free, I was making a film.

Cahiers: You would obviously have done it differently.

Leone: I have not seen Rosi's film. I wanted to do a playback with real Gypsy actors, and the voices of great singers like Preminger's *Carmen Jones*: it's right as an idea. But it seems he thought highly of the girl, Julia Migenes-Johnson. What did you think of her?

Cahiers: She is good, but the movie is not.

Leone: I told them: you know I started like this in the cinema, making operas with Carmine Gallone: they took actors, they dubbed their voices with professionals. Real actors are necessary, we cannot make true movies with someone like Placido Domingo. With Carmine Gallone, it was like that. *Faust*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Taxi di notte* with Benjamino Gigli.

Cahiers: Your relationship with American cinema evoke Cabiria, Pastrone's film made in 1914 that inspired Griffith and Intolerance.

Leone: You know, in 1908, my mother played in a western by Pastrone, I have a photo where she is dressed as an Indian on a horse. And my father, he discovered the actor of Maciste in Cabiria, Bartolomeo Pagano, because he worked with Pastrone.

Cahiers: Your pseudonym, Bob Robertson, was it a reference to your father?

Leone: Yes to his stage name, Roberto Roberti. My father began to make films because of the disappearance of Duse's company, where he worked. His real name was Vincenzo Leone, and he took his stage name, because in the troop, there was a youth named Ruggero Ruggeri. And when the company was broken up, my father went to make films with Pitalugga, then with Pastrone.

Cahiers: So the Italian western existed in 1908?

Leone: Yes, it was a short movie, a half-hour film.

Cahiers: The films you've made are from genres: crime, western. Will you one day make a film outside these genres?

Leone: I have a funny relationship with cinema, cinema intrigues me. It is said that I was a big fan of westerns, this is wrong, I am a big fan of cinema. For me, cinema is the adventure, it is life, and what interests me is to develop, through certain situations, some ideas, some phantoms. I also like Sicilian marionettes and puppets. What touches me about them is the epic stories they tell, like Orlando, they always find a link with the country where they have to work: Orlando becomes the Mayor of the country, his opponent, the pharmacist in the country, etc. ... They know the history of the country and tell fables using local history.

Cahiers: So the genre you use is universal?

Leone: Yes, yes. Universal, it tells me something, it is decisive for me. And then, John Ford, he based his best western on a story by Maupassant (Editor's note: Boule de Suif served as a model for the scenario of Stagecoach written by Dudley Nichols).

Cahiers: Since we no longer make westerns today, will you do any more?

Leone: I would love to do another one, but the market is too small for it now.

Cahiers: Are there still any more western actors?

Leone: No, they must be reinvented. I found in the U.S. the makings of sensational actors. Sensational.

Cahiers: Being European, how do you see America?

Leone: In America there is all the world, in every corner you find a different universe. Here in Italy there is only Italy and the problems are small compared to a world like America. There, there is this madness, this aspect of fable that I believe our country cannot give; especially for me, who started the Western thinking that the greatest writer of westerns was Homer. When I saw Kurosawa's Yojimbo, from which I did for A Fistful Of Dollars, what struck me was that it was inspired by Red Harvest, and then it had the structure the Commedia dell'Arte, Arlecchino Servant of Two Masters, by Goldoni, who pushes two masters against each other without them realizing it. And that's the idea I left with, that is to say, through the myth of a certain cinema, to build fables for adults. But here, now, the taste of the public is for true drama. It is the opposite in your country: great cinema is being shown on television and small television movies on big cinema screens. One evening, different channels at the same time were showing The Leopard, The Magnificent Seven, The Great Escape, The Bridge on the River Kwai, and afterwards, people go to

the cinema to see a comedian called Paolo Villaggio who is like your Aldo Maccione and whom they have already seen on television a week before!

Cahiers: What do you think of Fellini?

Leone: I like Federico, he can do anything, I am always entertained. The beginnings of his movies are always fabulous, for example in his last film.

Cahiers: You are very sensitive to the construction, including the beginning.

Leone: Yes, you like the beginning of my film. It is so important to me and it is the part they want to cut in America. But it was television that ruin the opportunity to make a good films in America, unless your name is Spielberg. Otherwise, it must be the soap-opera like this film, which won an Oscar, Terms Of Endearment. They are brainwashed by it in America, soap-operas, television.

Cahiers: Do sci-fi films interest you?

Leone: As a spectator, a little, as director, no. I do not like things that I do not dominate, and having to wait for images constructed by a bunch of people. But perhaps films will be made like that.

Cahiers: Blade Runner?

Leone: I saw it, I didn't like it. Alien neither. But I like Spielberg, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, ET, he is great, he has a humor that Lucas does not. Humor is the first thing for a director. The mixture of humor and drama in Hitchcock, it's fantastic. One day I said to Spielberg, without wanting to say something bad: your best film is Duel. He said, your best movie you is My Name Is Nobody. He was very annoyed.

Cahiers: Do you have another project in mind?

Leone: No, I'm looking for something I like.

[Interview 13 April 1984 by Michel Chion, Serge Le Peron, Serge Toubiana, transcribed and edited by Michel Chion]