

Conversation avec Sergio Leone - Noël Simsolo

Noël Simsolo had a fifteen year friendship with Sergio Leone and a book containing conversations in French between the two of them was first published in 1987, two years prior to Leone's death. As far as I am aware it has never officially been translated into English. Whilst Leone's views seem to change over the years and his quotes are sometimes contradictory, it's good to read his actual words and what he was thinking rather than the opinions of a fan or film critic.

[Rough translation of the chapter on Once Upon A Time in America]

Once Upon A Time In America - The Hoods - Harry Grey - Gérard Depardieu - Robert De Niro - An opium dream - Journey to hell - Once upon a time ... Cinema

Simsolo: How did you discover The Hoods?

Leone: Giuseppe Colizzi had me read it. Colizzi was the nephew of Luigi Zampa. He was a writer. He had followed the making of the Good, the Bad and the Ugly because he wanted to make westerns. Indeed, he launched the duo Terence Hill and Bud Spencer just before Enzo Barboni made My Name Is Trinity under the pseudonym of E.B.Clucher. One day, Colizzi told me he stole an entire chapter of an American novel for one of the sequences of the film: Ace High (Les Quatre de l'Ave Maria). The title of the book was: Mano Armata in Italian. The author was Harry Grey. The original title was The Hoods.

Colizzi had not asked permission to use this excerpt. It was the casino scene after the attack on the bank. Later, I removed the scene in my own film ... after seeing this part of the book, I was not enthusiastic. It was not great. However I found some elements that encouraged me to make a movie. Something else also intrigued me. On the cover of the book it said that it was the autobiography of a real gangster. And damn I wanted to meet this Harry Grey.

[Leone's words differ slightly from Frayling who said Leone first encountered the Hoods when his wife's brother-in-law Fulvio Morsella read it to him in Italian. I have seen Ace High (Les Quatre de l'Ave Maria) which is a typical Terence Hill and Bud Spencer movie, lifted a bit by the casino scene and Eli Wallach. Colizzi simplifies the crooked roulette wheel idea by having a person in the basement who has access to the underside of the wheel.]

Leone again: At the end of the filming of Once Upon a Time in the West, I found myself in New York. I took the opportunity to call Harry Grey's agent. He said that his client did not want to see anybody in person, the agent dealt with all money matters. The author had agreed to this system. Whilst hearing this, I thought that the rights of the novel were free. But I wanted to meet the writer. I explained to the agent:

I am an Italian director. I am passing by here. I would like to meet the person who wrote this book. I need to discuss more details with him. If I am interested in the novel, it interests me even more to talk with its author. If I buy the film rights to The Hoods, it is not to make a simple adaptation. So it is necessary that I have several discussions with the person who wrote it. And this has nothing to do with you. We will talk about money, you and I. But later! I want to meet the man who signs himself Harry Grey. My name is Sergio Leone and I am only in New York for a few days.

Forty eight hours later, I received a telephone call. And I heard a hollow voice which said: "Mister Sergio Leone, I am Harry Grey." And he told me how much he admired me. He had seen all of my films several times. He wanted to meet me, as long as it was without witnesses ... I told him that was impossible. I was too poor at English. I needed an interpreter. I suggested my brother-in-law stating that he was an Italian who was fond of American stories. With him, there would be nothing to fear. Under those conditions, Grey agreed that we meet the next day.

Simsolo: What did he look like?

Leone: He reminded me of Edward G. Robinson. The same style: small, stocky, bull neck, hair and very white skin as rosy as that of a baby. He spoke very little. After a long moment, he told me there was a problem: the rights of the novel had already been sold to a filmmaker named Dan Curtis. Previously, they had belonged to Joe Levine who had transferred them to Dan Curtis. I phoned Levine. I confirmed all this. I made contact with Dan Curtis. He categorically refused to sell me the rights. He claimed he wanted to direct the film. I was crestfallen. I returned to Rome. I tried to turn over the page and find a new topic. Nothing doing. All the material about the youngsters in *The Hoods* kept haunting me. The fascination was immense. The basis of Grey's novel inspired me tremendously.

Some time later, I discussed the problem with André Génovés. He had produced several films by Claude Chabrol and he wanted to work with me. He knew the situation. I promised to work with him if he bought the rights. And he tried. He offered two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for this book which was not worth twenty thousand ... Curtis always refused. The speculation continued for eighteen months before I rescinded on my promise. Free again, I turned to Grimaldi. I told him: "We do not have a contract. But if you obtain the rights to the book for me, we can talk." Grimaldi took a plane. On his return, he brought me the rights to *The Hoods* on a platter.

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Simsolo: How did he succeed?

Leone: He used a very simple trick. Dan Curtis produced and made small films for television. Grimaldi said, "I want to do *The Hoods* with Sergio Leone. Not with you. And you, you want to direct films for the cinema. So choose another topic. I will produce it if, in exchange, you give me the rights to Harry Grey's book." And Grimaldi kept his word. He produced for Curtis *Burnt Offerings*, with Bette Davis. A budget of two million dollars. It was well managed. As a result of these transactions, there was indeed a very good deal.

Simsolo: How did you choose your writers for this movie?

Leone: I started by speaking to Kim Arcalli, an editor who also wrote scenarios for Bertolucci: *The Conformist*, *The Last Tango in Paris*, 1900 ... He also did a little directing in Tinto Brass. And I enlisted as co-writer Enrico Medioli, a screenwriter who had worked for Valerio Zurlini and above all for Luchino Visconti: *The Leopard*, *Sandra*, *The Damned*, *Ludwig*, *Violence and passion* ...

After three months, we had a first version. I left Arcalli to start refining this and I took Medioli to The United States to meet Harry Grey. This time, our man was much more talkative. He told us he had written his book whilst he was in Sing-Sing. He said he hated American films about gangsters. He found them artificial. In reaction against this, he wanted to show what life was really like by writing *The Hoods*. Again, I understood because, precisely, I thought that his novel was filled with passages copied from film noirs. The best and the worst! He had in fact plagiarized them. After the episodes of childhood, everything disappeared into cliché. Suddenly, my intuition was verified. The only authentic things in his story were the childhood episodes. So, I said to myself that from the moment that imagination takes precedence over reality, to the point that the author believes he has created something new with the most common of stereotypes that is when we are really at the heart of myth. And at that instant, I understood the need to make a film about this idea ... I had found the right direction. It should be a tribute to film noir and an homage to cinema.

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[I recently watched *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part 11* on Blu-ray. One advantage Coppola had was working closely with Mario Puzo who seemed to know a lot about the Mafia. Whilst Puzo's novel is fiction, some of the events and characters are composites from real life e.g. Hyman Roth is based on Meyer Lansky and Moe Greene on Bugsy Siegel.

Leone and his writers didn't have the same level of expertise on this period of American history and whilst Harry Grey knew a lot about the internal workings of the mob, either he was not very

communicative in the many meetings he had with Leone during the 1970s or Leone had in mind making a movie where the historical facts are secondary to the movie's main themes.]

Simsolo: Did you restart writing the script?

Leone: Of course. And I talked it over with Arcalli and Medioli. Alas! Arcalli was unable to finish the project. He died of cancer. As for Medioli, he was ideal for dramatisation and for the rapport with the genre and the rapport with the cinema. But we needed other writers for the childhood episodes.

I thought of Leonardo Benvenuti and Piero de Bernardi. Together, they had written for many people: Zurlini, Carmine Gallone, Lattuada, Pietro Germi, Mario Camerini, De Sica, Comencini, René Clément, Zampa, Manfredi, Dino Risi, Monicelli ... But I especially remember a film by Franco Rossi: Friends for life. Their treatment of the theme was very good. I thought they were likely to develop perfectly all that related to the childhood of Noodles, Max and the others. We therefore discussed it. I told them about my own childhood, The Trastevere, and several elements that were in my own script as a youngster? Viale Glorioso.

Simsolo: Did you stay in touch with Harry Grey?

Leone: I returned to New York several times. And we saw each other during those visits. His real name was Goldberg. He told me he was associated with an Italian whose first name was Frank. I quickly realized that this must have been Frank Costello ...

We had many discussions. He confessed that the only liberty he had taken in the book was about Max. In fact, Max was not dead. At seventy years of age, he survived thanks to Murder Incorporated, the anonymous criminal syndicate invented by Lepke. The most brilliant discovery of criminal history: some-one who kills under contract. There is no link between the killer and his victim. It can't be prevented. And the old Max accepted one or two contracts a year. To ensure he had enough to eat.

But this did not suffice for him. Max always had grand ideas. Thus, at seventy years of age, he had suggested to Grey that they do a hold-up together. Harry's wife was opposed to this collaboration. She said: "If you do that, at seventy years of age, I will leave you!" So he abandoned the idea. He did not regret it because a few weeks later, he saw Max's arrest on TV. Max had attempted the job on his own. And he found himself again in prison.

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[Harry Grey's statement that the only liberty he took in The Hoods was the death of Max conflicts with Leone's belief that the only fully authentic chapters were those relating to Grey's childhood. It's impossible at this stage to state with certainty what is fact and what is fiction in The Hoods. Harry Grey's recollections and memories have certainly been distorted and supplemented by the passage of time, films he has seen and newspapers, magazines and books he has read.

In August 1930 Supreme Court Judge Joseph Force Crater disappeared in mysterious circumstances. A reward of \$5,000 was put up for anyone who had information. Subsequently more than \$100,000 was spent by the authorities in the search for him. In 2004 Richard Tofel wrote a book Vanishing Point about the disappearance and the case had some prominence in the press in August 2005 when a note in an envelope marked "do not open until my death" was opened:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9006026/>

There are ten pages towards the end of The Hoods (published in 1952) where Grey describes how Max and Noodles got rid of Crater's body.]

Simsolo: In contact with Harry Grey, have you met other gangsters?

Leone: I spoke with a famous gangster whose name I withhold. A man with a very lively and bubbly look, but nevertheless the look of death. He was a small man. He wore heel lifts. He seemed calm and wise. His origins were Calabraise. All his colleagues were Italian. One of them wanted me to do a film about one of their old friends: Lucky Luciano. He had even bought the rights to a book and he proposed that I do it, without asking my opinion. The other gangster did not want a movie made about Luciano. It was too compromising for him. Luciano and the other gangster had been associates. Thus, for a whole meal, I felt that I was running round in circles. So, I put my cards on the table: "I wish to make a film about the Jewish mob."

Immediately, the gangster stopped eating. He said very slowly: "That is what you must do. And you have my complete support."

[according to Mickey Knox in his book 'the good, the bad, and the dolce vita', this gangster was Jimmy Blue Eyes and the meeting took place in the back room of an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn]

Simsolo: Did you have help from the Italian Mafia?

Leone: No. I didn't have help, but I didn't have stories... Whilst for The Godfather, Coppola and his team had some trouble ...

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[It's often mentioned that Leone was offered the job of directing The Godfather but turned it down. According to Bob Evans Head of Production for Paramount, the movie was offered to many directors including Richard Brooks, Costa-Gravas, Elia Kazan and Arthur Penn. They all turned it down. It was an interesting book, a little trashy but it glamorized the Mafia. Bad Subject.

Coppola himself didn't want to do it - Frank Sinatra type stories and a bit sleazy. By the 1960s pioneering individuals were no longer running the studios - corporations had taken over - some predicted the death of Hollywood and cinema. They feared that TV and other forms of entertainment would take over the marketplace. Coppola needed money to help with other projects and after prompting by George Lucas and other colleagues, he agreed provided it wasn't just a film about organized gangsters. He wanted to make it a family chronicle and as a metaphor for capitalism in America.

Leone's "Coppola and his team had some trouble..." is a bit of an understatement.

Bob Evans, his wife Ali MacGraw, and producer Al Ruddy all received threats of violence. Bomb threats were made on Paramount buildings. A genuine Mafia godfather vowed to stop the movie by any means possible. The owners of houses to be used as locations reneged on deals owing to intimidation. In the end the movie only got made by Al Ruddy having meetings with the mob and agreeing to alterations to the script - specifically the word Mafia had to be deleted from the script. Some gangsters fancied being involved in the movie itself and there are some real gangsters amongst the guests in the early scenes.]

Simsolo: How did you research the New York that existed at the time of the movie?

Leone: Once I was sure the project was going ahead, I met many people over a three year period. Jews and Italians ... But I knew the Jewish mentality well. I knew quite a few Jews in my childhood. Some had remained friends. And I was not in my own country. As concerns the Italian Mafia, I never had any contact with them. It was my films that influenced them. And I let them believe what they wanted. Besides prostitutes and gangsters always see film people as brothers and confessors. They tell us everything. The truth and the false. They become voluble. They exaggerate their story when visualizing it. In a way, they act as a cinematographer in our presence. I listen to them. Thus I can see the Jewish ghetto. I take all this in to the point of transforming me into a real New York Jew. To accomplish this osmosis, I lean on a system that is dear to me. I take with me with a friend who talks a lot. He occupies the ground for me and I can observe quietly. Then I forget nothing. And I finally know what I need. Very quickly, I realized that a Jewish gangster, even a very wicked one, becomes very religious with age. He

wraps himself in religion. It happened to Meyer Lansky played by Lee Strasberg as Hyman Roth in *The Godfather Part 2*. Al Capone and Lucky Luciano were nothing next to this man: he managed the gambling rackets in Cuba and directed the politicians of this island. He was terribly dangerous.

Ill, at seventy years of age, he decided to leave everything to die in Israel. To this end, he offered a hundred million dollars to the Jewish community. He was refused. They did not want him in Israel. A Jew has the right to kill only during a war!... So he remained in Miami, full of anxiety, continuing to make steps to be buried in the Promised Land after his death. This fact fascinated me because it makes credible the attitude of Max at the end of my film. He is plagued by guilt. He needs to be forgiven by his best friend. This would not be possible with an Italian. Luciano would have killed his friend. And he would be completely screwed. The Italian maffiosi totally mock religion. They will use it only as a pretext. What counts for them is family: mother and father. Nothing to do with Jewish conscience.

Simsolo: At one point in the project, did you not anticipate that Gérard Depardieu would play Max?

Leone: I did at the beginning. I wanted Max to be French. Not just a matter of co-production. I had the desire to evoke the French who lived in America. After all, the French Connection is not an invention of screenwriters... But I felt that I risked compromising history by giving it this coloration. With a French hero, the adventure would reflect a unique case. Yet, I hesitated. Gerard Depardieu is a great actor. He very much wanted to play Max. If Max was no longer French, he wanted to learn to speak English impeccably. I was tempted. I thought he was brilliant in 1900. And I also knew that he had lived in the Environment... But it appeared that putting a french actor in this story would not work. And thus I gave up, indeed to another great idea: to have different actors according to the age of the characters. There would be children, adults and the elderly... They would resemble each other... If I had kept Depardieu to play Max as an adult, I could have Jean Gabin as the old Max.

Simsolo: So did you talk to Jean Gabin about it?

Leone: Yes. I think he liked me very much. And I have always admired him. He gave his agreement on condition that he did not have to travel by plane. He told me: "Listen, Leone, we will go to America by boat. Both of us. Thus we will have time to fully discuss the role and prepare everything. I hate flying. The boat, I love. I understand. But what I prefer, it's hard to do. The train. It's the easiest way to travel."

Simsolo: With this in mind, who was to play old Noodles?

Leone: At this time in the project, Richard Dreyfuss was to be the adult Noodles. I noticed him in Spielberg's *Jaws* and especially in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, a film by Ted Kotcheff where he played a young Jew. He was enthusiastic about the idea of playing Noodles but he had too many personal problems. It was not possible to secure him. Pity. And I thought of Cagney for old Noodles. James Cagney... He was flattered by the proposal but he showed me dry hands that trembled, so as to warn me... At this stage in the project, we wanted more past stars like George Raft... I also approached Paul Newman. But he replied that he no longer wished to appear in films which had violence in them.

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[According to *Once Upon A Time In America* by Adrian Martin, pre-production casting was extensive - 3000 actors were interviewed for 110 speaking roles and 500 auditions were videotaped. Actors considered for the role of Max included Jon Voight, William Hurt, Joe Pesci, Harvey Keitel and John Malkovich. Liza Minelli and Geena Davis auditioned for the part of Deborah. Clint Eastwood turned down the part of an Irish gangster which Martin presumes may have been the character of Jimmy O'Donnell which went to Treat Williams.

Leone was interested in using locations around Montreal in Canada where there were more buildings and details of the 1930s than in New York. Besides which Montreal was thought to be

the capital of of Prohibition - most of the bootleg alcohol had passed through that city. During a visit to Canada in 1975 he is reported as saying that shooting would start the following May. And there could be guest appearances by stars of the golden age such as George Raft, James Stewart, Henry Fonda and Glenn Ford. Dean Travoullaris, Coppola's art director on Godfather and Godfather Part 11 would be on hand as consultant to ensure that the film looked authentic. There would be an important part for French-Canadian singer-actor Robert Charlesbois. And part of the story would be set in Canada.

Danny Aiello who appeared briefly in The Godfather Part 11 (attempted murder of Frank "Frankie Five Angels" Pentangeli) met Leone and read for him. Leone said to Aiello "You got a bella face, a bella face. I seen your bella face somewhere." Leone couldn't remember where and Aiello thought he had lost out and was going to the door when Leone said "You are, of course, going to be in my picture." Aiello went around various hangouts in New York, where actors go, and bumped into, he swears, a hundred actors who thought they had been given parts in the movie. After another meeting and further readings, Aiello was offered one of the three available parts and chose Police Chief Vincent Aiello, who has extra scenes in the 1981 shooting script.]

Simsolo: Did you consider a quick American adaptation?

Leone: The turn of events forced me. Grimaldi offered me Norman Mailer. He liked very much the thought of a poster that showed both our names. And me, I wanted to meet Mailer. From our first interview, he warned: "I have read your idea. I will do it willingly. But because I am drawn to gangsters rather than to Jews. And I think you're absolutely crazy to deal with such a subject. The environment is Jewish. The world of cinema is also Jewish. They will not let you make it."

I replied that I didn't want to show any particular bias in all this. Nobody would be sympathetic or unsympathetic. In large cities, we know that there is a Jewish underworld. But in small corners of the country, the mob is known only as Italian, Irish or black. And I added that I did not intend to disclose these things because I knew that major companies would not co-operate if I did. I did think that Norman Mailer had spoken with very great honesty. But our relationship worsened. Alas! He let go to madness. What he wrote made no sense to me. Things are complicated. Grimaldi was forced into a lawsuit. And Mailer left the film... And we turned to John Milius.

Simsolo: How was this placed with him?

Leone: John Milius is someone very special. I liked Dillinger which he made with Warren Oates very much. As soon as he saw me, he told me he had been a university student in Los Angeles. There, along with Coppola, Scorsese and De Palma, he had dissected all my films. He swore that he was my biggest fan and he thought of me when writing The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean for Huston and Jeremiah Johnson for Sidney Pollack. In short, it was a true declaration of love. I was received in a very strange way. He came to take us to dinner at his home. We were driven in his open-topped car. As we neared his house, I heard the music from all my films playing in the sky. He had placed powerful loudspeakers around his house that overlooked a hill. This echoed everywhere. Once we arrived at the house, he opened a large vault. I thought it contained jewels. But they were weapons. Milius had a passion for guns. He collected them. Like a true madman... We talked, but he could not commit to the project. He was currently writing a story called Apocalypse Now.

Simsolo: Why did you separate from Grimaldi?

Leone: He was very eager to produce the film. But there was the success of Last Tango in Paris by Bertolucci. Then there were big failures like 1900 and Casanova by Fellini. This last film was a financial disaster. The coup de grace for Grimaldi. He hoped that my film would get him out of this impasse. He changed our plans. He did not want to have two parts as for 1900. He panicked too because he had lost the support of major companies. Everything was going very badly. I wanted to break our agreement and get back the rights to the book. He refused. There were lawsuits. It was long. More than three years during which I kept on working on the project. Other producers were interested. Finally, thanks to Yves Gasser, I met Arnon Milchan. Again three years of a hesitation waltz. When he was assured of finding thirty million dollars to finance

my film that would only cost twenty million dollars, he agreed to it. First, he put ten million dollars into the pot. He bought the rights from Grimaldi for the tidy sum of five hundred thousand dollars. And production began.

Simsolo: At what stage did De Niro enter the project?

Leone: I had met him during the preparation of 1900. He was not yet a star. He had just been noticed in Scorsese's Mean Streets. At the time, I had talked to him about the film with the promise that he would be one of the interpreters. When Milchan took over production, he came to work with Scorsese on The King of Comedy. De Niro became his friend but he was committed to working on another film for eighteen months. He broke this contract without telling me. Just so that he could play the role of Noodles. In recent years, he has become the biggest star in the world.

Simsolo: What happened with regards the role of Max?

Leone: I preferred that this be a new actor. We did more than two hundred tests. Until I discovered James Woods on stage. I thought he was good. His audition was not conclusive but I sensed a real neurosis behind his strange face. That's what attracted me. And I convinced De Niro that it was him that we must hire. Bob would have preferred that I take one of his friends. And we made many tests with his buddies. Fortunately, he is honest. Looking at the tests, he recognized that none of his friends could really be Max. The case of Joe Pesci was different. Milchan had promised him the role of Max. I had found him great in Raging Bull but I warned him that he would not be right for this role. I offered him another character that he could choose. And we fully agreed. However, De Niro did bring me one of his friends: Tuesday Weld. I remembered her in her first films where she was as beautiful as Brigitte Bardot. From the initial trials, it was evident that she could embody the character...

Simsolo: And the kids?

Leone: I did not want well known child stars. Just spontaneous kids that I knew how to direct. Here, Cis Corman was most useful...

Simsolo: How did the filming go with De Niro?

Leone: At the very beginning, we had some pretty heated discussions. But we reached an understanding very quickly. A rare harmony. Not only did I understand what he wanted but I realized that I wanted the very same thing. Luckily, I was supported by a fantastic helper: Brian Freilino. He served as my right arm. He spoke American and Italian equally well. His presence really cemented the harmonious relationship between De Niro and myself. Everyone was screaming at the miracle including Milchan who had witnessed endless exchanges between Scorsese and De Niro on King of Comedy. With me, there were no debates. A full understanding and an absolute trust. Bob laughed when I mimed scenes. And that laughter was a true sign of complicity.

Simsolo: For you, is Once Upon A Time In America the most Italian of American films or the most American of Italian films?

Leone: One can say that it is the most American of Italian films. Above all, I'm Roman. And also, a little Neapolitan. I put my life and all my experience in the balance. This passes into the film. Ultimately, it is a biography on two levels: my personal life and my life as a spectator of American cinema. After the war, I was never satisfied with films. Cinema became my drug. So, with Once Upon A Time In America, there are homages that I had to render. Like the scene of the charlotte russe in the stairwells. It is an homage to Charles Chaplin. This is not an imitation of one of his films. It is not a plagiarism from a sequence that he has made. It is simple evidence of a love for him. And I think he would have filmed the situation in this way... But before speaking specifically of this movie, I want to say how much the truncated version took the soul out of my work. A version of one hundred and thirty-five minutes was done for television. Everything was flatly chronological: childhood, youth and old age. Time is no longer a theme. There is no more mystery, journey, and opium smoking. It is an aberration. I cannot accept that the original

version is too long. It has the exact duration it should have. After the screening at the Cannes Film Festival, Dino De Laurentiis told me it was wonderful but it was necessary to cut a good half-hour. I told him he was in no position to tell me that. Because he makes films of two hours which seem to last four hours, while I make films of four hours which seem to last two. Dino cannot understand this. I added that this was the reason we never worked together.

Simsolo: In Once Upon A Time In The West, it was the end of one world and the beginning of another world. In Once Upon A Time... The Revolution it is the beginning of an illness. I get the impression that for you, Once Upon A Time In America, it will be the end of the world...

Leone: The end of the world. The end of a genre. The end of cinema. For me, it's just that. All one hopes is that it's not truly the end. I prefer to think that this is the prelude to agony. However, there is some hope in the face of De Niro at the end of the film. Like I said: If you have realized that films like this can save cinema, you should love movies and go and see them. Yes, it's the end of a genre. Yes, it's the end of security. Yes, it's the end of a world. But this is not the end of a dream. And since the movie came out, I have understood. I discovered how much all this was true. I am very aware now, in the autumn of 1986. I am fifty-six years of age. When I made the film, I was fifty-two. And I thought I was making something for people of my age, with memories of a certain experience and of a certain cinema. I was not wrong because this generation has liked the film. But those who have loved the movie to the point of delirium, to the point of seeing it twenty-five times, are people twenty years old. People who do not know cinema and are ignorant of the names of Griffith, Stroheim, Ford and even Chaplin. People who were not ten years old when Once Upon A Time... The Revolution was released. And this proves to me that there is a natural desire to see a certain cinema. And that's the hope!

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[The next part is unavoidably contentious. From time to time Leone changes his views and contradicts himself. When asked about the opium dream theory, he is quoted as saying: "The film offers a double reading" and "I say it here and I deny it here".

Viewers need to make their own mind up and there's nothing wrong with a composite view such as Leone filmed it realistically but had in the back of his mind that the post 1933 sequences may have been a dream or imagined.

Few supporters of the dream theory had the idea that part of the movie was a dream whilst they were seeing the movie for the first time. Some found events which were a bit puzzling, learned of the dream theory and supported it because it seemed to provide an explanation. There's nothing in the script which indicates that part or all of the movie may be a dream and the other writers have not given a unified opinion. There are also many things which contradict the dream theory - how could Noodles, in 1930, dream of television sets, outside broadcasts, cars of the 1960s, plastic frisbees and famous names of the 60s such as Jimi Hendrix?

Of course how could Leone portray the 1960s other than by using real examples? During the 15 years that he was thinking about the movie he formulated some very complicated and esoteric ideas. At the time of the conversation with Simsolo he was definitely in favour of the dream theory but it may be out of context - at other times Leone refused to be pinned down.]

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Simsolo: Isn't the film also the history of America linked to an opium dream?

Leone: The peculiarity of opium is a drug that makes you imagine the future as the past. Opium creates visions of the future. Other drugs only make you see the past. Thus whilst Noodles dreams how his life could have been and whilst he imagines his future, it gives me, as a European director, the possibility of dreaming inside American myth. And that's it, the ideal combination. We walk together. Noodles with his dream. And me with mine. These are two poems that fuse together. Because, as far as the matters which concern me, Noodles never leaves 1930. He dreams everything. All the film is the opium dream of Noodles through which I dream of the phantoms of cinema and American myths.

Simsolo: This time, were women and sex more important than in your previous films?

Leone: It was necessary. We are no longer in a Western. We are in American cinema, in the full sense, with sex, passion, betrayal, friendship and love. And, moreover, next to Noodles and my dream, there is another protagonist: time. And time changes everything.

Initially, Noodles is integrated with others. He does small jobs for older thieves. Until the Archangel Gabriel arrives. This is Max. And Max said: We can be killed and we're all alone. No bosses. This is Max, the anarchist! And Noodles understands the lesson to the point of going to prison in place of all the others. He spends fifteen years in a cell. When he leaves prison, his ideas have not changed. But time has transformed the situation. And he has to go as far as betrayal for things to continue. Because Max is integrated. He thinks about politics. He wants to work for the Syndicate. Noodles remains faithful to his original ideals. Through the opium dream, okay, but I repeat that through this opium dream I am given me the opportunity of exploiting all my love for film, myth and reason to make films.

It is complex. To the point of not being able to show directly the death of Max at the end of the film. There should certainly not be a close-up of James Woods when he leaves his house. Not at this time because the world that Max has constructed, it's just good to throw it and the America of today away with the garbage. Individualism no longer exists. It is the Syndicate. And this is the end of the idea of liberty.

Because of all these feelings, I asked for different music from Ennio Morricone. We started with a song from the period: Amapola. And I wanted to add specific songs: God bless America by Irving Berlin, Night and Day by Cole Porter and Gershwin's Summertime. In addition to the original score of Morricone and mythical melodies of the time, I added something from today: Yesterday by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. In order to touch the essential points: the nostalgia of a world, the clear images that this nostalgia puts in my head, and perhaps not in reality... It works on my imagination. Indeed, here are the paintings of Edward Hopper, of Reginald March and of Norman Rockwell, which serve as catalyst material. This is not Max Ernst or Giorgio de Chirico as in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*.

Even for the scenery of the ghetto, it was necessary to find a real place recovered from the past. I was offered the streets where Coppola had directed *The Godfather Part 2*. I did not find these places great. I preferred to use views of the ghetto, with Brooklyn Bridge in the background. It was more electrifying. But today these places are no longer the Jewish quarter. Puerto Ricans live there. Because of this, I was discouraged from using these places. I was told it was very dangerous. I did not succumb to that pressure. And I was right because the Puerto Ricans did not cause any trouble at all. They were always there, but loyal. Not even a piece of wood was stolen. No doubt because we were Italian. Perhaps we were protected much more than we thought. It was the thieves who were watching for anyone who would steal anything from us!

Simsolo: Your film is based on a classical style of writing in a fragmented and modern structure...

Leone: This demands immense work from us. The beginning of the film provides a wealth of information that the viewer only understands later. As I said earlier, the entire structure of *Once Upon A Time In America* is based on time. And there is a lot of camera movement that we do not take account of. Because I did not use the camera to describe a city, a street or a place. The camera moves only whilst following a character. Its movement works with the movement of a man in a space which is nothing other than time. And it is necessarily less spectacular because I use the technique to show feelings and not as a means of discovering a world, a story or a universe, as was the case for *Once Upon a Time in the West*. There, when the crane rises, it is to show a city which has been created. Here, the city is already there. We do not need to show it as well.

I am aware of the apparent static nature of my film. In fact, it does not stop moving. But this static nature is felt because it is that of time: everything stops in the smoking of opium. And also any part of it.

Simsolo: This does not preclude realism...

Leone: Let's be fair: we need realism in this dream. With all this mythology of the cinema, and for the fiction to work, you need to give it a factual documentary dimension. Doing a little as if the camera was hidden. Producing effects such as these made me really feel the cinema of yesterday. We believe it!

And that's why all the places are real. I found them. Again, it was to do with searching for a lost time. The Grand Central station in New York of that era no longer exists. It was destroyed. But I knew it was only a replica of the Gare du Nord in Paris. So I shot those scenes at the Gare du Nord in Paris. Those are the same windows, the same pillars of concrete and stone: the same materials. It's like the scene in the Long Island hotel, where Noodles takes Deborah. The place no longer exists but it was a copy of the Palaces of Venice. So I filmed the movie in Venice. It's logical. America has never done anything other than imitate Europe in all this. Following my intuition, I filmed the movie in the places the buildings were modelled on. Without snobbery or chauvinism. Only because the reality of the era no longer exists in America. All is lost, forgotten, destroyed... And me, to make a film about memory and memories, I had to find these images of reality. To best portray this notion of myth and dream, I had to work on more certain realities. From there, everything came.

Time is the protagonist of film and time is always right. So when Noodles returns, it was with Yesterday and across a mural by Reginald March, with the red apple of the America of today. Bus tickets are no longer being sold. Hertz rent cars to enter hell. That makes sense since my film is also a journey through hell.

Simsolo: Do you not have a fond liking for Noodles?

Leone: I wrote a text on it. I will read it to you. It will explain my relationship with him ... Listen: I saw Noodles as a child in the Lower East Side of New York. I saw him as a little boy in the service of racketeers. Then I saw him kill Christians with passion and calculation. After that, I watched him expose himself all alone to carry out a war without success against the gods of organized crime. But Noodles was not Dutch Schultz or Peter Lorre, Alan Ladd or Lucky Luciano, Al Capone or Humphrey Bogart. Nobody paid attention to him: the view of the world had passed by him as if he was the window of a bar. He was Noodles. And that's all. A small Jew from the ghetto. A Mr. Nobody who had tried his luck with a Thompson submachine gun in his hand during a period when alcohol was banned and the game of urban violence was still young.

Like thousands of other young offenders, survivors of gang warfare, then locked behind the bars of a penitentiary, he was crucified on a cross too big for him. Even in summer, he wore a coat caricaturing the aesthetics of the gangster. But despite its villainous appearance and form evoking the Actor's Studio, this coat floated on him. Too big, as if it was a gift from a mischievous Good Samaritan to some drunk from the Bowery.

It really did not suit him. And things turned out very badly for him. Betrayed, hunted, unknown, torn, he had to flee. But I was solidly behind him for other reasons. The Hoods confirmed for me an old idea. The idea that America was a world of children... Chaplin too, in his time, had the same thought. And today, I am sure my friend Steven Spielberg thinks it. Noodles was one of those children. Not a boy scout of Frank Capra, with the aim of helping Mr. Smith save the world. He was more a child who showed his teeth and clenched his knife in his pocket. Something like a unlucky Mickey Rooney who has never met Spencer Tracy as a priest in Boys Town, the city of kids...

Simsolo: The scene where Noodles violates Deborah seems crucial.

Leone: Absolutely. At the Cannes Festival, an idiot accused me of complacency towards misogyny and antifeminine sadism because of this sequence. She had understood nothing. I told her I was not antifeminist but if all feminists were like her, I was going to apply myself in quickly making a film against feminists! I was really furious because her accusation was too absurd.

This rape scene is a cry of love! Noodles has spent fifteen years in prison. He never stopped thinking about this woman who was on the outside. He was always madly in love with her. To

the point of leaving with her when he regained his freedom. To the point of telling her everything he is... All that he has done! He is a professional gangster but his love is so great that he cannot hide anything from this woman. He took her to a great place that he rented for a fortune... Just so that she could choose a table that she liked. And so they could be alone and happy...

He loved her so much he behaved like a prince with her. He transformed the evening into a fairy tale. He confessed all his love for her. He said she was the light which got him through fifteen years of imprisonment. And then, she replied to him: "I am just here to say goodbye to you. Tomorrow I leave for Hollywood." She is going there to become a Hollywood image. And become again an image for Noodles! He listens to this in silence. Quietly. He has received this terrible lesson without batting an eyelid. And then in the car, she gives him a kiss of consolation. As if to say to him: Poor kid. I give you a kiss because you're a little angry at me. Noodles can take it no more. He wants her to leave with a memory she will not forget. And he destroys her with maximum violence. He could have taken her gently. Violation without brutality. He knows it. He senses it. She would let him do it. But he prefers this brutality so that she will remember it forever. He says to himself that she has already forgotten all the beauty that he had offered to her during the evening. But he makes sure that she will remember the violence of this act of the moment. And this violence is the most desperate of all.

When I filmed this scene, I wanted Deborah to make a gesture of affection towards him. The truth comes out during this sacrifice. She loves Noodles. She understands everything. She understands above all that nobody will love her as much as Noodles can love her. And when, afterwards, she has rejected him for Hollywood and her career, he tries to apologize for his excesses. To better understand this sequence, it's good to know the mentality of a gangster. This is a man who has always considered women as sex objects. But this time, despite the rape, it is respect which drives him. It is love. It is love. And it is the biggest of his dreams she comes to break when she announces her departure to him. She was an image. She will become an image at this instance of exasperation, Noodles may know her flesh. But that's all.

She wants to be an actress. And finally, actors are only masks and robots. They are lost. They no longer know their original identity. And when he found her again thirty-five years later, she is wearing this white mask. She is just an actress! And Noodles repeats to her the phrase from Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra: Age will never wither you... She can no longer appear as a myth. As a representation by an actor. Being an actor, it's like an illness.

During the filming of Once Upon a Time ... The Revolution, I said to Rod Steiger: What is your life? You play Napoleon. For a year, you are Napoleon. During the six months that follow, you continue to be him because of the press and the promotion of the film. And six months before shooting, you are already thinking about the role. And then you pass by Napoleon to play merely a cop in In the Heat of the Night. And you become this policeman for months and months. A process that repeats itself endlessly. And the more you believe in the Actor's Studio, the more you invest yourself in the psychology of the characters you play. But where is the original Rod Steiger? Remember him? Can you tell me how he is? Rod replied: No. My life, it's that. That's why actors are liars. Their illness always takes them to other places.

De Niro is a chameleon. We do not notice him on the street. Isn't he a bit like Noodles? De Niro is a Mr. Nobody. To be the old Noodles, he had to really transform himself externally and internally. This is something that few actors know how to do. And I wanted this realism vis-a-vis Max. The aging of Woods is deliberately theatrical. The difference is crucial. Max is aged like a nightmare. This is theater! Only Noodles is in reality.

Simsolo: Why think morbid thoughts? With this film, you do it. Do not you agree?

Leone: I admit to being well aware of it. And it goes further. Doing these projects are difficult. After Once Upon a Time in the West, I asked myself this many times. I wondered if I should abandon the profession. Here it's a little different because it's primarily a film about cinema. It's not just nostalgia and pessimism. I have written something about it. I will read it to you: In my eyes, The Hoods was one of those glass balls for tourists, with inside a small Eiffel Tower, a small Coliseum, perhaps a small Statue of Liberty. If you turn the ball upside down, you can see large snowflakes falling down on the scene. That was the America of Noodles. And mine. Tiny, fabulous, lost forever.

I must add that this film is also a painful vengeance. Yes, I retaliated for everything that America and cinema have put in my head. And I am aware that this film is different from my previous works. This time I worked in total clarity as to the correctness of what I was doing. No question. Not the slightest concern. I have no doubt. I was transported on a journey during which I was certain of a good result. I'm speaking of the making of the movie. I'm really happy to have waited fifteen years to do it. All this time was important. I reflected on this when I saw the finished film. And I realized that if I had done the film earlier, it would have just been one more movie. Now, *Once Upon A Time In America*, it is the film by Sergio Leone. And it's me, this film. We can only succeed with such a film with maturity, white hair and a lot of wrinkles around the eyes. I could never have made the film until I was at least forty years old...

[End of chapter]