Directed by Sergio Leone
Written by Sergio Donati & Sergio Leone (screenplay); Dario Argento, Bernardo Bertolucci and Sergio Leone (original story)
Producer Fulvio Morsella
Music Ennio Morricone
Cinematography Tonino Delli Colli
Film Editing Nino Baragli
Art Direction Carlo Simi

Claudia Cardinale…Jill McBain
Henry Fonda…Frank
Jason Robards…Cheyenne
Charles Bronson…Harmonica
Gabriele Ferzetti…Morton - Railroad Baron
Paolo Stoppa…Sam
Woody Strode…Stony - Member of Frank's Gang
Jack Elam…Snaky - Member of Frank's Gang
Keenan Wynn…Sheriff - Auctioneer
Frank Wolff…Brett McBain
Lionel Stander …Barman

1985 Nominated
Golden Globe  Best Director - Motion Picture
Once Upon a Time in America (1984)

SERGIO LEONE (b. January 3, 1929 in Rome, Italy—d. April 30, 1989, age 60, in Rome, Italy) is perhaps the most well-known spaghetti western director of all time. Leone entered films in his late teens, working as an assistant director to both Italian directors and U.S. directors working in Italy (usually making Biblical and Roman epics, much in vogue at the time). Towards the end of the 1950s he started writing screenplays, and began directing after taking over The Last Days of Pompeii (1959) in mid-shoot after its original director, Mario Bonnard, fell ill. When he made Once Upon a Time in the West (1968), his stylistic influence switched from the more frenetic pace of Hollywood westerns (which he put on hyper-drive for the "Dollars" trilogy with Clint Eastwood) to the slower, tenser style of Japanese samurai films, mainly those of Akira Kurosawa. Characters in his films frequently play a musical device, with the music appearing also in the composer's score (Indio's watch chimes in For a Few Dollars More (1965), Harmonica's harmonica in Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)). He frequently used the "Mexican standoff," whereby three men each point a gun at each other at the same time (adopted later by John Woo and Quentin Tarantino). Although they did not work together until 1964, as children Leone and composer Ennio Morricone were classmates. Morricone has said that Leone asked him to compose a film's music before the start of principal photography—contrary to normal practice. He would then play the music to the actors during takes to enhance their performance. He directed Duck, You Sucker! (1971), reluctantly, and turned down offers to direct The Godfather (1972) in favor of his dream project, which became Once Upon a Time in America (1984). He died in 1989 after preparing an even more expensive Soviet coproduction on the World War II siege of Leningrad. He directed and wrote 12 films which are C’era una Volta in America (Once Upon a Time in America, 1984), Un Genio, Due Compatri, un FolloA (A Genius, Two Friends, and an Idiot, uncredited, his last western, 1975), Giù la Testa (Duck, You Sucker!, 1971), C’era una volta il West (Once Upon a Time in the West, 1968), Il Buono, il Brutto, il Cattivo (The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, 1966), Per Qualche Dollaro n Più (For a Few Dollars More, 1965), Per un Pugno di Dollari (A Fistful of Dollars, 1964), Il Colosso di Rodi (The Colossus of Rhodes, 1961) and Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompei (The Last Days of Pompeii, 1959). He also directed (uncredited) Afrodite, dea...
Bernardo Bertolucci (b. March 16, 1941 in Parma, Emilia-Romagna, Italy) took after his father, a Roman poet and film critic, and became a celebrated published poet by the age of 20. He gave up poetry for the cinema after working as an assistant to Pier Paolo Pasolini on the movie Accattone (1961). When the Italian Bertolucci was Oscar-nominated as Best Director for The Last Emperor (1987) (and won), his Best Director fellow nominees were all non-Americans: Adrian Lyne and John Boorman (UK), Lasse Hallström (Sweden) and Norman Jewison (Canada) making that particular instance unique in Oscar history. Bertolucci’s Last Tango in Paris (1972) was pronounced obscene and was banned ‘forever’ by Italian courts. The director lost his civil rights for 5 years and couldn’t vote and received a four months suspended sentence. Conversely, the film was his only directed Oscar nominated performance for Marlon Brando and Bertolucci was nominated himself for Best Director. He was also nominated for an Oscar in 1972 for Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium for Il conformista (1970). In 2007 he won the Venice Film Festival Career Golden Lion. He wrote five original stories for film: Stealing Beauty (1996), Little Buddha (1993), 1900 (1976), Last Tango in Paris (1972), Once Upon a Time in the West (1968). Additionally he wrote screenplays for Me and You (2012), The Sheltering Sky (1990), The Last Emperor (1987) and The Conformist (1970). Bertolucci also directed 25 films, some of which are The Dreamers (2003), Stealing Beauty (1996), Little Buddha (1993), The Sheltering Sky (1990), The Last Emperor (1987), Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man (1981), Luna (1979), 1900 (1976), Last Tango in Paris (1972), The Conformist (1970) and The Grim Reaper (1962).


Tonino Delli Colli (b. November 20, 1922 in Rome, Italy—d. August 16, 2005, age 82, in Rome, Italy) began his career as assistant cameraman at Cinecittà studios in 1938. He did his best work as Cinematographer for such directors as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Sergio Leone and Federico Fellini and is known for for his sweeping, panoramic landscapes and detailed close-up's of actors' faces in the seminal spaghetti western The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966). He was the Director of Photography on 7 films, which are Life Is Beautiful (1997), The Name of the Rose (1986), Ginger and Fred (1986), Tales of Ordinary Madness (1981), Once Upon a Time in the West (1968), The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966), Seven Hills of Rome (1957). He was the Cinematographer on 120 additional films, some of which include Death and the Maiden (1994), The Voice of the Moon (1990), Stravari (1988), Intervista (1987), Once Upon a Time in America (1984), Trenchcoat (1983), Lovers and Liars (1979), Blood Feud (1978), First Love (1978), Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975), Seven Beauties (1975), Till Marriage Do Us Part (1974), Lacombe, Lucien (1974), The Canterbury Tales (1972),
Claudia Cardinale (b. April 15, 1938 in Tunis, French Protectorate, Tunisia) was 17 years old and studying at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome when she entered a beauty contest, which resulted in her getting a succession of small film roles. The same year she had a child out of wedlock, however she signed a contract forbidding her to cut her hair, marry or gain weight. Because of this, she told everyone that her newborn son was her baby brother. She did not reveal to the child that he was her son until he was 19 years old. After Careless (1962) she rose to the front ranks of Italian cinema with her beauty, dark flashing eyes and explosive sexuality. Long considered one of the world's great beauties, she has appeared on more than 900 magazine covers in over 25 countries. While considered one of the great sirens of cinema, she has never done a nude or topless scene in any of her films. became an international star in Federico Fellini's classic 8½ (1963) with Marcello Mastroianni, but American audiences may remember her most for tonight's American audiences may remember her most for tonight's

Henry Fonda (b. May 16, 1905 in Grand Island, Nebraska—d. August 12, 1982, age 77, in Los Angeles, California) was the oldest person, at 76, to win a best actor Oscar for his work in On Golden Pond (1981). That year before the Academy awarded Fonda the Honorary Award in recognition of his brilliant accomplishments and enduring contribution to motion pictures. Was twice a roommate and a very close friend of James Stewart. They met and shared a room when the two were both struggling young actors in the early 1930s. Fonda went to Hollywood shortly before Stewart. When Stewart arrived he shared Fonda's home, where they both gained reputations as ladies' men. After both married and had kids, the more mellow buddies still hung out, usually spending time building model airplanes. While Fonda is most known for his film work, he did periodically appear on stage. However, he missed out on the chance to create the role of George in the original Broadway production of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? because hisss agent rejected the script out of hand, without consulting him. The agent gave as his reason the assertion that, "You don't want to be in a play about four people yelling at each other all the time." A friendship and collaboration of nearly 20 years was ended when director John Ford sucker-punched him while making Mister Roberts (1955). Three films of his are on the American Film Institute's 100 Most Inspiring Movies of All Time. They are: On Golden Pond (1981) at #45, 12 Angry Men (1957) at #42, and The Grapes of Wrath (1940) at #7. Additionally, Fonda acted in 118 films, some of which are Summer Solstice (TV Movie, 1981), Gideon's Trumpet (TV Movie, 1980), The Oldest Living Graduate (TV Movie, 1980), The Swarm (1978), Fedora (1978), Midway (1976), Clarence Darrow (TV Movie, 1974), My Name Is Nobody (1973), Sometimes a Great Notion (1970), There Was a Crooked Man... (1970), The Cheyenne Social Club (1970), Once Upon a Time in the West (1968), The Boston Strangler (1968), Madigan (1968), Welcome to Hard Times (1967), A Big Hand for the Little Lady (1966), Battle of the Bulge (1965), In Harm's Way (1965), Fail-Safe (1964), The Best Man (1964), Spencer's Mountain (1963), How the West Was Won (1962), The Longest Day (1962), Advise & Consent (1962), Warlock (1959), War and Peace (1956), Fort Apache (1948), The Fugitive (1947), My Darling Clementine (1946), The Ox-Bow Incident (1943), The Lady Eve (1941), Chad Hanna (1940), The Return of Frank James (1940), Drums Along the Mohawk (1939), Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), The Story of Alexander Graham Bell (1939), Jesse James (1939), That Certain Woman (1937), You Only Live Once (1937), The Trail of the Lonesome Pine (1936), The Farmer Takes a Wife (1935)

JASON ROBARDS (b. July 26, 1922 in Chicago, Illinois—d. December 26, 2000, age 78, in Bridgeport, Connecticut) was a star athlete at Hollywood High School and served in the U.S. Navy in World War II as a radioman. Upon returning to civilian life, he attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and struggled as a small-part actor in local New York theatre, TV and radio before shooting to fame on the New York stage in Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh" as Hickey. Preferred working in the theater, and said once that he performed in Hollywood films so that he could "grab the money and go back to Broadway as fast as I can." Avoided films until age 37 because he felt his acting father, Jason Robards Sr., had sold out and tarnished his own reputation by "going Hollywood". However, Jr's long film and TV history is highly acclaimed, as he won the Oscar Best Actor in a Supporting Role in 1978 for his performance in Julia (1977) and for All the President's Men (1976). In 1988, he became the 11th performer to win the Triple Crown of acting: Oscar, Tony, Emmy. Robards was also the recipient of 22nd Annual Kennedy Center Honors for lifetime contribution to arts...


GABRIELE FERZETTI (b. Pasquale Ferzetti on March 17, 1925 in Rome, Italy—d. December 2, 2015 in Rome, Italy) was one of Italy’s most prominent international stars of the 1950’s and 60’s. Always elegant, urbane and well-spoken, by the early 60’s, Ferzetti’s distinguished features had him frequently cast in provocative political dramas as flawed men hiding behind charming, sophisticated facades. He also acquired an international following with character roles in Torpedo Bay (1963), I Spy (1965), as a cynical railway baron in Once Upon a Time in the West (1968) and as syndicate boss Marc-Ange Draco joining forces with James Bond in On Her Majesty’s Secret Service (1969), although his accent was deemed to be too strong, and he was dubbed by David de Keyser. Ferzetti acted in 166 films and TV series, including, 18 Years Later (2010), Pope John Paul I: The Smile of God (TV Movie, 2006), Othello (1995), First Action Hero (1994), Julia and Julia (1987), Inchon (1981), Man of Corleone (1977), The Night Porter (1974), Hitler: The Last Ten Days (1973), The Confession (1970), On Her Majesty’s Secret Service (1969), Machine Gun McCain (1969), Bandits in Rome (1968), Escalation (1968), The Bible: In the Beginning... (1966), The Shortest Day (1963), L’Avventura (1960), Hannibal (1959), It Happened in Rome (1957), Donatella (1956), Sins of Casanova (1955), The Counterfeiters (1953), Puccini (1953), Strange Deception (1951), Sicilian Uprising (1949), William Tell (1949), Fabiola (1949), Les Misérables (1948), Lost Happiness (1946), Via delle cinque lune (1942).

WOODY STRODE (b. July 25, 1914 in Los Angeles, California—d. December 31, 1994, age 80, in Glendora, California) was one of the first four African Americans who integrated professional football in 1946. Strode played for the Calgary Stampeder in the Canadian Football League from 1948-1949 before moving back to the United States and beginning his film career. Strode made his initial film appearance in 1941’s Sundown, but it was not until the 1950’s that he began to focus on acting. He landed small parts in films such as The Ten Commandments (1956) and Tarzan’s Fight for Life (1958), but his breakthrough came when Strode caught the attention of famed director John Ford, who cast him in the title role in Sergeant Rutledge (1960). Ford and Strode


**LIONEL STANDER** (b. January 11, 1908 in The Bronx, New York City, New York—d. November 30, 1994, age 86, in Los Angeles, California) was perhaps best known for his role as Max

**Sergio Leone from World Film Directors, Vol. II. Editor John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co., NY, 1988**

Sergio Leone (1921-1981), Italian director and scenarist, was born in Rome, the son of a prolific pioneer filmmaker Roberto Roberti. Leone was apparently not himself interested in the movie industry at first, but studied law for a time at the University of Rome and otherwise drifted from job to job (though one account says that he served in his early teens as his father’s script boy). He seems to have finally entered the film industry in 1939, at about the same time that his father left it on retirement.

Over the next twenty years Leone worked in various capacities on some sixty B features, serving as assistant to Mario Camerini and Vittorio De Sica among other notable Italian directors, and later to some American directors who came to Italy to film costume epics after the war, including Mervyn LeRoy (on *Quo Vadis*, 1951), Robert Wise (on *Helen of Troy*, 1955), and William Wyler (on *Ben Hur*, 1959). He also had small acting roles in several films—De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief* among them—and collaborated on a number of scenarios.

Some sources say that Leone’s first film as director was a low-budget spectacular called *Nel segno di Roma* (*Sign of the Gladiator*, 1959), for which he had written the screenplay, and most agree that he codirected *Gil ultimi giorni di Pompeii* (*The Last Days of Pompey*, 1959). The latter—one of three Italian versions of Lord Lytton’s novel—was credited to Mario Bonnard but brought Leone several offers of similar assignments. The one he accepted was *Il Colosso di Rodi* (*The Colossus of Rhodes*, 1960), starring Rory Calhoun, Lea Massari, and an international supporting cast in an action spectacular about court intrigue and revolution on the island of Rhodes, ending with the destruction of the great statue by a tidal wave. Filmed in Spain in ‘scope and color, and directed with more style and spirit than most such programmers, it made a million dollars in Italy alone.

The success of the first movie actually to bear his name as director assured Leone of a career of sorts, but not one that appealed to him. He turned down an opportunity to direct epics in the Maciste series and trod water for a while, serving as second-unit director on Robert Aldrich’s *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1961). At about this time, the success of a German television Western series (*Winnetou*) aroused the interest of Italian producers in the genre, and Leone saw his chance. In 1964 he directed his first Western, *Per un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*), shooting it in Spain in English and Italian.

Akira Kurosawa’s great *chambara* (swordfight) film *The Seven Samurai* had already been remade as an extremely successful Hollywood Western (*The Magnificent Seven*). This seemed to Leone a trick worth imitating, and he lifted the plot of *A Fistful of Dollars* from another of Kurosawa’s *chambara* movies, *Yojimbo* (1961). As adapted, it tells the story of a nameless gunman (Clint Eastwood) who rides alone into a Mexican border town where two rival gangs of outlaws are fighting for control. He soon demonstrates that he would be an invaluable ally, but will not commit himself to either side, instead using a variety of deceptions to ensure that they wipe each other out.

As Nick Barbaro pointed out in his program notes for *Cinema Texas*, Leone followed Kurosawa’s script very closely—sometimes line for line and shot for shot—but nevertheless produced something very different. Concerned to record the death of the samurai tradition, Kurosawa had used long lenses and deep focus to create an atmosphere of enclosure and claustrophobia, while Leone’s visuals reflect, not only the openness, but the surreal anarchy of the setting. While Kurosawa’s camerawork was very subdued, Leone is flamboyant….The combination of wide screen, wide-angle lenses and unusual camera angles creates a feeling of large, open spaces.”
Leone had also made a number of startling alterations to the Western genre, the most shocking of which was the introduction of a hero who morally is no better than the villain—an unshaven, cheroo-chewing, mean-looking killer, motivated by greed and unredeemed to the last. And yet this nameless loner, for reasons that are entirely unexplained, is given some of the attributes of Jesus Christ—he rides into town on a mule, suffers a near-crucifixion, and appears to rise from the dead. Beyond this, we are presented (often in a screen-filling close-up) with a gallery of ruffians beyond the wildest imagination of Central Casting, wearing clothes that look as real but as unfamiliar as the Spanish deserts and canyons of the exteriors.

And, as Richard T. Jameson wrote, Ennio Morricone’s score “capped and integrated the real memories of the Mascot-Monogram stock libraries filtered through a modern and European sensibility, the result an idiosyncratic, eclectic, delaying-then-surfing score full of war whoops, hoofbeats, church bells, and hammers snicking back to full cock; it was startling, unnerving and frequently breathtaking in its sense of aspiration and grandeur, and it somehow complemented the bizarre exoticism of the film, the familiar made fresh, new, and neurotically contemporary.”

The Italian distributors were initially wary of this brutal and disorienting movie, but when it did open it was an instant smash hit, making two billion lire in Italy alone. Legal wrangles over the borrowing from Yojimbo delayed its United States release for two years but, once arrived, it fared as we expected. James Price, taking a middle position on this, wrote that hr “enjoyed it rather a lot, though it is maddeningly slow and melodramatic, and entirely devoid of the romanticism which attracts one in the genuine (Western) article. Its primary appeal lies in its strident violence, and in the way it pushes the conventions beyond the absurd, but there is more to it than that. The Man With No Name is not merely a dead shot. He’s conceived on many power lines crossing the horizon, too many highways and billboards.”

In spite of its great length (147 minutes), the film was another hit, and increased Leon’s critical following, though some reviewers continued to resist his operatic charms on moral grounds. James Price, taking a middle position, wrote that hr “enjoyed it rather a lot, though it is maddeningly slow and melodramatic, and entirely devoid of the romanticism which attracts one in the genuine (Western) article. Its primary appeal lies in its strident violence, and in the way it pushes the conventions beyond the absurd, but there is more to it than that. The Man With No Name is not merely a dead shot. He’s incapable of missing, and he cannot die….He is conceived on purely cut-out, comic-strip liens….Western myth becomes a series of western conventions (not the same thing) which are overlaid with an urban, post-war sensibility….Even more modern and European, I suppose, is the tone of private detachment….Wars are old-fashioned, clumsy and futile; moreover, they interfere with the pursuit of personal gain.”

The success of this film, which completed the Man With No Name trilogy, persuaded Paramount to part with an extremely large budget for the most ambitious of all of Leone’s films, C’era una volta il West (Once Upon a Time in the West, 1968), which was scripted by Leone, Dario Argento, and Bernardo Bertolucci. A desolate piece of land becomes valuable because it has water
and the new railroad must pass through it. The rightful owner, Brett McBain, is therefore murdered, with his children, by the railroad’s hit man Frank, a sadistic killer who is played by Henry Fonda (a shocking piece of casting for lovers of My Darling Clementine, and no doubt deliberately so).

Unfortunately for Frank, McBain has entered into a marriage contract with Jill (Claudia Cardinale), who inherits the precious property. Technological progress is further endangered when Jill comes under the protection of the sentimental but formidable outlaw Cheyenne (Jason Robards) and the mysterious Man with a Harmonica (Charles Bronson). The winners in the end are the Harmonica Man, the railroad, and Jill, who winds up on the side of progress. Cheyenne and Frank represent different faces of the frontier past, and are therefore doomed.

In his article about Leone in Film Comment (March 1973), Richard T. Jameson devotes a good deal of space to describing the director’s “infatuation with detail, and his genius for achieving emotional saturation through studied acceptance, almost stoical endurance of time and space as the key events in any scene….Leone employs space not only for spectacle… but also for celebration and miracle….” The shot that dollys Jill up to the door of the Flagstone train station, adjusts to observe her through the window, then cranes up past the roof both to follow her progress out the other side and to create/reveal the teeming town site beyond is an expression of the sublime arrogance indispensable to great cinema.” David Nichols has drawn attention to Leone’s symbolic use of Bronson’s harmonica which, like the watch in For a Few Dollars More, acts as a reminder of the past, links past and present, and represents Frank’s nemesis, his past literally catching up with him.”

Once Upon a Time in the West, which originally ran nearly three hours, was a commercial failure. Paramount cut 25 minutes (including Cheyenne’s death) without increasing its box-office appeal. And yet many of Leone’s most knowledgeable admirers regard it as his masterpiece. David Nichols, for example, is tempted to see it “as the outcome of the meeting between Leone’s cynicism and Bertolucci’s Marxism,” and goes on: “In its style and its ambitions it pushed the Italian western as far as it could go….Leone’s style, evolved in the earlier films, expanded its sparse outlines to grandiose but appropriate proportions. The film becomes an…emblematic tale, comparable with Italian political movies like Quemada, and also in a sense the ultimate Western. Most major Western themes are there, but, through Leone’s artifices operatic style, the film becomes a view from Europe, based on American historical mythology but presenting it precisely as an alien mythology. The traditional function of the Western is undercut and its iconography used to say, in effect, that does not wash any more.”

Giù la testa (Duck You Sucker, also known as A Fistful of Dynamite) appeared in 1971 after a three-year interval. It is set in 1911-1913 during the Villa Huerta civil war in Mexico. Juan (Rod Steiger) leads a gang of bandits (several of them his illegitimate sons) who acquire an accomplished dynamiter in Sean (James Coburn), a graduate of the Irish Republican Army. Juan is interested only in profit, but Sean sees in him a potential revolutionary hero, and in the end has his way, with disastrous results for both of them. This is the most comically black of Leone’s films, and the most overtly (and cynically) political. Andrew Sarris calls it a horse opera “with the emphasis on opera. Leone’s frescoes of anguished close-ups providing the visual libretto to Ennio Morricone’s music….Leone is nothing if not ambitious and audacious, and I say more power to him in this era of emotionally paralyzed filmmaking.”

In fact, recognizing that the spaghetti Western had had its day, Leone turned to production; he heads his own company, Rafran Cinematografica. As David Nicholls says, he both established the style of the Italian Western and took it to its furthest limits. “If Leone initially set out to exploit a popular form in order to grab a fistful of lire, as he had done earlier with epics, his true understanding of that form, combined with his tongue-in-cheek cynicism and the bigger budgets engendered by enormous international success, led him and his collaborators to change permanently the look of the western and to revitalize its subject matter…. Even critics who look down their noses at the Italian product cannot help but praise American films which would never have been made without it…..[like] The Wild Bunch, Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, High Plains Drifter, The Outlaw Josie Wales, Ulzana’s Raid, Two Mules for Sister Sara, [and] Chato’s Land.”

After a long hiatus from directing, Leone mounted the most ambitious film of his career, Once Upon a Time in America (1984), a gangster saga spanning the years from the early 1920s to the 1960s and set for the most part in the immigrant ghetto of New York. The central character, Noodles (Robert De Niro), a Jewish gangster turned stool pigeon, has taken refuge in an opium den, and the sensational flashbacks and flash-forwards that ensue have an hallucinatory quality. In it original form the film ran to 3 hours and 24 minutes, but was ruthlessly edited down for American distribution by the Ladd Company to 2 hours and 24 minutes, reducing Leon’s intricate structure to a flatly chronological account. Reviews of the film when it first appeared were based on the truncated version, which Leone protested had destroyed the integrity of his work. By and large, critics viewed the cut film as an ambitious failure. David Denby, for example, commented that “Judging from what’s left of the epic, I’m not sure the film works at any length.” The screenplay concocted by Leone and five other Italian writers is often ludicrous; the central plot mechanisms are murky and unconvincing.” But Andrew Sarris, who had seen the 3 ½ hour version, sanctioned by the director, at Cannes, felt that the film succeeded despite its offenses to realism: “I cannot imagine anyone who’s ever been moved even slightly by Leone’s work discounting his devotion and commitment to the dream movie he has made of Once Upon a Time in America….I was absorbed throughout by Leone’s hauntingly guilt-ridden expressionism.” And Pauline Kael,
comparing the uncut original with the version first released in the United States, wrote, “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a worse case of mutilation. In the full version, the plot, which spans half a century, was still somewhat shaky, but Robert De Niro’s performance…took hold and the picture had a dreamy obsessiveness.” She felt that the uncut film failed in a number of respects, but admired its “mythic” sweep. “The movie might seem a compendium of kitsch—in a certain sense it is. But it’s kitsch aestheticized by someone who loves it and sees it as the poetry of the masses. It isn’t just the echoing moments that keep you absorbed. It’s those reverberant dreamlike settings and Leone’s majestic, billowing sense of film movement; the images seem to come at you in waves of feeling.” Richard Combs called Once Upon a Time in America “the sequel to Leone’s Once Upon a Time in the West—not in the sense of a progressive historical account of America, but as a valediction to images of America. Leone’s historical recreations and evocations have a double-edged quality: they are extraordinarily lush and sensuous, but simultaneously distanced.” The uncut film was eventually screened in the United States and has also been shown on television.

From Christopher Frayling, Sergio Leone: Something To Do with Death (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).

Frayling on Leone:
“Leone was drawn, throughout his filmmaking career, to artificial, faraway worlds where realistic surface details were carefully researched, so as to chime with the audience’s suspension of disbelief. But the stories belonged to the realm of myth, where the characters were not bourgeois Romans but giants and where theatre mattered more than the mundane. These were his fairy-tales for grown-ups. In this sense, it took him much of his life to see like a child, and to make the uninhibited Hollywood movies he, as an Italian, wanted to see…The words that critics were beginning to use to describe his world included ‘mannerist,’ ‘carnivalesque,’ ‘exhibitionist,’ ‘excessive’ (meaning bad), and ‘excessive’ (meaning good). What he was trying to do was to reenchant the cinema, while expressing his own disenchantment with the contemporary world and conveying the exhilaration he personally felt when watching and making films, a bridge between ‘art films’ and popular cinema, and a source of deep confusion to the critics” (Frayling, 2000, 487).

Quoting Jean Baudrillard on Leone:
The French Philosopher Jean Baudrillard called Sergio Leone “the first post-modernist director”—the first to understand the hall of mirrors within the contemporary “culture of quotations” (Frayling, 2000, 492).

Frayling quoting Leone:
“The attraction of the Western, for me, is quite simply this. It is the pleasure of doing justice, all by myself, without having to ask anyone’s permission. BANG BANG!”
“Naturally, it was not my business to write or make history—in any case, I had neither the inclination nor the right. So I made Fistful of Dollars starting from my own history—a history of fantasy…Nevertheless, it was necessary to present a very precise historical debate, thoroughly documented, in order to address the problem…Within this debate, I could look at human values which are no longer around today…”

When asked about the imaginary nature of his West, Leone answered by citing a famous passage from Karl Marx’s Grundrisse: “A man cannot become a child again unless he becomes childish. But does he not enjoy the artless ways of the child, and must he not strive to reproduce its truths on a higher plane? Is not the character of every epoch revived, perfectly true to nature, in the child’s nature? Why should the childhood of human society, where it obtained its most beautiful development, not exert an eternal charm as an age will never return?’ I believe that a film director who is on the point of shooting a Western must bear in mind, above all else, this truth. So, I haven’t chosen the West as physical, historical evidence of anything, but rather as representative, or as emblematic, of these artless ways of the child” (Frayling, 2000, 17).

“Marx’s conclusion—the that the artifacts and myths of ancient Greece exert ‘an eternal charm’—was treated by most commentators [cultural theorists and structural anthropologists] in the late 1970s as a little too sentimental to be of much value as a tool of analysis.” For Leone, however, fable and myth were still the most suitable means of getting to fundamental problems deep rooted in society (Frayling, 2000, 18).

Marlaine Glicksman: “Interview with Sergio Leone”
The release of Django: Unchained, Quentin Tarantino’s most-recent mash-up of spaghetti western and blaxploitation genres, about a slave turned bounty hunter who seeks to avenge his wife’s enslavement, reminds us of the reach the cinema of Sergio Leone has had.

I had met with Leone in September 1987 to discuss his then upcoming epic, a Soviet coproduction. He resided in a Roman suburb that resembled a sort of Malibu minus the beach. His contemporary home was filled with antiques. (“Every antique has a history,” he said, “a mystery about it: who owned it, who touched it. Every object could be a film in its story.”) His study was lined with books. It was there, behind a large desk, that Leone, addressed as “Maestro,” held court before family and friends, most clearly king. His friend actor Brian Freilino sat by his side, translating our interview as we spoke.
With late-eighties Glasnost, and with the assistance of the Soviet Union, Leone was in pre-production, preparing to bring the 900-day siege of Leningrad during World War II to the screen. For 40 years the story lay obscured by Soviet smokescreens, many of its witnesses silenced by firing squads or sent into exile, never to return. Though many films were previously proposed, his was the first project to be put into active planning. Inspired by Harrison Salisbury’s nonfiction book The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad, the film would be shot in Russian and English, and largely within the Soviet Union. The first Soviet co-production, it was rumored at the time to be the most expensive film ever. The movie also marked a turn for Leone, a step away from mythic America toward a new frontier.

In the winter of 1941–42, Leningrad, once compared to Venice, and the center of Soviet artists and intellectuals, was surrounded by a Nazi blockade determined to starve and shell it into annihilation. A bungle of Kremlin politics, power struggles, and poor planning left the Leningraders to defend their city on their own. The incessant squeal of children’s sleds against the snow was, at times, deafening, as they carried bodies, thousands a day, most of them victims of starvation. Corpses obstructed the streets, the hospital corridors, the riverbanks. The survivors pulled them as far as they could; starving themselves, they were too weak to bury the dead. The bodies would cover with snow and, with the below-zero temperatures, freeze to form an icy path for the next caravan of sleds, only to be uncovered by spring thaw. The living waited on breadlines, often targets of the daily shelling. The survivors would pick themselves up to rejoin the queue for their meager rations. Family pets were butchered. When none remained, there was evidence of cannibalism: Corpses were carved up, and it was said human flesh was being sold at the market. People were murdered for ration cards. Or, worse, the cards were lost or stolen: Lost cards could not be replaced, and this meant certain death by starvation. Many volunteered for the front, where food rations were larger.

That winter was the worst, but it was only the beginning of the 900-day siege. Many who survived would lose their lives during the final battle, in 1944. Those who did survive did so on luck, love for their city, and energizing acts of heroism—and there were many: While war was waged, the library remained open; there were philharmonic concerts. The Leningraders succeeded in defending their city against Napoleon and during the Russian Revolution. They were determined to succeed again. Sergio Leone was determined that their story be resurrected as cinema.

A cult figure in the United States but an auteur abroad, Leone broke ground—and box-office records—with Fistful of Dollars (1964), the first in a series of westerns that would establish stardom for actor Clint Eastwood and legitimacy for the “spaghetti western” (a term coined by American film critics), even though several had already preceded it. The films that followed, For a Few Dollars More (1965); The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966); Once Upon a Time in the West (1968); Duck You Sucker (a.k.a. Once Upon a Time the Revolution [1971]); and Once Upon a Time in America (1983) would establish the Leone style: the rapid editing of extreme close-ups, seamless transitions, mythic landscapes (most often shot in Almeria, Spain), mannered acting, super-natural sound, elaborately powerful Ennio Morricone orchestrations (composed before the films were shot), broad strokes of humor, and anarchic violence.

“I work with intuition. With interpreters. I have my own method. I know exactly what I want from actors. Sometimes, I even recite the role to the actor if it’s not clear.”

Sergio Leone was born in Rome in 1929 to silent-film star Bice Valerian (Edvige Valcarenghi) and film actor/director Roberto Roberti (Vincenzo Leone). He was no stranger to fascism: His father stood firm in his opinions of Mussolini’s regime, and the family was forced into exile and placed under constant surveillance in Naples when Sergio was thirteen. He would attend law school and then begin work as an assistant director for, among others, Vittorio De Sica (and even had a bit role in The Bicycle Thief). Later, he would assist the many American directors who filmed in Rome, including Robert Wise, Fred Zinneman, and William Wyler. He would take over shooting The Last Days of Pompeii (1959) from director Mario Bonnard and then make his first film, The Colossus of Rhodes (1960).

Unlike many of his Italian contemporaries, whose work focused on Italy and the Italian family, Leone set his films in America, creating epic fables documented with authentic detail. Settings and stories serve as context, however, as Leone’s Italian sensibility infused them with social and political implications. The director was a master at mining the past for contemporary mirrors, and his movies seem as modern and prescient today as they did at their height, in the 1960s and seventies.

In Fistful of Dollars (and in an easy parallel with the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan), Eastwood arrives in a stagnant border town to be told, “You will get rich here, or you will get killed,” then threatened, “Get out, Yankee.” The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly is set against the Civil War, while Once Upon a Time in the West parallels the Vietnam War. All are filtered through familiar cinematic myth, however, as Leone plays with archetypes and, often, turns them on end: Women rise above saloon-girl status to become the films’ central motivating force; the protagonist shoots first; and good-guy types like Henry Fonda are cast as the bad guy (a choice blamed for poor U.S. box-office draw for Once Upon a Time in the West). Nowhere is this more evident than Once Upon a Time in America, a reflection on Leone’s own life, and the life and (in Leone’s eyes) death of cinema. Ironically, as might befall a parable about cinema, American distributors cut the film from 420 to 135 minutes—a shorter film means more daily screenings, equals more box-office revenue.
Leone’s highly stylized mise-en-scène, plots, and characters, and his quick-fire cutting influenced the work of directors Sam Peckinpah, Robert Altman, and Alex Cox (whose *Straight to Hell* was also shot in Almeria). Similarities are found in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* and gangsta rap. Leone’s Ennio Morricone soundtracks still echo in music videos and in the work of contemporary composers like John Zorn.

Today Quentin Tarantino’s explosively idiosyncratic revenge-genre films owe a most-obvious nod to the Maestro, from their graphic title sequences to their unabashedly blood-spewing plots to their groovy soundtracks. (Tarantino claims *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* as his number-one favorite spaghetti western.) Django’s own ruffles, cinched peacock-blue suit, and Thom Browne–style cropped blazer clearly riff on Leone’s cinematic flair for fashion, with its leanings toward long black dusters, draping ponchos, cigarillos, and chiseled cheekbones.

In Tarantino’s cinema, as in Leone’s, man and gun are almost indistinguishable, and whether it’s the man or the gun that inevitably fires first is never easily or entirely clear.

It is this unmitigated violence that marks and unites both Leone’s and Tarantino’s work. Though when asked by a Time critic why his films were so violent, Leone simply pointed to a double-page-color spread of a young black man being gunned down by police and gave his famous reply: “Haven’t you read your own magazine?” With the horrifying massacres in Newtown, Connecticut, and Aurora, Colorado, this response could as readily be Tarantino’s own.

Sergio Leone died of a massive heart attack in 1989, at the age of 60. Unsurprisingly, the Maestro’s untimely end paralleled that of his main character in what was to be his upcoming epic: the death of a man who gets so involved in the story, he loses his life in the process.

Marlaine Glicksman: Can you tell me about the film you’ve initiated with the USSR and how the project came about?

Sergio Leone: The idea came to me ten years ago. I always fish out antique ideas, very old ideas. The original idea was this amazing story on the city of Leningrad holding out against the Germans, almost destroying themselves, consuming themselves to hold out again the Germans. But I don’t want to do a war film per se. Nor do I want to do a political film. It’s a little hard to avoid putting both war and politics in, in that they both come into the activity, but on their own. My basic idea is to do a great love film set in the hell of 1942. At that moment, hell was Leningrad. Underneath all this, of course, is a film about dissension between the two most important countries in the world, the United States and the Soviet Union. I think it is a must at this point to talk about cooperation instead of the rancor and hatred and competition between nations.

I will approach these themes through the story of a Russian journalist who calls in a cameraman during this particular period in Leningrad. The news cameraman expects to go and to do fifteen, twenty days, whatever it is, to cover something that is going on over there. Instead, he not only gets involved in the situation but overwhelmed by the amazing collective bravery of these people holding out against the Germans. He gets so involved, that he loses his life in the process. Because in the last days of the siege—we don’t have to tell the ending, but nonetheless—this man gets so involved with the entire thing that he stays longer than he thought, and his own personal sacrifice is much greater than he ever dreamed it would be.

MG: Is this project part of Gorbachov’s Glasnost?

SL: No. It’s a film that I’ve been thinking about and discussing for ten years, and there is no way I could have foreseen Gorbachov’s arrival or this opening.

MG: Will you weave present U.S.—Soviet politics into the film?

SL: As I said, politics, if it enters this film, will come from under the door, after the door has been closed, as politics quite often seep its way into all types of places. It is difficult to exclude politics, but this is not essentially a political film; politics is a marginal factor. It’s a film about this heroic, collective behavior, which is probably the greatest human act in the history of the world. Out of three million people, one third were lost. One million died in three years. I don’t know any other story that has so many deaths in order to protect and save something.

We are also going to respect historical facts. But it is not essentially a historical film, either, because I have no intention of doing a historical film, or a war film. The film is humanistic in the respect that I want to take these two people, one Russian, one American, deal with them and their encounter, the contrast between them, and how they resolve it.

MG: It is not a metaphor for politics today?

SL: If anything, it might be some kind of example, but not a metaphor. What I hope, as a result, is that Reagan and Gorbachov, after seeing the film, would be a little friendlier between themselves.

MG: I understand that this will be your most pessimistic film. Is this true?

SL: If death is a sign of pessimism, I guess so. I’ve always had the sensation that people in America are always avant-garde. Very attentive to all the new innovations. But it’s very specialized. The American public is a very specialized public.

But when I begin a film, I never start off thinking whether it is going to be optimistic or pessimistic. As the fable develops, it takes on one aspect or another. A story on one face or the other, optimist or pessimist, depending on which way it turns. Obviously, today’s reality isn’t very optimistic.

I admit that some of my ideas may have turned out to be pessimistic in nature. Because the life that I live—the life that we all live—is filtered through [one’s own] experience. It isn’t necessarily optimistic when you look at the political phenomena, the different things that are going on in the world. If you filter
those ideas through, they aren’t going to come out optimistically. And that went into some of my characters and some of my films.

MG: It’s said the film will cost $100,000,000—the most-expensive film ever made.

SL: You can’t qualify it in that sense. Because the Russians will be doing their costs in rubles, and we’ll be doing our costs in lira. We don’t control or evaluate what they are spending on their side. But they can certify and discuss what we are spending because we are going to budget our expenses.

The film will mostly be shot there. Therefore, our costs will mostly be the men that we take, the talent we bring, the organizers, and all that. Their costs are a city, extras, war costumes…. However much it is going to cost to rejuvenate a World War II tank is something that I don’t think even they can evaluate.

MG: Will you have free reign over the film, or will it be with the participation of the Soviet authorities?

SL: Artistically, they have given me carte blanche. I’ve only asked for one thing, and that would be a historian, a writer who lived through that moment, who could also act as a referee for the historical points in the story that we are writing, who could collaborate with the Western writers. In that respect, we could arrive at an optimal product for us and for them in terms of historical and political values. But in requesting this collaborator, I’ve asked for one who has the ultimate word on it, in that, what we write together—we and the Russian collaborator—he is the last word. Someone cannot come in and say, “No, no. I don’t like this. I don’t like that.” This man who I collaborate with is the last word.

MG: How do you work on a film and with actors when it is not in your own language?

SL: I’ve shot films in Africa. I’ve shot in America—English is not my language.

I work with intuition. With interpreters. I have my own method. I know exactly what I want from actors. Sometimes, I even recite the role to the actor if it’s not clear. And I beg them not to imitate me, because I’m not a good actor. I tell them this is the idea, so they understand exactly what I want. And if they don’t understand, they redo the scene until they understand [laughs].

MG: Previously, you’ve made films about the frontier. Is the Soviet Union then, for you, the new frontier?

SL: For me, it’s not a new frontier. It’s a very cosmopolitan world that all eyes of the world go and look at, just as they do with the United States. For one clear reason: Either side pushing some button could destroy all of humanity.

MG: Have you made all the films you have wanted to make on America? Was Once Upon a Time in America your last?

SL: It’s difficult to talk about the last film that is going to deal with America. Who knows. America is so varied and exciting that after six months, you go back and find it completely changed. America interests me above all because it is so filled with contradictions, interesting contradictions, which change constantly. Even if you’ve decided that you don’t want to deal with that subject again, before you know it, the desire comes back to do it yet again.

MG: What type of contradictions?

SL: The world is in America. In Italy is only Italy. France is full of France. Germany is full of Germany. In a continent that contains the entire world, contradictions are, of course, constantly arising.

One of these contradictions that I like to sight is that two of the biggest moneymaking films in America were Mary Poppins and Deep Throat. One, of course, is the opposite of the other. But most likely seen by the same public.

They are alive, these contradictions. And they give vitality and fervor to the nation. But they are nonetheless great contradictions.

MG: You once said that America was the world of infants. SL: I’ve always had the sensation that people in America are always avant-garde. Very attentive to all the new innovations. But it’s very specialized. The American public is a very specialized public.

All the people I’ve met, many outside of cinema, knew everything perfectly about one thing or one subject or one area. And less about a lot of things. But the Jesuits use this kind of training, or, let’s say it this way: The Jesuit General imposes this kind of structure; he encourages the young men to specialize. Because getting ten of them together, you have the best of everything. But this does not mean that this system is good for the Jesuits all over. They’re all available to the cause.

I’m not saying that the Americans had the same impact as the Jesuits, but I do see them as a very specialized populace, even in terms of being, to a degree, naïve. Because naiveté comes from lack of information. I’m not sure of this, but I think even in American schools, they must be studying in a specialized manner. We’re talking a very cultivated people, but I found as cultivated as they were, they were uninformed about the personages who weren’t American. They knew everything about America, but much less about other countries. We, on the other hand, probably know less about Italy, but we probably have a broader outlook. This doesn’t mean that this is a better system, because I really do believe that the Jesuit system is better for a country.

The very fact of seeking specialization is probably what makes America so great in these two hundred years. But also, the sensation that somebody who wants to understand America doesn’t really need to visit it much. Just go to Disneyland. You have the impact of how the Americans think, how they dream, what they desire, how they have a good time, what they prefer. I associate this with young people. But many times I think this infantile quality is much better than the false, incomplete concept of adulthood.

“I’ve always had the sensation that people in America are always avant-garde. Very attentive to all the new innovations. But it’s very specialized. The American public is a very specialized public.”

MG: Why did you decide to become a filmmaker?
SL: My mother was an actress. My father was an actor and a director. I am the son of filmmakers. I was born with this bow tie made of celluloid on my collar.

MG: And why did you decide to make westerns?

SL: I had never thought of making a western even as I was making it. I think that my films are westerns only in their exterior aspects. Within them are some of my truths, which happily, I see, belong to lots of parts of the world. Not just America. My discussion is one that has gone all the way from Fistful of Dollars through Once Upon a Time in America. But if you look closely at all these films, you find in them the same meanings, the same humor, the same point of view, and, also, the same pains.

MG: What would you say your discussion was? Is it about money? Violence?

SL: I have to be honest about one thing. When I want to America, no on asked me how I was. Everyone always asked me, “How much do you make?”

But, of course, this happens in other parts of the world, and not just in America. But in America, it is particularly sure that you’ll hear this question asked. Therefore, I consciously chose a person like the bounty killer [of the Fistful trilogy] because he was the street sweeper of the desert, a man who put his life at risk exclusively for the money. I’m not saying that he went against the law, but he put himself within the wings of the law only when it was something that he could profit by.

Of course, there was also the myth of the western films. But my films are borrowed not from the story of the West in America but from the story of cinema. So it is clear that the vehicle of the western was a very interesting vehicle for me to contraband some of my ideas.

Probably the greatest writer of westerns himself was Homer. His characters were never all good or all bad. They’re half and half, these characters, as all human beings are. And I am searching as Diogenes did with his lantern for all of these wonderful human beings. I haven’t found them yet.

I’ve always had the sensation that people in America are always avant-garde. Very attentive to all the new innovations. But it’s very specialized. The American public is a very specialized public. The reason it is taken as a realistic film is because inside the fable, I’ve put that kind of reality in. And it could easily be called, instead of Once Upon a Time in America, Once Upon a Time There Was a Certain Kind of Cinema. Because it was also an homage to cinema. And there’s my pessimism. Because I didn’t know yet that type of film is always going to become more extinct, that there won’t be anymore. Because there will always be more films that win five Oscars like Terms of Endearment.

MG: Which filmmakers influenced you, and what were your favorite films?

SL: I must be honest and say that I was under the fascination of films. I was fascinated by all films, even the words of them. If I was to do a more-precise analysis of the situation, I have to admit that I was more entertained by the bad films than the good ones. Because when something is beautiful, it is there; it is finished; it is done. It doesn’t have to be touched or be worked upon. But if it is badly realized and not completely expressed, sometimes that is more provocative and interesting than when you see something that is perfectly and beautifully done. But if there is an auteur who influenced me—and there is only one—that is Charlie Chaplin. And he never won an Oscar.

MG: Why was Chaplin such a great influence for you?

SL: Because he, too, through spectacle, contrabanded certain ideas, put them through, ideas that even today are not being expressed by great statesmen and politicians.

When one goes to see Modern Times, for instance, one understands much more about socialism than listening to the man who was then head of the Socialist movement in Italy.

I think politics should be expressed in this way and not in other ways. And not just politics—sentiments, even certain states of being. Even when I read a book, if the book leaves me the possibility of finding certain solutions or working on my own toward a solution, I prefer that much more than if the book fills me with the answers, gives them to me directly.

I’ve always believed that true cinema is cinema of the imagination. Cinema through spectacle, through the entertainment of spectacle, tells the story of many actual problems in life. Because who ever doesn’t want to read between the lines can just enjoy the entertainment and the show and can go home happy. On the other hand, whoever would like to look and see what someone is saying behind all the show, glitter, scenery, whatever it may be, and see what ideas are being expressed beyond and below and above that, can do that, as well.

The first must that any director has is to not force his public. He has to, I feel, be one step back, not only from cinema, but also from politics and all these issues in order to tell and depict the situation that spreads to people. It’s very easy with the camera to show the positive side of something. If a director takes the time to document—to step back to observe—I think it I more honest. Because it has to be the public that makes the conclusions and who, possibly, resolves the situation.

MG: Many stylistic elements in your films seem as though they were the forerunners of music videos.

SL: Before I saw them in videos, I saw them in other films. It’s natural to me that someone who loved that type of music or that type of spectacle would copy it, to do something, a video. It seems the most natural thing in the world to me.

MG: Your female characters are often very strong.

SL: My films are often characterized by the lack of women present in them, except for this last one [Once Upon a Time in America].

Would you like to know why I create the women as I do?

Well, because I think women have always been considered objects, especially in the genre of westerns. And especially in gangster films, with the gangster’s moll—she would always be more or less of an object. And I’m not convinced of this theory. Because I think even gangsters’ women have brains. They think and even, as we say, have balls.
Virginia Woolf was one example. She was called the “Lover of 100 Gangsters.” Which is why, in the context of westerns, when I used a woman in my films or wrote a woman into my film, I wanted her to be a central point and a motivating point or a catalyst to function in the film. I didn’t want her just to be a woman standing at the window, waving hello and goodbye to men as they came and went in the world that they were struggling through. I wanted her to have a true function.

When I used Claudia [Cardinale] for example, in Once Upon a Time in the West, she represented the birth of American matriarchy. Because women had enormous weight in America. And they still have. Because they are truly the padrone [owners, masters] of America. Therefore, when they are put into a film, I think they have to be put in for a distinct purpose and have a reason to exist. Not as some superficial or gratuitous presence. You see in Once Upon A Time in the West the whole film moves around her [Cardinale]. If you take her out, there’s no more film. She’s the central motor of the entire happening. It’s the same for Deborah [Elizabeth McGovern] and for Carol [Tuesday Weld] in Once Upon a Time in America.

MG: You’ve made commercials, been a producer.
SL: Producing films was a distraction for me for which I paid dearly. Because I realized than an author cannot also be a producer. Therefore, I had more trouble than I had a sense of utility or satisfaction. But it served to occupy me and to keep me occupied in a field that I love—which was cinema—while I was waiting to realize the film that I wanted to do, which was Once Upon a Time in America, which took ten years of thinking and working to realize.

As far as commercials were concerned, I did very few, and I did them only when they gave me carte blanche to them the way that I wanted to. And I did them as an exercise, because I, who do very long films, never thought I would be able to tell a story in 30 or 40 seconds—you come across a whole new system and manner of approaching a subject. And it was interesting for me for that reason. I even had success with them, which is strange, because out of the six ideas, two won the platinum Minerva in France—it’s the Oscar for their commercials. One was about the Renault diesel and the other about the regular Renault.

MG: You’ve always waited to make the film that you’ve wanted to make the way that you’ve wanted to make it. That is different than most directors’ experience.
SL: Because there are directors, and there are authors. I think I am more of an author than a director. I’ve tried to consider stories that I have read, making them into films, but they would turn out unnatural. If a producer wants that, he should call other people. Not me.
MG: Do you think it is become more difficult to make a film that says something today, during a time when so many people are concerned about money?

SL: It is hard to do a film that wants to say something because, unfortunately, most everything has been said. It’s very difficult to be original; it’s difficult to find new solicitations, new expressions. But this is talking about filmmaking. Cinema. Because I do think that less and less cinema is being done. And this is due to, of course, television, commercials. They are starting to rethink these things in America, as well, because I’m noticing that the cable stations are having more success, because of the non-interruptions, no commercials, than the national networks. And they are starting to talk about this and to discuss the problem.

I’m terrified by young people who are doing what they think is filmmaking. What they’re really doing is taking that convulsed, fast rhythm of commercials. It’s not filmmaking. I’ve seen films that have made as much as $100, $200 million, but they’re not films. They’re images. They’re flashes. They’re many beautiful images, lots of things to look at. They capture you. But it’s not a film. It’s not something that involves you in a story. They go to cinema now to be blown away by the effects. Just like you would if you would walk into a discothèque or anyplace else, with noise and lights. Because they need to get away for one or two hours. So they go, but nothing remains inside of them.

MG: Why, unlike many other Italian filmmakers, have you not made a film in Italy, about Italy? That’s very unusual. What do your fellow Italian filmmakers think about that?

SL: I never worry about what they think about me. Because I feel so far away from what my Italian colleagues have done that I almost automatically become an isolated director. As Claude LeLouch said, his favorite American director is Sergio Leone. Not because I would be American, but because I was dealing with subject matter that an American could have just as easily dealt with.

I think, to go to the bottom of it all, that the films I have made and my kind of filmmaking is a hybrid type of filmmaking—in that it isn’t American, it isn’t Italian. It really just has to do with my own ghosts and phantoms. And I have to say, in the end, it’s just my way of seeing things.

An important Italian critic once gave Fistful of Dollars a very bad review when it came out. Then he became a fan of mine later. He went to the university here [Rome] with Once Upon a Time in America. We showed it to 10,000 students. And while the man was speaking that day to the students, with me present, he said, “I have to state one thing. When I gave that review about Sergio’s films, I should have taken into account that on Sergio Leone’s passport, there should not be written whether the nationality is Italian or anything else. What should be written is: ‘Nationality: Cinema.’ ”

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2016 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXXII:

MAR 8 WILLIAM FRIEDKIN The French Connection 1971
MAR 22 MARTIN SCORSESE Raging Bull 1980
MAR 29 AKIRA KUROSAWA Ran 1985
APR 5 SPIKE LEE Malcolm X 1992
APR 12 CLAIRE DENIS Beau Travail 1999
APR 19 ARI FOLMAN Waltz with Bashir 2008
APR 26 MICHAEL HANEKE Amour 2012
MAY 3 TERRY GILLIAM The Fisher King 1991

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