

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

MARCH 20, 2001 (III:9): ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST (1969)

SERGIO LEONE (January 1929, Rome, Italy – 30 April 1989, Rome, heart attack) was the son of prolific pioneer filmmaker Roberto Roberti (Vincenzo Leone) and movie star Francesca Bertini. He studied law for a time, drifted from job to job, entered film industry in 1939, about same time father retired from it. Over next 20 years he worked in various capacities on some 60 features, serving as assistant to Mario Camerini and Vittorio de Sica among other notable Italian directors, later to some American directors doing costume epics—Mervyn LeRoy on *Quo Vadis* 1950, Robert Wise, *Helen of Troy* 1955, William Wyler *Ben Hur* 1959. He had small acting roles in several films, *Bicycle Thieves* for example, where he played a young priest. His other films are *C'era una volta in America* 1984 (*Once Upon a Time in America*), *Un Genio, due compari, un pollo* 1975 (*The Genius*, uncredited), *Gi la testa* 1971 (*Duck, You Sucker/A Fistful of Dynamite/Once Upon a Time... the Revolution*), *Il Buono, il brutto, il cattivo* 1966 (*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*), *Per qualche dollaro in pi* 1965 (*For a Few Dollars More*, released in US in 1967), *Per un pugno di dollari* 1964 (as Bob Robertson in the European prints; *Fistful of Dollars* in US 1967), *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah* 1962 (uncredited), *Il Colosso di Rodi* 1961 (*The Colossus of Rhodes*), and *Gli Ultimi giorni di Pompei* 1959 (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, uncredited). Clint Eastwood dedicated *Unforgiven* 1992 to him. Leone turned down an offer to direct *The Godfather* because he was working on a film he'd wanted to make for years, *Once Upon a Time in America*—an Italian film about American Jewish gangsters. When he died in 1989 he was preparing "The 900 Days," a Soviet co-production about the World War II Siege of Leningrad in which he planned to star De Niro.

ENNIO MORRICONE (10 November 1928, Rome, Italy, sometimes credited as Leo Nichols and Dan Savio) is perhaps the most prolific film composer ever. His IMDB credits list nearly 400 theatrical and made-for-tv scores, as well as one TV series score – "The Virginian" in 1962. He scored all 5 of Leone's westerns, as well as *The Genius* and *Once Upon a Time in America*. Some of his other film scores were for *Mal na* 2000, *Bulworth* 1998, *Lolita* 1997, *Wolf* 1994, *Disclosure* 1994, *Une pure formalit* 1994, *In the Line of Fire* 1993, *Cinema Paradiso* 1991, *Bugsy* 1991, *Hamlet* 1990, *Money* 1990, *State of Grace* 1990, *Casualties of War* 1989, *The Untouchables* 1987, *The Mission* 1986, *La Cage aux folles* 1978, and *Days of Heaven* 1978. Morricone and Leone would often work on the script and the score at the same time, with each writing into the other's ideas. Leone would then play the music to the actors during filming, much as music was played on the set by some early silent era directors.

TONINO DELLI COLLI (20 November 1923, Rome, Italy) did two other films with Leone: *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, and *Once Upon a Time in America*. He also shot nearly 120 other films, among them *La Vita bella* 1997, *Life Is Beautiful* 1997, *Death and the Maiden* 1994, *The Name of the Rose* 1986, *Ginger e Fred* 1986, *Pasqualino Settebellezze* 1976 (*Seven Beauties*), *Salo, or The 120 Days of Sodom* 1975, *Lacombe Lucien* 1974, and *Arrivederci Roma* 1957 (*Seven Hills of Rome*).

CLAUDIA CARDINALE (15 April 1938, Tunis, Tunisia) got her start in films after winning a beauty contest. For a while she was touted as the next Sophia Loren, but even though she appeared in more than 100 theatrical and made-for-tv films she never managed the leap from sexy Italian actress to major international star, probably because she never managed to learn English. She appears in *Brigands* 1999, *Son of the Pink Panther* 1993, *A Man in Love* 1987, *Fitzcarraldo* 1982, *Ruba al prossimo tuo* 1969 (*A Fine Pair*), *The Professionals* 1966, *The Pink Panther* 1963, *Il Gattopardo* 1963 (*The Leopard*), *8 ½* 1963, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* 1960 (*Rocco and His Brothers*), and *I Soliti ignoti* 1958 (*Big Deal on Madonna Street*). She's in two films we've selected for the Fall 2001 BFS series, *Il*

Gattopardo and *The Professionals*.

HENRY FONDA (16 May 1905, Grand Island, Nebraska – 12 August 1982, Los Angeles, heart disease & prostate cancer), one of Hollywood's most respected actors during most of his long career, won his only acting Oscar for his last film, *On Golden Pond* 1981. With a

C'era una volta il West (1969)

Once Upon a Time in the West

165 minutes, Paramount Pictures [us]

Rafran Cinematografica [it]

San Marco Production

Claudia Cardinale Jill McBain

Henry Fonda Frank

Jason Robards Cheyenne

Charles Bronson Harmonica

Gabriele Ferzetti Morton

Paolo Stoppa Sam

Woody Strode Stony

Jack Elam Knuckles

Keenan Wynn Sheriff

Frank Wolff Brett McBain

Lionel Stander Barman

Director Sergio Leone

Story Dario Argento, Sergio Leone, and Bernardo Bertolucci

Script Sergio Donati, Mickey Knox, Sergio Leone

Producer Fulvio Morsella

Original music Ennio Morricone

Cinematographer Tonino Delli Colli

Production design & Costumes

Carlo Simi

very few exceptions, most notably tonight's film, he played good guys, or good-guys-driven-bad, as in *Jesse James* 1939 and *The Return of Frank James* 1940. Some of his other memorable performances were *The Cheyenne Social Club* 1970, *The Boston Strangler* 1968, *Fail-Safe* 1964, *The Best Man* 1964, *Advise and Consent* 1962, *Warlock* 1959, *12 Angry Men* 1957, *Mister Roberts* 1955, *Fort Apache* 1948, *My Darling Clementine* 1946, *The Ox-Bow Incident* 1943, *The Grapes of Wrath* 1940, *Young Mr. Lincoln* 1939. His first role was with the Omaha Community Playhouse, an amateur theater group directed by Marlon Brando's mother, Dorothy. He won a Tony for *Mister Roberts* 1948, a role he reprised in the screen version. Fonda had real-life training for that role: he won a Bronze Star for his naval service in WWII. "Like many of the men he played on stage and screen," wrote critic Leonard Maltin, "naval officer Roberts was a man of absolute integrity; this was a quality audiences came to associate with Fonda for the rest of his life. It's no accident he played U.S. presidents so often." He won an honorary Oscar in 1981 and the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award in 1978.

JASON ROBARDS (26 July 1922, Chicago – 26 December 2000, Bridgeport, Connecticut, lung cancer) came to dramatic fame for off-Broadway performance as Hickey in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. The play ran 500 performances, a record for a non-musical. He followed that with the first stage production of *Long Day's Journey into Night*. *Iceman* was broadcast by what was then called National Educational Television in 1960; it was one of the landmark events of early television. In his later years he returned to TV work, much of it notable, e.g. *Inherit the Wind* 1988, *The Long Hot Summer* 1985, and *Sakharov* 1984. Some of his films are *Magnolia* 1999, *A Thousand Acres* 1997, *Philadelphia* 1993, *Melvin and Howard* 1980, *Julia* 1977, *All the President's Men* 1976, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* 1973, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* 1970, *A Thousand Clowns* 1965, and *Long Day's Journey into Night* 1962. He won best supporting actor Academy Awards for *All the President's Men* and *Julia*. He also won Obi, Tony and Emmy awards. Robards was in Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked it on December 7, 1941; he spent seven years in the navy and was awarded the Navy Cross (equivalent to the army's Distinguished Service Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor).

CHARLES BRONSON (Charles Buchinsky, 3 November 1921, Ehrenfeld, Pennsylvania) plays cops, tough guys, avengers. He's probably best known to recent audiences for his portrayal of Paul Kersey, that untiring serial killer of malefactors in the five *Death Wish* films. A creepy number of his other films in the past 20 years have the words "death" or "killer" or "assassination" in their titles. He has appeared in slightly over 100 films, among them *The White Buffalo* 1977, *Hard Times* 1975, *The Mechanic* 1972, *The Valachi*

Papers 1972, *Red Sun* 1971, *The Dirty Dozen* 1967, *The Great Escape* 1963, *The Magnificent Seven* 1960, *Apache* 1954, *House of Wax* 1953, and *You're in the Navy Now* 1951. His appearance as Harmonica in *Once Upon a Time in the West* is at least partly an attempt at catchup: Leone had offered him the role of the unnamed gunslinger in *A Fistful of Dollars* but, in what was perhaps the worst career move he ever made, he turned it down. The role went to you-know-whom. According to Leonard Maltin, "Bronson was one of fifteen children born to Lithuanian immigrant parents, and though he was the only member of the family to complete high school, he joined his brothers working in the coal mines to support the family. He served during World War 2 as a tailgunner, then used his G.I. Bill rights to study art in Philadelphia and, intrigued by acting, enrolled at California's Pasadena Playhouse. An instructor there recommended him to director Henry Hathaway for a movie role and the result was Buchinsky's debut in *You're in the Navy Now* 1951."

WOODY STRODE Woodrow Wilson Strode, 28 July 1914, Los Angeles – 31 December 1994, Glendora, California, lung cancer said his favorite of his threescore film roles was in John Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge* 1960. He dueled Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus* 1960 and attended John Wayne in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Before becoming an actor Strode was an athlete, first in the decathlon and football at UCLA, then as one of the four black men who integrated the NFL in 1946 (the others were Bill Willis, Marion Motley, and Kenny Washington).

JACK ELAM (13 November 1916, Miami, Arizona) has that wild-eyed look because he was blinded in his left eye in a fight when he was a kid. He used to play bad guys but as he's gotten older and, he says, "too fat to get on a horse" he's played friendly greybeards, mostly in a lot of made-for-tv films over the past 20 years. Some of his many films are *The Cannonball Run* 1981, *The Apple Dumpling Gang Rides Again* 1979, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* 1973, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* 1957, *Kiss Me Deadly* 1955, *Cattle Queen of Montana* 1954, *High Noon* 1952, *Rancho Notorious* 1952 and *The Gunfighter* 1950.

LIONEL STANDER (11 January 1908, The Bronx – 30 November 1994, Los Angeles, California, lung cancer) appeared in more than 100 films and tv series in a career that began in 1932. He has no film credits between *St. Benny the Dip* in 1951 and *The Moving Finger* in 1963. That's because he was blacklisted for telling the House Committee on Un-American Activities what he thought of their hearings rather than giving them names. Stander worked for several years on the highly successful tv series "Hart to Hart," as well as the five reprises of the series 1993-1995.

...The director John Boorman said, "In *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the Western reaches its apotheosis. Leone's title is a declaration of intent and also his gift to America of its lost fairy stories. This is the kind of masterpiece that can occur outside

trends and fashion. It is both the greatest and the last Western.”

...Leone’s father used the stage name Roberto Roberti in imitation of the famous actor Ruggero Roggeri, mostly to hide from his family the fact he was in a theatrical touring group. They would have disinherited him; they thought he was practicing as a barrister in Turin.

...Leone wanted Henry Fonda and he was hard to get. Fonda told Eli Wallach he wasn’t wild about the script and Wallach said to ignore it, to go and he’d fall in love with Sergio. Fonda agreed to meet him in person and told Leone he was used to old methods, that if he accepted he wanted to give full authority to the director, that before he agreed to anything he wanted to see Leone’s films. Early one morning in a private projection booth he saw without interruption *Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*. When he came out, it was already late afternoon. “Where’s the contract?” was the first thing he said.

Cheyenne: Hey, you could make thousands of dollars... Hundreds of thousands of dollars... Even thousands of thousands of dollars...

Harmonica: They call 'em millions.

From *SERGIO LEONE Something To Do With Death*. Christopher Frayling NY 2000

Sergio Leone once said “I was born in a cinema, almost. Both my parents worked there. My life, my reading, everything about me revolves around the cinema. So for me, cinema is life, and vice-versa.” He first wandered onto a sound stage at Cinecittà in 1941, at the age of twelve, to watch his father shooting a film. And he died watching a film on television, in Rome, at the age of sixty. As we will see, for Leone, the passionate experience of movie-going, the ideas and sensations it unleashed in him, informed all of his work in cinema. Leone was the first modern cineaste to make really popular films: films which nevertheless remained personal to him. In the words of philosopher Jean Baudrillard, he was

“the first postmodernist director.”

“The attraction of the Western, for me,” he said, “is quite simply this. It is the pleasure of doing justice, all by myself, without having to ask anyone’s permission. BANG BANG!”

“The Americans have the horrible habit, among other habits, of watering the wine of their mythical ideas with the water of the American way of life—a way of life, incidentally, which isn’t of interest to anyone who has his head on his shoulders. Take Doris Day. There is a vision of America in her films,

which is totalitarian and quasi-Soviet! A world without conflict, Abel without Cain. While America, on the other hand, like every other society is really about conflict and truth competing with untruth.... I wanted to show the cruelty of that nation, I was bored stiff with all those grinning white teeth. Hygiene and optimism are the woodworms which destroy American wood. It is a great shame if America is always to be left to the Americans."

"My father died a broken man," Leone would remember. "In a magnificent part of the world, his native, land, which is that same Irpinia which was rhapsodized by Virgil in the *Pastorals*. He fell ill there, and died very soon after, and when he looked at me—almost for the last time—I read in his eyes the deepest regret that I'd decided to abandon my legal studies, and to turn towards the cinema. In my mind, though, my chosen career seemed like a debt I was paying to both my parents." Sergio wanted very much to impress them both. It was in acknowledgment of this 'debt' that he would choose as his pseudonym for his first international success as a director—*Fistful of Dollars* (1964)—the name 'Bob Robertson'.

"I detested opera on film when I worked as Gallone's assistant and I still do today. I've been offered operas to direct, but I simply couldn't do it. I'd be laughing too much. When I see an actor singing on a horse, and he falls out of the saddle to become his noble self again, while continuing all the while to belt out his *bel canto* at full volume—I just fall about laughing. It's too silly for words." The only credible way of presenting opera on film, he added, was to use professional movie actors against authentic backgrounds, and "do play-back with the best singers, like in Preminger's *Carmen Jones* . . . You absolutely need real actors: you can't make a *film* with someone like Placido Domingo in it." He was offered *Carmen* on film and *The Girl of the Golden West* on stage, but turned them both down.

"Take Vittorio De Sica's attention to detail. Nothing of this kind would have been possible in America, where the stratification of the industry suffocated the director's intuition under three layers of ultra-professional dust. I learned more from De Sica, in a few working weeks, than from being a paid assistant, in the following years, for the big American directors who were descending on Italy from a great height to reveal to us the miracle of the great historical and mythological films, which incidentally went down like stodge food."

"Let's be frank: I was impatient to get away from neo-realism. For me, cinema is imagination. It can say things by using the resources of the fable. The doctrinal sort of film never appealed to me.... So the encounter with Wise, Walsh and Zinneman was essential for me, above all to understand how a certain kind of cinema was constructed. I mean the technical side.... I believe this experience helped open certain windows on a kind of cinema which could have thoughts, and at the same time be spectacular."

"I made fifty-eight films (*sic*) as an assistant—I was at the side of directors who applied all the rules: make it, for example, a close-up to show that the character is about to say something

important. I reacted against all that, and so the close-ups in my films are always the expression of an emotion. I'm very careful in that area, so they call me a perfectionist and a formalist, because I watch my framing. But I'm not doing it to make it pretty. I'm seeking, first and foremost, the relevant emotions."

"John Ford is a film-maker whose work I admired enormously, more than any other director of Westerns. I could almost say that it was thanks to him that I even considered making Westerns myself. I was very influenced by Ford's *honesty* and his *directness*. Because he was an Irish immigrant who was full of gratitude to the United States of America, Ford was also full of optimism. His main characters usually look forward to a rosy future. If he sometimes demythologizes the West, as I had tried to do on the 'Dollars' films, it is always with a certain romanticism, which is his greatness but which also takes him a long way away from historical truth (although less so than most of his contemporary directors of Westerns). Ford was full of optimism, whereas I, on the contrary, am full of pessimism....

"There is visual influence there as well, because he was the one who tried most carefully to find a true visual image to stand for 'the West'. The dust, the wooden towns, the clothes, the desert. The Ford film I like most of all—because we are getting nearer to shared values—is also the least sentimental, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. We certainly watched that when we were preparing *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Why? Because Ford, finally, at the age of almost sixty-five, finally understood what pessimism is all about. In fact, with that film Ford succeeded in eating up all his previous words about the West—the entire discourse he had been promoting from the very beginning of his career. Because *Liberty Valance* shows the conflict between political forces and the single, solitary hero of the West.... He loved the West and with that film at last he understood it."

Whereas the others strut their allotted roles then bow out, [Jill] at last has a useful purposeful role to fulfil: attending to the thirsty railroad workmen. As the mythologies dissolve, she comes into her own. For the one and only time in his film-making career, Leone placed a female character at the heart of the action. The world of the "Dollars" films, and their imitators, was exclusively male. With only one or two exceptions, women were restricted to the roles of whores, buxom hotel receptionists, *bandidos'* molls or silent Mexican widows living in adobe pueblos on the outskirts of town. Sure, the Italians had managed to make the old-style Western heroine redundant, a definite plus. But in the process they had merely scraped away, in critic Andrew Sarris's words, "the thin veneer of Madonna worship" to reveal a misogyny "never remotely approached even in the wildest of the Freudian Hollywood Westerns."

Leone had intended to show Clint Eastwood in bed with a Mexican woman, in a short sequence of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* but although he filmed it and press stills were issued, the sequence was deleted from the final edit. The same happened with a sequence in *For a Few Dollars More* where Eastwood goes to bed with a hotel receptionist. It was as if the self-contained, iconic hero would be diminished if he showed his vulnerability in this way. Confronted by

accusations of misogyny, Sergio Leone tended to reply that his films were mythic: Homeric, even—concerned with “a simple world of adventure and of uncomplicated men—a masculine world.” ...In all his comments on historical research, he never once mentioned the studies of pioneering women (the reprinting of memoirs, letters and diaries; the publication of women’s histories of the frontier process) that were just beginning to emerge in the late 1960s. He regularly scorned the perfunctory presentation of female characters in the classic Hollywood Westerns.... Leone’s daughter Raffaella defends this apparent indifference to women displayed in his films: “When asked why women played such a small part in his films, he’d say, “Well, there are three strong women at home—Carla, Raffaella and Francesca—and that’s maybe the reason!” Carla adds, “Women had an essential role in his life, so in his films he couldn’t just show them as props.”

Since Leone was so set on bucking Western conventions, it was appropriate on this occasion to centre the film on a resourceful and powerful woman. “Jill represents the water, the promise of the West, the plot revolves around her and she’s the only one who survives.” But it seems Leone didn’t ‘invent’ this aspect of the story at all. It was Bernardo Bertolucci: “I’m still very proud of my contribution to that treatment. I convinced Leone to introduce the character of a woman, for the first time. He took Leone to see *Johnny Guitar*, a film that centres on two remarkable females. “I was talking to him about a scene [involving Charles Bronson, after he has recovered from the gunfight at Cattle Corner Station. It was filmed, but cut from the final version]. The hero goes into a small hotel, throws himself on to the bed, and says to the girl, ‘Take off my boots’ (and she takes them off), ‘Massage my feet’ (and she starts to massage his feet). This should have been the beginning of an erotic encounter. But Leone interrupted me: ‘Yeah, yeah. She massages his feet slowly, very slowly. . .and *he falls asleep*.’ He had a tendency to

neutralize the possibility of a sexual relationship.”

[Jill’s] function in the film is crucial: she brings into focus all the other ‘worn-out stereotypes’ and is the only character to survive and adjust to the modern world. Nevertheless, Leone was presenting her survival at the end with ambiguity: “From one point of view, it is optimistic—in that a great nation has been born.... It’s been a difficult birth, but all the violence has made the greatness possible. From another point of view, it is pessimistic, undoubtedly—because the West has given way to the great American matriarchy, the worship of “mom”. America has come to be based on this, and the arrival of the railroad ushers in the beginning of a world without balls. The great force in American life—part of its formidable success story—is based on women with iron balls, so to speak. I’m pretty sure that Rockefeller’s grandmother came from a whorehouse in New Orleans.”

‘The vice-presidents of the companies I have had dealings with have all had baby-blue eyes and honest faces and what sons of bitches they turned out to be! Besides Fonda is no saint himself. He has had five wives. The last one fell out of a window while trying to murder him. He stepped over her body and went to the theatre to act his part in *Mr Roberts* as if nothing whatever had happened.’

‘The rhythm of the film. . .was intended to create the last gasps that a person takes just before dying. *Once Upon a Time in the West* was, from start to finish, a dance of death. All the characters in the film, except Claudia, are conscious of the fact that they will not arrive at the end alive.... .And I wanted to make the audience *feel*, in three hours, how these people lived and died—as if they had spent ten days with them.”

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SHOW

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