

CHRISTIAN UVA

# SERGIO LEONE

Cinema  
as Political Fable



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## *Cinema as Political Fable*

CHRISTIAN UVA

*Translated by*

FABIO BATTISTA

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*To his tender strength.*  
*To his intelligent rigor.*  
*To his lucid sense of morality.*  
*To his utmost dignity.*  
*To Gianfranco Uva, my father.*



# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1. Sergio Leone's Short Century	1
1.1. A Childhood in the Shadow of the Regime	1
1.2. The Apprenticeship Years	5
1.3. The Debut: From Myth to Historical Imagery	11
1.4. Leone's Road to the Western	14
1.5. Engaged Cinema	21
1.6. From Director to Producer	24
1.7. From the "Film of Films" to the Unfinished Project	26
2. Cinema between Fable and Political Mythology	35
2.1. Political Spectacle	35
2.2. Postmodernism as the "Third Way"	44
2.3. World Metaphors and Thought Models between Gramsci and Jünger	48
2.4. Repressing Fascism: Leone's Sword-and-Sandal Debut	51
2.5. The First Trilogy: Men with No Names and Subversive Dis-Identities	55
2.6. The Second Trilogy: Historical and Political Imagery in a Fable World	69
3. Three Sequences	101
3.1. Dislocations and Symbols between Macrohistory and Microhistory	101
3.2. "Revolution Is an Act of Violence"	107
3.3. Voyeurism, Gender, Jewishness	113
<i>Filmography</i>	121
<i>Bibliography</i>	127
<i>Index</i>	131





# Acknowledgments

In his review of the Italian edition of this book, which appeared in the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* (Vol. 3.3, 2015), Peter Bondanella called it “a very good book, one that will add a great deal to the discussion of Leone’s work,” adding that it deserved to be translated into English “to reach as wide an audience as possible.”

Now that this wish has been achieved, my sincerest gratitude goes to him.

I would like to thank my collaborator Matteo Santandrea who worked hard for this book.



# 1

## Sergio Leone's Short Century

“. . . cinema was born as spectacle, and as such it performs its functions. . . . And it is only when the political image appears through such functions that it becomes acceptable. Otherwise, what you have is not cinema, but a propaganda document.”

—Sergio Leone

### 1.1. A Childhood in the Shadow of the Regime

Sergio Leone was born in Rome on January 3, 1929. His birthplace, Palazzo Lazzaroni, was located in Via dei Lucchesi, not far from the Trevi Fountain, but from the age of two to the age of twenty he lived in the heart of Rome's historical Trastevere neighborhood. His house in Via Filippo Casini was but a few minutes away from Viale Glorioso, the street that would provide the title for his first screenplay.

His parents were well-known personalities in the world of Italian silent film. His mother, Edvige Valcarenghi, had made a name for herself as a comedy actress—in the theater, and subsequently on screen—using the pseudonym Bice (short for Beatrice) Waleran (later Bice Roberti). His father, Vincenzo, was one of the most active professionals during the years of the first real boom of Italian cinema. It is no coincidence that in 1922 Leone's future parents first met at one of the most prominent film studios of the time, Turin's Aquila Film. Here the actress—who would quit acting a couple of years after getting married in 1914—began working with an actor and artistic director who went by the pseudonym Roberto Roberti. He, too, was a man of the theater, where his stage name was meant to echo that of the famous Ruggero Ruggeri.

Cinema was in Leone's DNA. Even before the rise of Fascism, Italian cinema had experienced a sort of mythical age that paved the way for a thriving film industry. This productive environment mostly relied on large, epic-style films such as *Nerone* (*Nero*, 1909), by the Società Anonima

Ambrosio, *La caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*, 1911), by Itala Film, *La Gerusalemme liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*, 1911), by Cines—but also on historical films, such as *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1913), *Spartaco* (*Spartacus*, 1913), *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1913) and, above all, *Quo Vadis?* (1913), which, as the scholar Christopher Frayling notes, “had cashed in on a wave of popular nationalism, following the conquest of Libia in 1912.”<sup>1</sup> During these years, pioneers like Roberto Roberti laid the groundwork for Italian cinema, establishing what would become known as its distinctive features in the wake of its international success.<sup>2</sup>

Genre-cinema was the most prominent form of film production in early twentieth-century Italy, and, as we shall see, this would become Leone’s first stepping stone in his professional career. Along with the other melodramatic works<sup>3</sup> directed by Roberti for Aquila Film in the same period, the aforementioned films served as the backbone for a system that grew exponentially from one production to the next. But just like Leone’s early works, the films directed by his father in this period—from *La contessa Lara* (*Countess Lara*, 1912) to *L’assassina del Ponte di Saint Martin* (*The Mystery of Saint Martin’s Bridge*, 1913)—were not entirely well received by Italian critics, who were baffled by the transgressive subjects they dealt with, and felt they defied the social norms of the time.

This biographical digression on Leone’s parents is a necessary step for understanding their son’s existential experiences, his professional choices, and his poetics. As a case in point, I would like to single out one work among the many directed by his father in the era of silent film: *La vampira indiana* (*Indian Vampire*, 1913), which was the first Italian Western. Fifty-one years before his son would go on to revolutionize this genre with *Per un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*, 1964)—for which he originally used the pseudonym Bob Robertson—the director Roberti was working on a proto-Western. In the lead role was Bice Waleran, who, reflecting a taste derived from symbolist poetry and painting, played the role of a woman who commits a number of evil deeds in order to save her brother. In keeping with the film’s title, the character was a *vamp*, the typical example of a *femme fatale* whose sexual nature brought about a message of death (and I believe one can read this as a symptom of the grim atmosphere clouding Europe before the outbreak of World War I).

Following the bankruptcy of Aquila Film and his brief collaboration with Rome’s Caesar Film studios, which asked him to direct the diva Francesca

Bertini in *La piccola fonte* (1917),<sup>4</sup> Roberti was called back to Turin by Itala Film. The project on which he was to work would once again prove fruitful in Leone's cinematic experience, particularly in his directorial debut in the mythological genre. The film, *Maciste poliziotto* (*Maciste the Policeman*, 1918), was one installment in a successful series of productions inspired by a character created by Gabriele D'Annunzio, and who first appeared in Giovanni Pastrone's epic film *Cabiria* (1914). This positive, popular hero<sup>5</sup> was played by a former docker, Bartolomeo Pagano (who was probably introduced to Pastrone by Roberti himself), and, in *Maciste poliziotto*, appeared as the trusty employee of a businessman threatened by evil agitators. The character thus came to embody that very type of Übermensch that would channel the nationalistic ideals exploited by the fast-approaching Fascism. It is no coincidence, as Frayling remarks, that "some, in the late 1920s, were to note the striking facial resemblance between the actor who played Maciste and an equally heavy-set superhero who liked to fold his arms for the newsreel cameras: Benito Mussolini."<sup>6</sup>

Despite his early enrolment in the National Fascist Party, Vincenzo Leone, as his own son would report, soon decided not to renew his membership, because, allegedly, the local party treasurer had pocketed all the money and run away with it.<sup>7</sup> This may well be an anecdote used by Leone to explain his father's complex disillusionment regarding the Fascist "cause," but during his early childhood he was heavily immersed, through his father's experience, in the gloomy atmosphere that the Fascist regime had spread throughout the country. He remembered, for instance, that "when we would go out on Sundays to the Caffé Aragno,<sup>8</sup> we would be followed by two policemen at a distance."<sup>9</sup> Vincenzo's growing anti-Fascism would eventually result in unabashed filo-Communism when, estranged from the cinematic world, he even faced the threat of political confinement. Such is the background that shaped Leone's views and, later in his life, would lead to a gradual disenchantment with any ideology at all.

The shadow, or rather the "ghost," of Mussolini influenced the lives of both father and son in multiple ways. For instance, a few years before Leone's birth, Vincenzo received a collaboration proposal from the dictator himself. This followed a professional rehabilitation in the eyes of the regime through the intercession of Roberto Forges Davanzati, his former schoolmate and an influential member of the National Fascist Party. Vincenzo was asked to direct a filmic adaptation of *L'amante del Cardinale: Claudia Particella*, a historical novel published in installments in Cesare Battisti's newspaper *Il Popolo* in

1910. The author, Mussolini himself, had written a scandalous story with an openly anticlerical agenda, in keeping with his then-professed identity as a “priest-eater from Romagna”<sup>10</sup> and an “angry” socialist. According to Leone’s own account, his father found the novel terrible and refused the proposal.<sup>11</sup> The scholar Gian Piero Brunetta, however, has uncovered a copy of a 1923 screenplay whose frontispiece bears the handwritten inscription “by Leone Roberto Roberti.”<sup>12</sup>

If we accept the first hypothesis—that of the “great refusal”—we may ascribe Vincenzo’s blacklisting among the enemies of Fascism enacted by Giuseppe Bottai<sup>13</sup> to his aborted collaboration on the *Claudia Particella* project, rather than to the Fascist treasurer’s fraudulent behavior. As a side note, Mussolini himself would soon disown his novelistic effort by virtue of his new, positive attitude toward the Vatican, required by the upcoming Lateran Treaty of 1929.

Regardless of which theory one accepts, his father’s unemployment marked Leone’s first ten years of life. This would come to an end in 1939, when the producer Giuseppe Barattolo asked Vincenzo to direct a Pirandellian-style farce titled *Il socio invisibile* (*The Silent Partner*, 1940); years later, the lead actor in the film, Carlo Romano, would be employed by Leone as a dubber for Jason Robards, Rod Steiger, and Eli Wallach.

Leone’s first real contact with the world of cinema, however, took place in 1941, when the twelve-year-old became acquainted with the Cinecittà studios and the streets of Naples in which his father was directing *La bocca sulla strada* (*The Man on the Street*). The film’s screenplay was authored by Guglielmo Giannini, a journalist, politician, writer, director, and playwright who would found the Fronte dell’Uomo Qualunque (Common Man’s Front) in 1944. From this initiative a political party would arise, along with the pseudo-ideology known as *qualunquismo*.<sup>14</sup>

During this period, Leone became acquainted with a flourishing production system, one that would soon experience the aftermath of World War II. “I wandered on to the set of *La corona di ferro* [*Iron Crown*]<sup>15</sup> and inspected the leather riding boots of director Blasetti. . . . I wandered, too, on to another set, where Mario Camerini was trying to assemble the actors in *I promessi sposi*,”<sup>16</sup> Leone would later remember. His memories, though anecdotal, are precious instruments that allow us to understand his formative years in retrospect, shaped by a reality in which the industrial, popular aspect of the cinematic product was always inherently connected to the authorial dimension. Despite the presence of an increasingly oppressive regime, this milieu

nourished a sense of “modernity,” at least in the cinematic world. As the film historian Vito Zagarrío remarks, this modernity can be identified “in the transformation of languages, means, and messages . . . , in the experimental nature of the work of some authors, in the use and hybridization of genres and traditions, in the very self-reflexive consciousness of the means.”<sup>17</sup> As we shall see, all of these aspects can be traced in the cinema of Sergio Leone.

Meanwhile, under the influence of the Italian Resistance movement, Leone would be tempted to join the partisan fight in 1943—the momentous year of the Allied invasion of Sicily and the fall of Mussolini—just like his colleagues Carlo Lizzani, Francesco Maselli, Luigi Magni, and Luchino Visconti. As the director remembered it, “there was talk of a social, ideological movement that would bring about the Liberation of the country, and I was beguiled by this. At sixteen years of age, I longed to join the Resistance: a group of friends and myself had made plans to reach the partisans in the North, on the mountains.”<sup>18</sup>

However, his mother’s efforts to dissuade him—and perhaps also the temptation of cinema—would ultimately change his mind. In 1943 we find Leone at work for the first time as an assistant to his father, on *I fuochi di San Martino* [*The Bonfires of Saint Martin*],<sup>19</sup> the last project by a director who could no longer fit in a context so profoundly different from that of the 1910s and 1920s. Despite his father’s resolution to persuade his son not to follow in his footsteps (he urged him to study law, instead), Leone went his way in a world where the material and moral ruin caused by the war were paving the way for a new way of conceiving both man and existence.

After all, his ties to the world of cinema had by then become unbreakable: his godfather was Camerini, while Mario Bonnard—an experienced director of historical films and sentimental comedies—was his father’s closest friend, and Carmine Gallone (the “prophet of Fascist *kolossal* films”)<sup>20</sup> was a regular at his family house. In fact, the director of *Scipione l’Africano* (*Scipio Africanus: The Defeat of Hannibal*, 1937)—who had returned to his profession by the late 1940s—would offer Leone his first paid job as an assistant.

## 1.2. The Apprenticeship Years

Leone learned the tools of the trade within a stylized type of cinema, but two short years after his debut as Gallone’s assistant for the opera-film *Rigoletto*