

A cinema poet
An interview with Tonino Guerra
by gianfranco Angelucci

A great writer celebrates his eightieth birthday: a lifetime of word pictures.

The house amid the almond-trees, in Valmarecchia, blooms, greeting the eighty year old poet, a white-rose cloud of flowers wrapping up in the early springtime sun the poetic home where Tonino Guerra has lived for 10 years with his Russian wife Lora, his honey-colored Labrador, and a well-behaved colony of cats.

What do the years mean...?

Years are often heavy, age is something that changes your way of thinking. Every time now, when I leave on a journey, I surprise myself looking at the things that I like with the suffering of the last farewell: I mean, this plant, this object, this light, well maybe I'm seeing it for the last time.

Age brings a softer attention toward nature, toward the natural events: the rain, the sun, the trees. I feel I need their friendship. There are two hundred flowering almond trees around the house, and this morning it was difficult to walk through, as you had the impression an airplane was flying over the trees. These trees are the first ones to bloom in the springtime, and every bee in the valley comes up here to collect the honey.

You paint, you write books and screenplays, you design fountains, and then you declare that everything you do is just a little poetical operation.

Yes, it's true, I believe I have given a little bit of poetry to all the directors I have worked with. Maybe they didn't need any, but poetry weighs little, and it's always good to have by you, all the time. Apart from that, I claim, as you know, that the director is the author of his film, or so it was in the great films I worked on, and the screenplay writer is only a collaborator.

What's a screenplay?

It's a structure you need for the film, like a theater script the director keeps under his arm as he shoots his film.

Did you ever consider it a literary genre?

Not really, but it could be, with a little bit of attention and love. But why, then, there's the film.

What do you feel for the hundreds of films you have worked on?

When you do a job, even potato picking, a certain liking remains inside you. I still feel what I have given, many times I was satisfied with my contribution, sometimes less. Then there are those magical moments, during the making of a film, when you find yourself with the director, in a state of deep mutual understanding, through which something of what you say, think, or like, gets totally transferred to the film. I am very fond of those moments.

Why do you write?

Writing is one of my greatest, maybe the only satisfaction I have. Words have always had my love, words are charged with images, it has always been so for me. My poems were an essence of images, they had the cinema inside them before I started working for it. It's not a joke, words are full of broadening visions.

Did you ever try to translate your poetry into images by yourself?

No, never, because what I wrote was already before my eyes, and I saw the film as I wrote. I must also add that I wouldn't be able to. It's easy to obtain reasonably good results, it's an adventure for

many; but to be a director of quality, substance and commitment, capable of showing new ways to others, is another matter.

I've heard you say, a bit prophetically, that the cinema is dead, and that if it wants to live again, it must return to poverty and poetry.

Let's not exaggerate. The cinema is in difficulty, it has taken up this American style, very much tied to special effects. I would prefer something more simple, I would like to feel the breath of something more close to our life and reality, in other words a comeback to poetry. But as I say it, I already criticize myself for my excessively crepuscular tone. I mean, the cinema art may follow other paths, and be different from the usual. Today the cinema doesn't keep me company, and there must be a serious reason: maybe I'm too old - I have celebrated my eightieth birthday and must look after my years - or maybe it's no fault of mine but of the films produced today. To the Italians I feel I owe a rebuke: many young directors, even the most promising ones, do not pay sufficient attention to the screenplay, which they feel is a secondary procedure. The screenplay is indispensable for a film: the cinema must be taken seriously, it's not a game, it's not a sum of photos, it's a path that goes through profound experiences, through sufferings and joys.

What type of films would you prefer?

I have worked with directors who have given me much, I feel I have received very good suggestions. Personally, I need a cinema which can hide its mystery and require my collaboration as spectator. Everyday clarity is sometimes the most obscure and least revealing thing. It's very difficult to write good, true things, you need, to find them, to work as a spectator. When the cinema translates these sometimes more obscure truths, I feel I am more involved, as it questions me, it makes me think, helping me to see the world and understand what life and truth are all about. These things aren't so easy to decode.

Tonino Guerra collaborated on the script of the "Icam: 300 Days" film, made for Eni.