

### **From the introduction by Tullio Kezich**

“Where is he? Where is the great man?” I can still hear the echo of the high-pitched voice of Pietrino Bianchi all those years ago in Suzzara, the natural ring of his voice as he led us at a brisk pace into the family home of Cesare Zavattini. Many of us had rushed, from Milan, Bologna and Parma, on hearing the news that our venerated maestro, who was in the country for a few days, would be happy to receive us. Wearing a jacket and slippers, overflowing as ever with exclamations and warmth, Za came to meet us in a festive mood, embracing his closest friends and shaking everyone by the hand. Above all it was an occasion to see gathered together, a sort of “twenty years later”, the three musketeers of the Parma film enthusiasts, the historical nucleus in its entirety: the former tutor from the Maria Luigia College and the two class heads, Bianchi and Bertolucci, Pietrino and Attilio who, respectively, would go on to become the most renowned film critic and an enchanting poet (as well as a critic, within the confines of Parma). A recollection of the time when they were united in their battle, together with Cesare, to drum into the heads of the local philistines that cinema was an art, neither more nor less than literature, painting or music.

Over the course of the memorable reunion, between frolics through the village, a colossal dinner and the rustic feast to which we had all been summoned in the evening, what they most recalled was their success in having sneaked an article onto the front page of “La Gazzetta di Parma” at the end of '28 about *The Gold Rush*. I still don't know whether it is a legend, and that the front page was in fact more modestly the third. But the fact is that Chaplin, who was their idol, was greatly celebrated in the city of Stendhal. And who knows what these pioneers of the tenth muse would say today if they were still with us, to discover from a survey conducted by the UK film magazine Empire that among the greatest directors of all time Chaplin only made it to number 38 (top of the list, in line with current fashion, was Quentin Tarantino). I can almost hear Pietrino, ready to pronounce his favourite insult: “Quadrupeds! They should all go and hang themselves!”

Since he left us, and it is now more than thirty years, I've never forgotten him. I've even on some occasions written about him and tried to understand what made him so special, so unlike other writers on cinema; and not just those more closely identified

with tradition. He was far from the usual style of the Italian intellectual and was never tempted to speak down to his readers. But neither was he prepared to lower himself. He was a person imbued with culture. His strong point was French literature, a language he spoke with a strong Parma accent but which he read avidly and frequently quoted, making errors through an excess of familiarity. Something that happens often to good students, who have remembered “by heart” without always checking the text. On the other hand, even at the festivals, Bianchi travelled light. The book he had in his hands, no way of checking handwriting or dates, not even a typewriter: he would type out the article, using two fingers, in the press room and it would be all over in twenty minutes. It was all in his head by the time the projection had finished.

I can say that I knew Pietro better than others because he was my companion at the Venice Film Festivals after the war, before becoming a colleague and then editor at “Settimo Giorno” where I was a journalist. To that modest title, the poorest of them all, he was able to attract some illustrious contributors, names such as Mario Soldati, Gianni Testori, Gianni Brera, Italo Pietra, as well as the emerging favourite Alberto Arbasino whose first book *Le piccole vacanze*, Pietro got Garzanti to publish. A man of the snobbish right, who recalled Maurras and the Action Française, he nevertheless didn't hesitate to testify in favour of Pier Paolo Pasolini in the trial against *Ragazzi di vita*.

Masquerading behind a self-satisfied cynicism, Bianchi turned out to be (often without being repaid)) a benefactor of colleagues, always making sure that they had work and adequate remuneration. He was an editor who was often tough in his judgements, rarely complimentary in his relations but wholly unable to ask people to work to no purpose.

But turning to the present collection of his articles published in the “Il Gatto Selvatico”, the ENI monthly edited by Bertolucci. The starting date is in 1955, when Pietro Bianchi was in his middle years and at the height of his exuberant creativity. I should say immediately that the book should not be seen as a mere occasional homage, put together to mark the centenary of the critic, but something more useful and lasting. For a start, it takes place in a period in which the overwhelming advance of television, across the world, began to threaten the hegemony of film. I would say that it was a moment in which, while cinema took a deep breath before attempting to address the

future, it was clearly in retreat and under the threat of disinterest and abandonment. But you won't find any of that in Bianchi work. He marched on regardless, continuing his pilgrimage at the foot of the screen, exorcising the spectre of the small screen by keeping it at a distance. I don't want to pick out the highlights of these pieces, to choose the cream of the crop, but I would say that, here and there, a few words that I hope will help people to fully appreciate Bianchi's intelligence and originality as a critic. Others will identify the pearls, the foresight and the lessons that come out of his various comments. Pietrino is quick to indicate, from *Gli innamorati* the promising talent of Mauro Bolognini, when he was still being confused with the other beginners of the second wave, or Francesco Maselli falling just short of a masterpiece with *Gli sbandati*. But what was truly surprising was his openness to a director who had begun with a truly small work of no significance, *Camping*. But Bianchi, with his usual intuition, was clear, "despite the evident limits of this film, this young man will go far". And, unlike the many who had brutally attacked the film, he was right, because the young man was Franco Zeffirelli.

The current condition of film criticism, devalued, minimised and marginalised by a media world in which the "quadrupeds" have taken over, becomes ever more evident when we read Bianchi's articles. Though there are far away in terms of time, they continue to provide proof that a publication interested in giving space to messages this kind would offer something more than the vanities of colour-ism or the uneven vagaries of the blogosphere. If for no other reason than to underline the link between cinema and culture, politics and society. It would be enough to follow the example of Pietro Bianchi, of this book. But up there in the stratosphere, will anyone realise this?

## **REVIEWS BY PIETRO BIANCHI**

### **December 1959 *La dolce vita* by Federico Fellini**

With *La dolce vita* Federico Fellini has completed the most ambitious work of his career. It is not only an intelligent, attractive and lively film; *La dolce vita* is much more. It is accusatory, poetic, vivacious, and it is also a surprising portrait of contemporary

Rome, as expressed in the daily and nightly habits of an elegant street, the Via Veneto, that the gossip pages of popular magazines have rendered famous in the four corners of the earth. *La dolce vita* is episodic, but the narrative flow is so captivating and strong that it is difficult to separate one story from another. The spiritual unity is provided by Marcello, a journalist who is a good deal better than what is required to do every day; keep up with, accompanied by a band of photographers, the most picturesque and salacious goings-on about town. Marcello wants to be a writer, he has moral ambitions, but the "filthy trade" drags him into a voluble whirl of petty adventures in which the personal story of the protagonist becomes mixed up with that of the voluble, amoral and sometimes perverse world of the "stars", weary or cretinous aristocrats, agitated intellectuals, phoney miracles, good hearted little women or famous beauties who have bank cheques in place of a soul. Intelligently and imaginatively, and above all sensitive to contemporary habits, Fellini has realised (the spark must have come from the illustrated magazines) that the hero of these very distracted and deeply illusory and for sure a little crazy Roman years, is the photo reporter. A brand-new type in our social life. He mixes in with every event, however futile. Despised by many, no one can do without him. In the great ennui and dressed in any manner, shirtless, rude and loud-mouthed, the paparazzo seemed like a disconcerting and superficial hero of the country. Fellini with cat-like astuteness, lightning-sharp gestures and implacable intuition has obliged everyone to express an empty humanity in search of an impossible absolute, impossible for the simple reason that, starting with the protagonist, no one has sufficient moral strength to oppose a mistaken existence. Certainly without wanting it, because no one is further from him in behaving as a moralist or prophet, Fellini has reiterated a concept that was close to the hearts of the romantics; in other words that, in a time of crisis, of the shift from an over-familiar civilisation to another, it is only the artist who is able to provide a style and vital consistency to the un motivated facts of the reality that surrounds us. This is why *La dolce vita*, as well as being an extraordinary film, is also an entertainment that doesn't give us a moment to breathe and transports the viewer beyond the limits of the long and powerful fairy tale film that appears on the screen, There is, in fact, in *La dolce vita* that which is so important and so difficult to find: a moral truth that is close to the simple rewards of intelligence and art.

### **September 1959 *La grande guerra* by Mario Monicelli**

This film by Mario Monicelli, wonderfully acted by an exceptional cast, perhaps suffers a little from the polemic that preceded its completion.

Particularly in the first part it is voluble, it gets lost in minute movements which, though nice and often witty in themselves, just don't hang together. There is also a bit of sleight of hand. Silvana Mangano, a beautiful and appealing actress, is difficult to believe as a girl from the Veneto. Some of the ideas in the film, the helmet that Lulli throws in front to stop the shooting of a sniper; the money given by the two tricksters to the Lulli's unaware widow; the chaplain's comment ("Christ is in the trenches because when he suffered on Calvary, he was thirty-three, just like us.") Gassman who takes a run in an attempt to break down the door of the friend that he thinks is locked, but then falls in because the malicious "trollop" has silently unlocked it, are tricks that recall some westerns, tricks by screenwriters on tap, rather than writers who believe in what they're doing. However, the second part of the film is almost all wonderful, both situations and characters are persuasive; the story takes off and breathes the pure air of a well-made film. In the memory *La grande guerra* remains as a worthy spectacle.

It should also be noted that Monicelli and De Laurentiis have managed to put together an artistic film, even while making use of a machine that has all the marks of a spectacular movie. Just think of the cast, apart from the duo Alberto Sordi and Vittorio Gassman, it includes a range of expressive actors such as Romolo Valli, Silvana Mangano and Folco Lulli.

The Venice Festival's top prize, the Leone d'oro, by putting in the same category a great old man like Rossellini and a director of the "middle generation" like Monicelli, indicates a continuity in our artistic cinema which, after recent problems, has been re-born, just like the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes.

### **February 1962 *Divorzio all'italiana* by Pietro Germi**

Pietro Germi was among the first (*In nome della legge*) to understand the interest that exists for the life and customs of Sicily. However his new film has a different

dimension to the film that, some ten years ago, built his reputation. By taking on an excellent story, this time the director has resorted to the great tool of laughter in order to encourage us to reflect on the curse that is the so-called "crime of honour". It is a black humour, because it plays on the theme of the death of two poor sinners and above all because it pretends to be on the side of the protagonist who, with Machiavellian astuteness, sets a decisive trap for the wife that he wants to be rid of.

The key is by no means mysterious. Indeed it is the satirical declaration, that feeds directly in to the title and removes all trace of bitterness. What is being underlined is that typical intolerance that produces, with placid dogmatism (and what is more comic than a dogmatist?), certain effects from certain causes. Phenomena that share only a temporal relationship and are related as the premises and consequences of facts that are about as pertinent as pork chops at a Jewish wedding. In *Divorzio all'italiana*, among the funniest episodes is the screening of *La dolce vita* in the sleepy village that is the backdrop to the story. When the scandal breaks, Fellini's innocent comedy is given all the blame.

The success of *Divorzio all'italiana* perhaps is due to the fact that Germi does not want to make a point, or rather, he is happy to stick pins in the balloon of hypocrisy that, in the south of Italy, surrounds certain issues. Some twenty years ago Vitaliano Brancati began by amusing us with his tales insular "male chauvinism". But Germi broadens the attack by including in *Divorzio all'italiana* rich and poor, conservatives and revolutionaries, the intelligent and the mean. *Divorzio all'italiana* is so well articulated that it is only on reflection that the viewer realises that he is in front of an infernal gamble against reason. The satirical intent works because Germi has taken a hold of the subject in such a way as to maximise its implications. "Don" Ferdinando works as a character because he ends up, devastated, in the arms of the all-controlling director. It is a simple story. The protagonist is afflicted with a boring wife, while he is much attracted to her sixteen-year-old cousin. Taking advantage of the "crime of honour" which leads to a reduced prison sentence, he murders his unfaithful wife. It is true that in the end we see that his young bride tricked him, but it is a convenient finale, the viewer needs justice to prevail. It is obvious that "Don" Ferdinando should, at least in part, be punished for his actions, but, unlike *Una vita difficile*, which was the film of a scriptwriter, *Divorzio all'italiana* has a splendid cinematic form. It is as succulent as the juiciest orange and as enveloping as the desert winds that come from Tunisia.