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A Conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci

The following conversation, or *happening*, as Bertolucci prefers to call it, took place in the middle of June when he was just beginning work on the script for his new film. It is translated, slightly condensed, from a tape in Italian.

Did the style, half interview and half detective story, of La Commare Secca come directly from the screenplay, or later, during shooting?

It came to me at the moment of shooting, this manner, vaguely *cinéma vérité*, of the Police Commissioner's interrogation of the various characters of the film. Many things came to me at the moment of shooting that were different in the script. This happened because, when I wrote the script of the film, I did not know that I would direct it—another director was supposed to do it. I was hired only as script-writer; afterwards, the producer was very satisfied, and got the idea of having me direct. Thus, for me it was a question of taking in hand this script that I had written without going into the real problems, which I had left to the director who would have shot it. I had a great problem which was to bring this story, these characters (not originally mine because the treatment, two or three pages of the treatment, were Pasolini's), to bring them close to me, close to my sensibility. This explains how many things changed in the film. In the film there is this effort, that perhaps one senses, to adapt some characters, in the beginning not created by me—because the environment of the Roman proletariat is not an environment which I come from, but is Pasolini's. In fact, one episode is shot in one way, and another in a different way. Really, there is this continuous stylistic effort, still rather ingenuous, be-

cause I had never shot anything before this film. It seems to me a rather naïve film, and at the same time rather refined, because—having gone to films a lot, having dreamed a lot about films—I had some ideas about how films are made. Naturally, these ideas afterwards, in the concrete realization, changed or did not come out the way I had planned.

Anyhow, it is a first film, and that device of the interviews came absolutely at the moment of shooting. The Commissioner and all the particulars of his environment were described in the script: a typewriter, a desk—but at the moment of shooting I was in such an environment and didn't like it. I wanted this interrogation to be less realistic. In fact, the Commissioner is never seen, only his voice is heard. Why? Because I was a bit afraid of the mechanism of the detective story, the thriller; and, more than that, it did not interest me. The thing that interested me in the film was and is the thing I discovered shooting it: the thing that interested me was to render the passing of the hours, the passage of time, the sense of the day that goes by, as a poetic fact, rather tragic, through some locations and some characters. This idea, the sense of time passing, is very simple, it is an idea which is at the base of much poetry. (I had written poetry before this.) It is the thing that I felt in this story, the element that I felt the most.

Inasmuch as the subject of La Commare Secca was not your own, did you have in mind another story to do as a first film, and, if so, was this Prima della Rivoluzione or a film much like it?

I didn't expect to begin to make films so quickly. I had begun as assistant to Pasolini on

Accattone. It was very interesting and very important. I was not one of those fellows who have a script ready and waiting to be shot. I used to tell myself: "The day when I can do a film the story will come to mind."

In fact, after *La Commare Secca* I wanted to do a film of my own and thought of a story. Perhaps I already had the story inside, the idea of the film was inside me for a long time. It comes from a statement of Talleyrand that was put as an epigraph to the film, which says: "Qui n'a pas connu la vie avant la Révolution ne sait pas ce que c'est la douceur de vivre." The idea of the film came from this statement, that is it came from the need to contradict this statement, which is true, but whose contrary is also true.

I set myself to work and wrote a story with characters. I worked a bit to find the producer, and then made it.

The things which you did shooting La Commare Secca, did they influence Prima della Rivoluzione, or did you try to begin again from the beginning?

La Commare Secca was certainly of use to me. The new thing for me in *Prima della Rivoluzione* was my relation to the story, since in *La Commare Secca*, chiefly the style was my own, the major effort was stylistic, that is to render the film *mine* through the style.

Pasolini saw this world of the Roman proletariat in a primitive style—of fixed compositions, close-ups like the paintings of Masaccio; as he says himself he had looked at more paintings than films, with a few basic movies: *Joan of Arc*. . . . On the other hand I was much more of a cinephile, I had seen many films and had different ideas. In *Prima della Rivoluzione* the difficult problems were problems of story, characters, and structure. Also, because the film was "very much mine," I had written a huge script, three hundred pages, almost a novel, which at the moment of shooting, as perhaps must always happen, I no longer felt to be my own: it seemed to me to have been written by someone else.

Every day there was the problem of inventing new things, because, really, in film, in my

experience, it is impossible to see ahead, it is impossible to write beforehand. It is necessary to make, at bottom, only sketches to be thrown away, and afterwards to leave oneself very free. Films must be open, even at the moment of creating them. For example, how can one say: "In this street or in this room these things happen." At the moment one is in that street that has been chosen, in that room in which one shoots, everything may happen outside of what was thought of. I leave myself very free, or at least I try to do so. . . .

I was told that you were working on a documentary for Radio-Televisione Italiana.

They are three programs of about three quarters of an hour each, on petroleum. I was asked by the large Italian petroleum industry, ENI, and they proposed this trip for a film that would be called *La Via del Petrolio*, and I accepted and made the trip.

The first program is on the origins of the petroleum that arrives here in Italy, from Persia, and the second is on the trip from Persia to Genoa, on the oil-tanker. The third is on a pipe line from Genoa to Germany.

What style did you shoot them in?

It was interesting because I had never made documentaries and thus it was, in a certain sense, the discovery of a way of film-making. I shot according to concrete demands; having very little time at my disposition, I would shoot whatever hit my eye. Thus such films have a very aboriginal aspect, they have the aspect of the discovery of a country; they have a style, also, because the style is born in the editing. I have spent four months in cutting these three films. It was a very interesting experience because I would shoot, in the Orient, without knowing what I was getting. It is not like film-making where every day one sees rushes.

I tried to create a rapport with the photographer, leaving him very free. It is very difficult to talk about this experience, because it is not yet digested enough, because I am finishing the cutting right now. The crew was very small. Practically there were three of us—myself, a cameraman, and an assistant cameraman who also did the sound, and also a produc-

tion organizer. The wonderful thing, the most poetic, was, at bottom, this small troupe that would shoot in the deserts with its small 16mm camera with a great deal of freedom.

Did you have a large shooting ratio?

I shot a lot, I would shoot all the time without stopping, and thus had about 12 hours of projection which I cut to 2½ hours.

After this, what are your plans?

I should do—it is very difficult now in Italy—a feature in September, or, better, begin shooting in September; I am writing it now. The title is *Natura contra Natura*. The story of three young fellows who live in Rome. All three are foreigners. They are three foreigners not because I wanted to do a film about characters who were foreign but because, having chosen three foreign actors, and wanting to shoot in sync sound, automatically the characters will speak Italian with a foreign accent. That is, sync sound has conditioned me in the creation of the characters. One is Allen Midget, who is the young fellow in *La Commare Secca*, an American, who will play the part of the soldier. The other is Jean-Pierre Leaud who has just done Godard's film, and the third is Lou Castel, the one who did *I Pugni in Tasca*.

Did you have this in mind before doing the documentaries?

The idea came to mind a few days ago, travelling by car from Cannes to Rome.

When you shoot, will you use a fairly free system as with the documentaries?

It was very useful for me to shoot those documentaries, precisely to discover what is possible, even necessary, in shooting in sync. In Italy this is not usually done—everything is dubbed here, the talkies have not been discovered yet. But I think that shooting in sync is very important, and I don't believe that it will prevent me from having the same freedom I had making the documentaries, because I want to shoot with a very small crew this time also. I will work with the same cameraman who shot the documentaries. In Italy there is a mania for virtuoso sound created in the dubbing room, an absurd perfectionism. Godard said, and rightly, that, if two people

are speaking and a truck or very loud car passes, it is right that one cannot hear what the two of them are saying.

When you write, do you describe the locations in detail?

Very little, very vaguely. That is I see the places then write, or first I write then I look for them, and if the locations are different I change the screenplay. It is the same thing that happens with the actors. One writes, and after having written looks for the actor. I find it very important to change the written character to fit the actor, not to try to have the actor become the written character. Generally they say to the actor: "Read this character to yourself and try to enter into him." I do the opposite, that is, I change the written character, I even have him become the opposite of what he was, to adapt him around the actor like a suit.

Do you work a lot with the actors?

It depends on the case. For example, in my first film no one was an actor, except for one or two very small parts (the soldier had been an actor before) and so my work reduced itself to this: having seen that actor, at dinner, laugh in a way that I liked, I would say to him: "Try to laugh as you did last night." That is, to refer the performance always to something of their own, never to something abstract. To always take, as a point of reference, their way of moving, of laughing, of speaking.

Do you prefer nonprofessionals, then?

When I was doing the first film, yes. In the second he was a nonprofessional actor, she was a theater actress—thus really professional down to the last drop of blood. In the next, all three are actors—however, they are film actors and also have done few films. They are rather virginal. Also, there is something that will help me: all three speak a language that is not their own. This is, already, a great help in eliminating the defects, the bad habits, the virtuositities that all actors have and that are so ugly. The fact of their speaking in Italian will cancel, brutally, all the artificial, forced intonations.

To return to present-day Italian film-making.

Of those directors who have made their first feature in the last few years, such as Pasolini, de Seta, Brass, Rosi, Olmi, are there any that you prefer?

All those you have mentioned are directors I value. The one I value most is Pasolini; he seems to me to be the most interesting director in Italy, the most important. I learned from him one thing that seems very important to me, that is that films are always being invented, and rediscovered. I would watch him work, watch him invent his film day by day, invent his filmic style, do his tracking shots or close-ups, and I seemed to be present at the birth of the cinema. The fundamental thing in films is to continually re-invent them and re-discover them. In other words to do a tracking shot as if it were the first tracking shot, and a stylistic solution as if it were always new, as if it were the first time it was used even if there have been thousands before you who have done the same things. This is very important, this sense of discovery—it should always be this way.

But I must tell you that the Italian films I love most are those of Rossellini. I like the French cinema as well—above all, Godard. Fellini, Antonioni, and Visconti are great personalities, but Rossellini is the greatest of them all. Regarding Rossellini's style there is this capacity of having things never too far away and never too close, the ideal distance that his camera has from things and from characters. It is one of the first cases of a truly open cinema. The best critical judgment of Rossellini I heard was given by Henri Langlois, Director of the Cinémathèque Française. One time I was at the Palais de Chaillot, and since the screen is very large (it takes up the entire back wall of the theater without borders), I asked him why the screen was so large. He answered: "It is a screen for the films of Rossellini," and I replied: "But it is very large, that is, the picture area is very small." "Yes, because Rossellini's compositions can really continue to the right, left, above and below." It is a very just definition, it is precisely that way.

Do any other arts influence you particularly?

Do you feel yourself close to any contemporary movements?

It seems to me that the cinema has been influenced by everything and since films look at reality, and music, painting, literature are all part of reality, the film must be interested in these also. I am evading, for a moment, the question that you asked me: A film director must begin to take a position not only in confronting the world that he describes and the society that he describes, but, also, in confronting the art he creates. It would be good to see films becoming conscious of what they are, as music has done, as literature has done, that is that there might be a cinema that looks at itself, a cinema that speaks about cinema. In the films that I will do, and, also, at bottom, in the films that I have done, especially in the second, above all in those that I will do, I wish that I might take a position in confronting the language that has been chosen. It is very useful as well because the public does not know what films are, it is necessary to teach them. This is the thing that interests me most at this time. I like poetry very much, I don't have other specific interests, only poetry. I also look at much painting, listen to music, but poetry interests me very much. I wrote poetry for years; afterwards I stopped because, since I would have said the same things in poetry and in films, it would have been a repetition, so I stopped writing poetry. There is no movement, however, at this time of which I feel a part.

Pasolini told me that he had felt, when he started making films, that he was only changing techniques, but later realized that he had changed languages. How do you see your change from writing to film-making?

No, Pasolini, remember, is a philologist, a critic of style, thus he posed philologic problems to himself, linguistic problems; he has written several studies of philology! For me, instead, the change was very natural, it was a passage without problems. For example, experiences as a poet were very useful to me in doing *La Commare Secca*—precisely the experience of putting one verse after the other. Now I know that all this is quite different, that films

are rather a long way from poetry. . . . But at that time I saw films very much as music, rhythmic, made up of slowness, acceleration, of contrasting rhythms.

When you wrote the screenplay of La Commare Secca did you feel influenced by this?

No, it seemed to me that I was doing literature. While doing the film *La Commare Secca* it seemed to me that I was doing poetry, writing the script it seemed to be literature. In fact, as far as I am concerned, a film is much closer to poetry than to a novel.

And with Prima della Rivoluzione?

No, partly because some time had already passed, partly because with *Prima della Rivoluzione* I came out of a kind of idyllic state, a state of unconscious creativity in which I made *La Commare Secca*. I came out of this rather false kind of state and found myself face to face with very deep problems, very intimate ones. In *Prima della Rivoluzione* it was a question on my part of exorcising the fear, of clarifying my ideological position. The film is the story of the ideological experiences of a young fellow who believes himself to be a Marxist and later discovers that he is not. Now, this has nothing to do with my personal history, however, it was a film that allowed me to clarify many things, to clarify my position, and above all to put certain fears at a distance. Thus, poetry was very far away. . . .

And with Natura contra Natura? If you can say anything this early.

I know that it is a film that will cost me a lot, as *Prima della Rivoluzione* cost me. I feel that already there is a kind of struggle inside of me, because it is a film about sexuality, about eroticism as a painful fact, as a tragic fact and thus it is a film in front of which I am already inhibited—I have created characters before whom I am already inhibited. It also is a rather moral film, I hope, having real problems.

With Prima della Rivoluzione, do you think you clarified, to a great extent, your ideological conflicts?

Yes, but one is never content with what one does, on the contrary I am in general always profoundly discontent, that is, I do not succeed

in being objective in the face of what I do. Also, the past interests me little, I am always interested in what is before me; it is this which films have helped me to discover. When I wrote poetry it was poetry entirely based on remembrance, on the past. On the other hand, film has made me discover that there is the future, where poetry is always a reconstruction of past moments. The poet (one can call him a poet as well) whom I like most is Proust. On the other hand, film has given me a different solidity, humanly as well; it has made me discover a new dimension, has made me leave an adolescence too prolonged, carried on too far ahead in years.

Could one call this discovery hope?

No, the hope of hope. Certainly, when one does his first film everything is easier because films are still something mythic. That is, one leaves behind, by degrees, with the first, with the second, this myth. I have gotten out of the mythology of film-making. Now it has become something more normal, that is more a part of me. I think, also, that films have remained rather static, that it is necessary to move them forward. At bottom, the film, since it was invented, has not moved very far forward, it has remained rather static, with a few exceptions. At first I thought that it might be the style, the technique that must move film forward. Now I no longer know. Perhaps, instead, it is the narrative forms. It is very difficult, at this time, to speak about films. Very difficult.

Do you have more ideas, stories?

Yes, I have many stories, and it would be fine for me if films became a way of life, as is writing for a poet, for a novelist; painting for a painter. Unfortunately, there is still a kind of barrier of ice, of glass to break.

What is that? The public, producers?

Everything, everything that is not the filmmaker. I said glass because behind it everything moves as in another world; one passes into it and then turns back out, it is always like this. Godard makes two or three films a year. So he lives films. This is something that I dream about: to live films, to arrive at the point at which one can live for films, can think cine-

matographically, eat cinematographically, sleep cinematographically, as a poet, a painter, lives eat sleeps painting.

Given this, how does the present situation of film appear to you in Italy?

It seems to me that films—but not only in Italy, almost everywhere in the world at this moment—are persecuted, hated, given kicks in the face. I was first at Cannes, and after at the Festival of Pesaro where a group of people who love films had come together. In general, at festivals one finds people who hate the cinema, who want to destroy it. In Italy, in France, as well, it is very difficult. This is a very sad subject. In Italy there is a great danger: that is of compromise. Even the best directors, even the best of the young directors, fall very easily into making films they believe in only half-way. I am making these documentaries precisely in order not to be forced to make such compromises. I believe that, as a novelist like Moravia in order to live writes articles on trips that he has made to India, or Egypt, or Cuba, it is right for a director to make documentaries in order to live—but not westerns he doesn't believe in. Instead, here in Italy there is this alibi of "the life that must be lived" with which many try to justify themselves. But there is television, documentaries, there are many possibilities to work. It is necessary that every Italian director, I mean those who have something to say (not the others, because it is right they make the films they do), should refuse to do those films.

Is your intention only to describe, or do you have, as well, some moral or message?

I cannot say it of myself, but it appears to me that all poets, from the moment they are real, are also moral: from the moment they speak about reality. It is very difficult to say what reality is, I don't know if you know Zen: when they asked the wise men what was reality the answers were many, for example, a very fine answer is a slap from the teacher, or a kick . . . at any rate I do not pose myself such problems. I pose myself moral problems in the style.

What is the thing that, above all, I do not

like in films? In general? A style that is amoral, devoid of morals, downright immoral. The films of Jacopetti, those like *Africa Addio*. It is an immoral film for its racism, but beyond that it is also immoral because of how it is made, how he uses the lenses, how he uses the camera. Perhaps still more immoral than for its racism that, at bottom, is so obvious, hysterical, and fanatic. There is an amorality in the composition.

For La Commare Secca and Prima della Rivoluzione?

There is a search, but I don't know if this morality follows from it. Sometimes, perhaps. The style of Rossellini, for example, is a profoundly moral style; a style with its own ethic. An angle, a shot in a film is already a world. Every shot has its own story, its own atmosphere, and has its own poetry as well as its own moral. A tracking shot, for example, may be moral or not moral. It is difficult to define all the cases in which it is moral and it is difficult as well to give a single definition, because a definition does not exist which says that this is moral and that not. But, there is an ethic in the style of many directors; for example, for Godard the style is already a way of seeing the world, for Rossellini as well. They would be able, at bottom, to relate nothing, or to tell stories which were absolutely not interesting or not important, or not to tell stories. But, their style is so profoundly moral that their films would be quite valid. In this discussion someone could contradict me by saying: "But that tracking shot is functional because in that moment of the film, of that given story, it works like that." But the story is only important up to a certain point, because in a film the relation between shots is independent of the needs of the story; because it is enough to put one shot in the middle, one first and another after, and already there is a relation between the shots, whatever it might be. It is for this reason that every angle has its own particular value.

These things that I am saying are so confused that I don't know what will come of them, but I am not a scholar, they are things that I think on my own.