

Conversation with Francesca Archibugi

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CINEMA AS SOCIAL MIRROR: FLAVIA LAVIOSA IN CONVERSATION WITH ITALIAN DIRECTOR FRANCESCA ARCHIBUGI

THE need to sublimate the familiar and ordinary in everyday life is a sentiment that underlies Francesca Archibugi's work. She offers audiences carefully orchestrated films dealing with a spectrum of sociological issues relating to the new Italian *familyscape*. Acting as a psychologist, sociologist, educator and parent, Archibugi can be defined as the director of the 'growing-up' Italian. She documents, analyzes, chronicles and celebrates the qualities that make children and adolescents cultural protagonists of our era. The following interview is an analysis of the director's film production as a reflection of the socio-cultural changes in modern Italy.

Laviosa: *Children and adolescents are cultural protagonists in your films in the sense that they, "people of few years of age" as you define them, are often victims of family situations and they seem to act as moral judges towards the actions of their parents. Are your young characters in the position of expressing a critical and moral judgment towards adults?*

Archibugi: The main characteristic of the age of adolescence is to be critical towards parents. It is a natural stage, necessary to acquire one's own identity. When this does not happen, there is often something that does not work, like in situations when, for example, there is an excess of emulation or no need to read adults' actions critically. This is a psychological and anthropological thesis. This particular situation is usually a spark for me to narrate characters, and characters are better presented in moments of crisis. [...] In this way, children seem to be more critical or parents more fragile than they really are, just because I have isolated those characters in a moment of crisis in their lives. Let's say that it is a dramaturgic device.

Parents seem to have lost their parental authority. Do you look at them with a moralistic eye, almost punitively? Or is your narrative gaze merely descriptive of realistic situations?

It is difficult to do self-exegesis. I do not know exactly what a parent should be like. I am a parent and I do not know, so I find it difficult to say what a mother should do. It is easier for me to present characters who make mistakes and so the accent on them is coloured with moralism, but it is precisely in a situation of conflict that there is something to say. It is not true that I am always on the children's side. Very often children do wrong things, but it's the spectator who is more inclined to forgive them, not me. It is normal that it is this way, it is human. A mother or a father who makes a mistake gets all the blame, but it is not my gaze, it is the gaze of the spectator that does it.

In one of your interviews, you mentioned that feminism has corroded the family, an institution that had been "motionless" for centuries. So in your films families seem to be in 'movement'. What is your opinion about these transformations and in what direction is the family going?

Let's say that not only feminism, but the entire women's revolution in the 1900s, even before the feminist movement, has affected the family, starting when women came out of their homes and entered the work force. Some believe that this was the greatest anthropological revolution in the century, more important than the October Revolution, to give you an idea. It was a real change in life and in the social structure, I think. Let's say that the family, as an institution without love, as it still was in the 1800s, when people lived together, raised children and continued to live their lives without communicating, gradually lost reason to exist, thank heavens! What seems to have happened violently in the centre of the family is [the shift from] a social pact, [to] a pact of love that two people stipulate. Not without surprise, there are so many separations, so many divorces when this love crumbles, ends, and changes. I think that the family continues to exist because it is the engine of the world. By family, I mean a young man and a young woman who fall in love, love each other, live together and wish to have children. In their love there is a very powerful energy that is the preservation of the species. So, I think that this will never end. But now, to this union we ask something new that we did not ask before: happiness, that people are happy together, and if this happiness is not there, it is not right. Therefore it is licit, and it is becoming more and more natural, to break the pact. I think that this is only a positive change. Obviously children suffer a lot because breaking a pact of love between a father

and a mother is a psychological earthquake. There are two parts of you that separate. Before you were one thing made of two things, then you become one thing made of two separate things, and we need to take this into account. On the other hand, this is the direction and I think it is the right direction.

There have been generations in transition between children of parents who never separated and children of the first separated couples. Are children ready to accept these changes in the family and their parents' choices? Is there an almost natural evolution in the psychology of acceptance of parents' separation?

There have always been separations especially among the upper classes and the aristocrats. Wealth gave the right to freedom and happiness, it was certainly more painful and difficult, but we can read Anna Karenina. People separated, started new relationships, or asked for divorce. This is something that happened in the past, so there has always been the need for a couple that is not happy together to break up. This, however, was not an option for the lower classes.

I think that the first children of separated parents suffered a tremendous shock also at an anthropological level because they were under a greater social pressure than children are today. Now at school it is more common and easier to deal with the problem because there are friends in the same situation. Even though social pressure is not as strong, we can never underestimate the wound. The wound however is part of life and the wound is a form of mourning, like losing a parent and building a new identity.

These are things that need to be dealt with because they change life. In any case, I do not consider childhood and adolescence a happy age precisely because a child is not equipped to face wounds, a child is much more vulnerable than an adult. For this reason, I do not understand where the whole idea of a lighthearted childhood comes from. It seems that no one remembers the moments of bewilderment and anguish in front of things that seemed to be bigger than they really were, more frightening, more mysterious because children in general do not know them.

Are your films autobiographical? Are you behind your female characters?

I am behind all my characters. I do my best to be a narrator and so I try to tell stories, to give unity to a psyche different from mine. Every character I invent is autonomous. However, you inevitably use certain mechanisms arising from yourself. So you assign and give characters parts of you when you portray them, when you create them. I have always identified with the characters I created, I have not identified with the girls, it was not a story of my childhood, absolutely not. In other words, biography is always something beyond my films, it is a way of feeling that belongs to me, but not to the stories or my characters.

Your most recent film Domani received mixed reviews. You treated a very delicate theme and painful moment, the earthquake in Umbria in 1977. What is your reaction after its production, besides the journalistic, cinematographic reviews and the public's response?

It is difficult to judge one's own films. Of all the films that I have made I have never quite understood why some went well and others did not, why some were well received and others were not. It is always a mystery. I do my work always in the same way. I am aware of the fact that sometimes a film can be more successful than another, but I am unable to be critical if I do not have specific elements that are strictly connected with the nature of my work.

Even in my most successful films there are things that have left me dissatisfied and I think I could have done better. Therefore, it is very difficult for me to talk about my films and what they are in the world. I can talk about what they are for me because I made them, or what moved me to make them, but how they are received by the world, I think is a mystery.

There are mysteries in cinema. This happens because, even though cinema is an industry, each film is also a prototype. Therefore, no producer can really say that a successful film can be done in a certain way, otherwise cinema would suffer. While wine ends its process of fermentation in the bottle, beer ends its own in the glass because it needs to be poured in order to say that the drink is ready. It is the same thing for cinema as opposed to a novel. A novel is static, while cinema needs to be 'poured' in a movie theatre. Only when a film is projected in the theatre, you understand from the audience's reaction the strength of the film, if it has power and its need to live, its comprehensibility, in other words, its power of communication.

How would you define your cinematographic signature?

I feel that I am a person that is searching and I believe and hope that if something of what I have done remains at the end of my work, it will be a body of work and not only one isolated film. I produce several chapters of a human comedy and I do not know how to define myself. Each film is the child of the next film and this is my way to go through life.

Do you think that there is a female cinema with women's values and themes and with a qualitatively different artistic gaze? Is there a specific gender experience that is female in cinematographic aesthetics?

I do not think so, in the sense that when someone is a narrator is a narrator. Probably the greatest narrator of female characters was Ingmar Bergman, the most profound, the most knowledgeable and also the most metaphoric. Let's say that I do not like films by women that tell women's stories with a female ideology. It seems to me that this is a terrible limitation of the gaze on life, because life is made of men and women, elderly people and children, rich and poor. Therefore, a narrator cannot live within his own skin, because the narrator is gaze, a gaze on others, obviously mediated by him/herself, the narrator is an individual, an artist who watches the world and his or her gaze is not neutral. Thus, I do not recognize the idea of female aesthetics in cinema, I do not see it and I cannot find it. There are women directors whom I like very much and who depict extraordinary male portraits. A great example is Jane Campion with her remarkable male characters like the one in her film *Holy Smoke!*, the character of Harvey Keitel was beautifully described. In the same way there are great male directors who present wonderful female characters with comparable strength.

Cinema is the art of the 1900s. In your opinion, has cinema developed its own language? Has cinema truly reached a level of expressive autonomy?

Cinema acquired its own language when it was born. Cinema was immediately a new language that inherited from all other art forms, but that was not similar to anything else. Cinema is still exploring and will be exploring new forms for ever, like all other arts which have not stopped developing. Theatre, much older, has not stopped searching, and in the same way painting and sculpture, even older, or literature are still elaborating new expressive ways. Cinema will never stop evolving. It was an established art as soon as it started with the Lumière brothers, and it was only waiting for its new poets to be able to grow.

You are involved in the location scouting for a new film. Can you tell me about this new project?

This is really a special project. It is the first time that I work for the Italian television (RAI). A film for RAI in two episodes. It is a very personal adaptation of *I promessi sposi* by Alessandro Manzoni. It is so personal that it is not even titled *I promessi sposi*, but *La vera storia di Renzo e Lucia*. So, this is my second costume drama and the second adaptation of a novel, after *Con gli occhi chiusi* by Tozzi. This film, *La vera storia di Renzo e Lucia*, is a way to analyze feelings and relationship in a different period. It is like portraying these feelings in a more abstract, less sociological, and in some ways, purer way. I am a realistic director. I have directed all my films in Rome, in a world that I know very well. So, now I feel the need of these incursions in the past. I feel the need for a self-evaluation through this film.

Where do you see yourself in the future? In which way do you see yourself accomplished as a filmmaker and which direction will you take?

I would like to become what I am now, in other words, to be able to make films and improve in order to go on narrating life. I do not see anything different in what I have been since I directed my first short feature film. To carry on working, sit at my computer every morning, and when I am done writing, shoot, elaborate, edit, think, produce a film and see the public's reaction is what I aspire to. I am very attached to my work like an artisan. I would not want to become anything different, I would like to be better and follow the course of life. At the same time, my aim is not to change my status, and become for example a Hollywood director. I wish to be who I am and better myself. In twenty years from now, I see myself very much like the person and director I am now.

Author Information

Flavia LAVIOSA is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Italian Studies at Wellesley College. Her research focuses on Italian women directors. She has published on Francesca Archibugi and is currently working on a monograph on this director. Laviosa has also written on Cristina Comencini and the cinema produced in the Southern Italian region Apulia.