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Author(s): A.G. Basoli and Suso Cecchi d'Amico

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Screenwriting with Your Eyes: An Interview with Suso Cecchi d'Amico

by A.G. Basoli

Among the writing credits of Martin Scorsese's epic, rousing journey through postwar Italian cinema, *Il Mio Viaggio In Italia* (My Voyage to Italy, 2001), there's a name most people assume belongs to a man—Suso Cecchi d'Amico. It doesn't. It belongs to a woman—in fact, to the Grand Lady of Italian Cinema, as she is known in Italy. Having authored, throughout her five-decade career, over eighty screenplays—including such classics of Italian cinema as *The Bicycle Thief* (1948, with Cesare Zavattini and Vittorio De Sica), *Bellissima* (1951), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), *Senso* (1954), *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958), *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), and *The Leopard* (1963)—she is, by rights, as much the subject of Scorsese's documentary as she was, along with Raffaele Donato, Kent Jones, and Scorsese, part of its writing team.

Giovanna Cecchi was born in Rome on July 21, 1914, and was renamed Susanna as soon as her father Emilio Cecchi, a famous literary critic, came home from the registry. The Tuscan taste for nicknames accounts for the short 'Suso,' which is often mistaken for a man's name. "I didn't find out Giovanna was my name until my first day in school," Cecchi d'Amico says, her speech still colored with a strong Tuscan lilt. "They called it out and I didn't budge—who's that?" Her parents' home was the hub of Rome's left-wing intellectuals before and during the war. In 1938 she married music critic Fedele d'Amico, with whom she had three children—Masolino, Silvia, and Caterina. In the Forties she did translation work (including Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), while beginning to write screenplays for Renato Castellani, Alberto Lattuada, Luigi Zampa, and Alessandro Blasetti.

Bellissima, in 1951, based on Zavattini's story of a working-class stage mother peddling her little girl in a competitive screen test at Cinecittà, and starring a superb Anna Magnani, was the film that launched a thousand scripts for Luchino Visconti—or probably close to that number, anyway, between the ones rejected by the censors and the ones that were actually made. Her thirty-year collaboration with the controversial director—the 'Red Count,' as he was known for his leftist leanings—involved writing the screenplays for all but two of Visconti's films. From the Fifties through the Nineties, her name also appeared ubiquitously in the credits of films by Michelangelo Antonioni, Luigi Comencini, Mario Monicelli, Francesco Rosi, and Franco Zeffirelli. She and Ennio Flaiano also did an uncredited rewrite of the screenplay for William Wyler's *Roman Holiday* (1953), which won an Academy Award.

Today, Suso Cecchi d'Amico lives in Rome, lamenting, like Dante, her forced "exile" from her beloved Florence, the town where she grew up. She is Vice



Suso Cecchi d'Amico with Luchino Visconti, for whom she wrote the screenplays for all but two of his films.



Photo courtesy Fototeca SNC

Chair of the David di Donatello Prize (the Italian Oscars), a Jury member of the Premio Strega, Italy's most prestigious annual literary award, and only recently resigned from the jury of the Premio Solinas annual screenwriting awards competition. "Once they started accepting only treatments instead of screenplays, I lost interest," she says. In 1994 she received the Golden Lion Award for her career at the Venice Film Festival.

Cecchi d'Amico's exceptional cultural versatility as a writer account for her protean command of genres and milieus, from contemporary comedies such as *Big Deal on Madonna Street* to historical dramas like *The Leopard*. She is fond of saying she is only an "artisan," not an "auteur," and she takes pride in shaping a screenplay to enhance a director's particular skills. Today, at age eighty-eight, Cecchi d'Amico is still writing screenplays. She works in a studio of her apartment in Rome's Parioli district that seems lifted from a film by Visconti—plush, red-velvet armchairs in a sanctuary of floor-to-ceiling bookcases lined with books that seem to gravitate around her writing desk, on top of which glistens the black enamel 1938 Olivetti on which she has typed all her screenplays. We spoke with her at her home in July 2002 about her long and illustrious career.—A.G. Basoli

Cineaste: You were born into a cinema family. How did that influence you, especially in terms of your later work as a screenwriter?

Suso Cecchi d'Amico: I come from an important family of intellectuals. My father Emilio Cecchi was a very well-known writer and my mother Leonetta Pieraccini was a painter. Our home was always the hub of Rome's intelligentsia, where intellectuals gathered

or visited, or were family members. So my collaborations came out of this great warmth, which was not the equivalent of today's smart parties. We spent entire days debating and coming up with projects we could work on together. It was a completely different way of working. I feel very sorry for young people today who have not experienced this way of doing things. Back then films were really done collaboratively, out of passion, without worrying about how much money it would cost, how much money it could make, or where it would play. It was about doing things.

Cineaste: The historical circumstances of that time also bound artists in a certain way.

Cecchi d'Amico: Very much so, that's true. We were close before, of course, but the war intensified those feelings. In a certain sense wartime is remembered, with nostalgia, for the solidarity and the desire to communicate and do things together.

Cineaste: How did you start working in cinema?

Cecchi d'Amico: My family got involved in cinema very early on. I grew up at a time when people were really crazy about cinema. My father lived in America for a while and he taught Italian painting at Berkeley in California. While there he went to Hollywood, wrote about it, and took a liking to the great cinema of the Thirties. When he came back they offered him a position as artistic director of Cines, maybe the most important film production company of the time here in Rome.

We children knew much more about cinema than he did. We were wild about cinema. What with him working at Cines and because of our unlimited access, we were constantly running around the soundstages. It was a great adventure for us, total film immersion at the age of seventeen or eighteen. He produced some very bold new films, very modern things that today would be called neorealist—Blasetti's *1860* and some of Camerini's films. We could have cared less about those films, however, because we infinitely preferred American comedies! The Thirties was considered the Golden Age of American comedy—Melvyn Douglas, Claudette Colbert. We were wild about that cinema, it was the joy of my youth.

Cineaste: Did you start writing at that time?

Cecchi d'Amico: No, no, no! I never even thought about doing it myself. Soon enough, however, my father and others started giving me scripts and submissions to read, to get my opinion—which is something I've done with my own children, to see if young people would be interested. It was [Carlo] Ponti and [Renato] Castellani who at some point came up with the idea, 'Why don't you participate? Why don't you write films?' Fine, I thought, let's give it a shot. I tried, I liked it, and I had fun, so I continued.

Cineaste: So you never officially 'learned' how to do it?

Cecchi d'Amico: At the time, scriptwriters usually had these great big meetings with Castellani. He was very picky, obsessed with technique. He started out with several films, always studying a

technique and carving his own technique out of a script. I jumped into the fray and ended up inventing my own technique.

Once I had decided to take up screenwriting as a profession, it soon became clear to me that nobody knew exactly what kind of a profession it was. I knew I needed to train myself, so I started looking for textbooks, but there were none. Today, of course, it seems that everybody has written books on how to be a scriptwriter

and you can choose from dozens of titles. The only instructions I could find were a series of short lessons by Jeanie Macpherson, and it was only fifty years later that I discovered she was a regular collaborator with Cecil Blount De Mille! I learned some very valuable lessons from her, one in particular that has always remained with me. She said that each scene must have three moments—it must close a theme, it must have its own main theme, and it must provide an opening for the next theme. It's a lesson that I have always treasured.

Cineaste: You have been quoted as saying that, in terms of writing a screenplay, you have a "passion for construction."

Cecchi d'Amico: Story structure is fundamental. It is the requisite foundation, even if you end up erasing it or forgetting it. You have to have it clearly in mind. So I came up with—it's difficult to explain how someone whose job is to sit in front of a blank page all day does this—a way to know how to fill it.

Cineaste: A scriptwriter must translate words in images

Cecchi d'Amico: You have to write with your eyes, I always say. With your structure you always have to keep in mind that the written word turns to images. Where are you taking it? What do you want to say with a film and what are the scenes that will let you say it? Writing for the screen is different from most other writing techniques. It probably resembles more the way writers build a novel. But I think structure is very important.

Cineaste: It has been suggested that your generation of filmmakers

"Story structure is fundamental. It is the requisite foundation, even if you end up erasing it or forgetting it. You have to have it clearly in mind. You have to write with your eyes, I always say. With your structure you always have to keep in mind that the written word turns to images. Where are you taking it? What do you want to say with a film and what are the scenes that will let you say it? Writing for the screen is different from most other writing techniques. It probably resembles more the way writers build a novel."



Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), a neorealist classic, was one of Suso Cecchi d'Amico's earliest screenplays (photo courtesy of Photofest).

used the cinema to continue the tradition of literary realism, or verismo, of nineteenth-century novelists such as Giovanni Verga.

Cecchi d'Amico: There was really no continuity. Italy, unlike other countries, such as America and England that have a rich narrative tradition, was very poor in that area. Verga was one of our few narrative authors. This Sicilian, who wrote stories about humble people, was an absolute exception.

Cineaste: *La Terra Trema*, though, was inspired by Verga.

Cecchi d'Amico: Certainly *La Terra Trema* was based on Verga. But it was a phenomenon that didn't apply to all of literature. Verga was an exception. Certainly for Visconti that was the case. But it would be inaccurate to say that cinema continued the Italian literary tradition of verismo.

Cineaste: How did you start collaborating with Visconti?

Cecchi d'Amico: I first worked with him in the theater: he had asked me to do some adaptations. I translated for him and wrote the introduction for a play by Hemingway called *The Fifth Column*, which he directed in 1945. From then on we never parted. Thirty years.

Cineaste: Speaking of your collaboration with Visconti, some critics have suggested that he relied on you for the screenplay because he was primarily interested in the visual realization of the work.

Cecchi d'Amico:

Visconti was the easiest to work with because he knew exactly what he wanted. Right off the bat, from the moment he chose the treatment, he let me know where he wanted to take the film. He would immediately start his own preparatory research. For example, in *Senso* he handpicked painters from that era whose original paintings were to inspire the costumes. At any given moment he'd give you an idea, he would help you.

Cineaste: Did you ever have any serious disputes with him?

Cecchi d'Amico: We were very close friends.

Cineaste: Visconti's films cover wildly different milieus, social classes, and time periods. He could go from the Italian Risorgimento, to the contemporary Italian problem of internal migration to urban centers, to the demise of the rural aristocracy in turn-of-the-century Sicily. How did you work together? How did you approach your research, for example, for a film like *Rocco and His Brothers*?

Cecchi d'Amico: At first we'd thought about setting it in Turin because the wave of emigrants from South to North, this phenomenon that changed Italy in the Fifties, converged there. We went to Turin, hung out with the immigrants, but then we ended up doing the film in Milan because Luchino was from Milan and he knew that city better.

Cineaste: How did you find the immigrants?

Cecchi d'Amico: It was very simple. They were looking for work, so they went to unemployment offices. The city was full of people who had already settled down, and had called others. They were always freezing cold so they'd go to the boxing gyms to warm up and earn a few extra lire. They certainly didn't have central heating where they lived. That's how we got the idea of boxing—that's where the immigrants went. Those were really tough times—the war had just ended, houses that had been bombed had yet to be rebuilt, and

families of evacuees were squatting in them.

Cineaste: How did you distill your research into the screenplay?

Cecchi d'Amico: We talked about it—I loved that part—then I'd sit down to write it and then we'd revise it. For example, when we did *I Magliari* with Rosi, I had to follow these guys who worked abroad and I met a factory worker, a young man named Pafundi, who became the model for Rocco. We met with them and they told us their stories that in turn inspired ideas we ended up using in the film. We also stole from books a bit. The character of Nadia, for example, in *Rocco and His Brothers* is inspired by Nastasia Filipovna from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Visconti and I read a lot of the same books. Dostoyevsky was a fantastic source of characters.

Cineaste: Your collaboration with Rosi was brief. What was the reason for that?

Cecchi d'Amico: I wrote his first films with him when he was a young man. He and Franco Zeffirelli were Luchino's assistant directors on *La Terra Trema*. They were our 'boys' because they were slightly younger than me, and we taught them. I made three films with Rosi—*La Sfida*, *I Magliari*, and *Salvatore Giuliano*. We're still very good friends, but later he met Tonino Guerra and started working with him. At the time I was working with Luchino very intensely. It just worked out that way, we had different commitments.

We may make other films together.

Cineaste: *Salvatore Giuliano* is a landmark work in Italian cinema. How do you see it in your career?

Cecchi d'Amico: It was very important. It dealt with the separatist movement in Sicily after the war, in particular the fact that Giuliano had been exploited by the separatists, and there was also the mystery of Giuliano's murder, and later that of Pisciotta. We were extremely passionate about the project. We had followed that historical development very closely, so when the idea came

to make a film we had already been on its trail. We consulted one of the great attorneys to get some advice on what precautions to take in making this film, on how to handle the subject, which was still very hot. He told us that we had to handle it in such a way that all of the scenes, even the things that were said, could be verified against the transcripts of the trials. So we studied those files in detail.

I can't begin to tell you how huge they were, and I can't in good faith say that I read all of them. We chose certain moments and things that would allow us to write the screenplay, and to make it unassailable from the legal viewpoint. But after having read all the files, having already developed the story we wanted to tell, we had to take out things for which we had no written proof. It's difficult to explain. You build the story, then you look at what the official documents are saying and based on that you sometimes must decide, we cannot say this because there's no proof. It's like telling someone how a murder took place, but you can tell the story based only on what proof you have, on the testimony of direct witnesses.

That requirement informed the need for a rather original construction, with some ambiguous moments, jumps in time, carefully documented re-creations, and so on. We were citing statements of the convicts. Everything had to be checked against the court records in order to make the film unassailable. It took us a very long



Anna Magnani in Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951), from a screenplay by Suso Cecchi d'Amico

time. Back then we could take a year to write a screenplay like that.

Cineaste: You wrote with Rosi...

Cecchi d'Amico: And [Franco] Solinas. It was one of Solinas's first films and he went on to become a very well-known screenwriter. We spent a lot of time in Sicily, we scouted the actual places, we spoke with the police who had arrested and questioned the bandits, and with the families, including Giuliano's mother and Pisciotta's brother. It was very detailed, although I have to say that the final production, which looks so realistic, is not at all realistic, because Rosi is like the conductor of a great orchestra. Everything becomes infinitely more solemn in his hands. In actuality those characters were much more modest, smaller and less heroic.

Cineaste: In *Rocco and His Brothers* the male characters are central to the story but they're flanked by some very strong female characters—the widowed mother, who somehow ruins her sons with her ambition, and the girl, the prostitute. What's your interpretation of these characters?

Cecchi d'Amico: The mother doesn't ruin her sons. I think it was Luchino's interpretation that went overboard, that made her too much of a commoner. She's not, she's a brave woman who left everything behind and joined her sons so they wouldn't be left to their own devices. A lot of those immigrants would end up as drifters. The clash with the city had a different effect on each brother—one of them turned out well, the other one couldn't find his way, and so on. The idea was to suggest that the only one who in the end is able to fit in is the youngest. The mother remains an external element to the sons' destiny. The girl is the catalyst.

Cineaste: There weren't many women screenwriters at that time, were there?

Cecchi d'Amico: I was the only one, but that was almost irrelevant. There was never any hostility toward women on the part of male screenwriters. Women had simply never thought about doing it, just like they had not thought about doing a lot of the things they now do.

Cineaste: The female characters you wrote were so rich and complex. How did you create them, and did you have to fight to impose them in such a male-dominated environment?

Cecchi d'Amico: It was convenient for them. These roles had always been written by men and they were only too happy that a woman could write them instead. They were really relieved that someone could handle the women. I'd tell them, 'Watch out, I know better about this stuff!' These women characters have, in fact, become some of the most discussed characters. They are complex. I love in particular Girardot's character. I always liked her performance—I just saw the film again recently—because it's a beautiful character. She accepts her condition with a lot of dignity and courage. Her defiance at the end, when she offers herself up to death, allows Rocco to understand that he was completely entitled to this love, that this *omertà* among the brothers was dumb, and she was the main victim.

Cineaste: How long would it take you to finish a script?

Cecchi d'Amico: Every film has its story. I just finished a film with Monicelli that, for story and screenplay, took one whole year. Now that it's done, it seems easy. But it took us a long time. Sometimes it would take a long time, sometimes it was fairly quick. Rocco was average, it took us several months. Then we called the great novelist [Vasco] Pratolini because we really wanted it to have the scope and complexity of a novel. Then it changed producers. [Franco] Cristaldi gave it to [Goffredo] Lombardo, who had his own screenwriters, Pasquale Festa Campanile and Massimo Franciosa. Very nice people, I have to say, that we didn't think we'd need, but who turned out to be very helpful in finding a language—they were both from the South—that had a southern flavor without falling into dialect.

Cineaste: Were these collaborations frequent? On most films you were credited along with other screenwriters. Were they true collaborations or was it like the Hollywood system, with each author doing separate rewrites?

Cecchi d'Amico: Insiders know who actually worked on a film. Franciosa and Pasqualino always said that the work they'd done on the film was secondary, it was consultation work. We always kept everyone's name in, even in the case of Franciosa and Pasqualino,

when their contribution had been much smaller compared to mine, Medioli's, and Luchino's.

Cineaste: What do you think of the 'film by' credit for the director?

Cecchi d'Amico: It doesn't bother me, really. What we see in the end is the hand and ability of the director. That's the final result. If the director's good, everybody looks good, otherwise you are in trouble. You'd only want the 'film by' credit if the film came out well.

Cineaste: How did you become involved in Martin Scorsese's documentary about Italian cinema, *My Voyage to Italy*?

Cecchi d'Amico: We have been good

friends for many years. One day over lunch at my house with Fellini, Scorsese started telling us humorous anecdotes about how his relationship with Italian cinema had started in his parents' home in Little Italy, with a television broadcast—the only television in the whole neighborhood—of Rossellini's *Paisan*. He was just a kid, so the film per se didn't make much of an impression—he thought it was a documentary—but all his neighbors had come to watch it and how from that moment on something started in him. From this lighthearted chat we stumbled on the idea of making a small documentary—one or one-and-a-half hour at the most—in which he'd tell his story as he had more or less told it to us. I was thrilled at the idea, so I drafted a short script for the documentary that shaped the narrative arc, which is now all that remains of my work. It started with the episode in Little Italy and ended with Scorsese's trip to Sicily, in search of his roots, blending in with *The Leopard*. Scorsese liked the script a lot and has respected, in a sense, its narrative arc.

What happened? Once the work started—of course, I had notated in my script the references to Italian films, but very lightly, without any long scenes or sequences—the 'quotes' he chose became



Alida Valli and Farley Granger star in Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954), from a screenplay by Suso Cecchi d'Amico (photo courtesy of Photofest).

a veritable anthology of Italian cinema, at least the Italian cinema which interests him from those years. They are long enough to sustain a discourse that articulates not only his emotional connection to the material, but also critical explanations of these long sequences. So we ended up with four hours of footage and the documentary is yet to be finished. It has become much greater than was originally intended. The final part that brings us back to Sicily is still missing. That is all I can tell you.

Cineaste: *Some of the films excerpted in the documentary are yours.*

Cecchi d'Amico: I wrote the blueprint of how to assemble this anthology of Italian films and his relationship with them—where he saw them for the first time, how and what he liked about them—which is something he had discussed with me. I built this tale that in the end became much longer; it became a critical essay. Scorsese's comments on the film sequences are his own.

Cineaste: *How was your collaboration?*

Cecchi d'Amico: It was made easier by the assistance in New York of Raffaele Donato, who has worked for many years with Scorsese, and here in Rome of Caterina d'Amico, who is the Dean of the Italian National Film School.

Cineaste: *I had seen an early version, when it was called Il Dolce Cinema.*

Cecchi d'Amico:

He's finished it for now, but he wants to make a continuation. It's going to be difficult. We shall be dealing with a period in which Italian production grew enormously while its international distribution diminished.

Cineaste: *From the Seventies on?*

Cecchi d'Amico: That's right. This is one of the reasons why the documentary will end then.

Cineaste: *You have this extraordinary history of collaborations with the legendary directors of Italian cinema. How did these collaborations come about?*

Cecchi d'Amico: We were all friends and we all worked together. It was a very different environment then and a much better one than it is today. The first neorealist films were made while Italy was still at war. Only Rome had been freed. The war went on in Florence and Milan up in the North for much longer. We made those films out of passion, out of the desire to record what was happening and what had happened, to communicate what we had lived through and what we thought about those events. It was only afterwards that these films started drawing attention.

These films were very inexpensive, so we were bold and the boldness came out of knowing that no one was going to blow their brains out if the film lost money. Now films are very expensive and today's producers don't do it out of love. We were fanatics. We had producers who would absolutely fall in love with a story and want to do it even if it wasn't completely right. They'd find a way, come to an agreement. But it all started with the desire to make a film they liked. Now that's the last thing on their mind. They're all out there making product, like on the assembly line, as if there was an industry, when in Italy there's no such thing as a film industry.

Cineaste: *Typically how did a project start? Who initiated it?*

Cecchi d'Amico: All births were different. Back then, when there

were real producers, we'd make movies based on a theme as opposed to a story—current events, a particular episode in the papers, a crime—which we'd propose to a producer. Or the director came up with an idea. He'd tell you what it was and you'd work on a proposal and then discuss it together. Then there was the actor vehicle—'What can we have Mastroianni do?' If the idea started from the producer, you made an agreement for the screenplay or the story with a deferred payment. You got a retainer and, if all proceeded well, then you'd get the actual contract.

Cineaste: *At what point did passion turn to business?*

Cecchi d'Amico: When films started making some money and required bigger budgets. Keep in mind that it was a very small community, we all knew each other, so it was among friends. Now it's very different. Young directors don't know each other. It's certainly less pleasant than when we were making films. Back then a director like Monicelli, who's a superb director, with the rare gift of comic timing—which cannot be taught, you either have it or you don't—but when he made *La grande Guerra* (*The Great War*), he could ask another director to shoot his battle scenes. The battle scenes in that film were shot by Blasetti, a much more famous director at the time, not Monicelli. Who does this today? Who is able to

call another director and ask, 'Would you shoot my battle scenes?' He'd say, 'You must be joking!'

Cineaste: *What about the political reasons for making those films?*

Cecchi d'Amico: They were huge! At that time, there were no papers—had there been newspapers or magazines, maybe many of us would have become journalists. We had no papers during the war—we had one page of news for all of Rome, the dailies were like pamphlets. We were young and we wanted to tell the world what had happened to us. We were just out of a war, out



L to R, Marcello Mastroianni, Memmo Carotenuto and Vittorio Gassman in *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958), with a screenplay by Suso Cecchi d'Amico (photo courtesy of Photofest).

of life in hiding. We had seen and done all kinds of things.

Cineaste: *Why a life in hiding?*

Cecchi d'Amico: Life as antifascists, helping the partisans. We ourselves were partisans. We lived through this huge adventure. We were all involved. My husband Fedele d'Amico was one of the initiators of the Movement of the Catholic Communists, which after the war became the Christian Left Party. During the war he lived in hiding. He published a clandestine paper called *Voce Operaia* [*Voice of the Workers*] that continued until shortly after the end of the war, and then folded. Men would leave the army to join the partisans. *Rome, Open City* is about that. After the war my husband said, 'Enough, now fascism is over,' and he resumed his regular job as a music critic. I did cinema instead, which was another way of telling our stories.

Rossellini was the first one out with *Rome, Open City*. We all ran around Rome, looking for film stock from the Americans. They were making their own documentaries. We stole it from them or asked for gifts. When we made the movies we brought props from home. We didn't go to a soundstage because we didn't have money to pay for it. It was these same films we made for a few lire that stunned the world.

Cineaste: Italian cinema built extraordinary momentum on the most dramatic times in the country's history.

Cecchi d'Amico: In the years that immediately followed the war, our cinema brought to Italy a respect from the rest of the world that it didn't have before. Two films in particular, *The Bicycle Thief* and *Rome, Open City*, drew so much attention and fondness toward Italy.

Cineaste: What are the most important factors that account for the strong political and social nature of neorealist cinema?

Cecchi d'Amico: There was a lot of antifascist activity during fascism. It was the political situation, not the literary tradition, which motivated a lot of intellectuals. They dealt with politics. Visconti was arrested during the German occupation of Rome. The last years of fascism were a much richer phenomenon. Intellectuals were politically active antifascists. Later on all of cinema was highly involved from a social point of view. Neorealism was very socially committed cinema. Left-wing ideologues dealt with humble people, not rich ones. All the filmmakers of those early years were left wing, and that tradition continues today. What do leftists deal with? Certainly not the problems of a royal family. Our films wanted to tell the truth to our own public, deceived and humiliated by twenty years of fascist lies. We never thought they would work outside Italy.

Cineaste: What do you make of the controversy surrounding the American title, *The Bicycle Thief*. Some critics have argued that by changing the original title from 'thieves' to 'thief,' an essential social dimension of the film is lost.

Cecchi d'Amico: The original Italian title is *Bicycle Thieves*. The singular version must have sounded right in English. Then they embroidered over it. I think initially it was completely unintentional. I know the result is important but titles are often picked for the way they sound. I think it only becomes important once you interpret the film.

Cineaste: A lot of people were credited for working on the script.

Cecchi d'Amico: The number of names attached to that film is absurd. At that time we didn't pay attention to credits for the screenplays. The producers had added names of friends who could invest money. De Sica pretended he had to consult a couple of journalist friends who needed to make some money. So a lot of the names there did not actually collaborate. The people who actually worked on the screenplay were De Sica, Zavattini, myself, and, when we started going out in the streets, Gerardo Guerrieri, who was one of the assistants. We walked around looking for interesting stories that we might want to tell. We tried to get to know the people, and then to represent them—in our own way, of course. A writer gets inspiration from something but then has to tell a story. It's not like taking snapshots. It's about interpreting a subject.

Cineaste: At what point did you start this 'street' research?

Cecchi d'Amico: We worked it out at the table. For months we just sat around brainstorming ideas on how we could craft the story and then we started going out. The film was inspired by a short story—although none of the episodes in the film are in the story—about the theft of a bicycle and a carpenter who is desperately trying to find it

around the city. That was the original idea, but as we went around we picked all the episodes from reality.

One day, for example, we happened on someone who had an epileptic seizure. That gave us the idea for the guy in the film who's about to get arrested. They became part of the script because they were inspired by things we had seen, which doesn't mean that you end up shooting the actual thing. You just re-create it in places that resemble the original places. We used many people from the street, nonactors, because they were the right type. But they didn't always deliver because they got nervous when we started shooting. Some people that seemed aggressive and funny didn't come through, while the timid ones did.

Cineaste: The neorealist films were not appreciated by the Italian Government. Giulio Andreotti, an undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture, introduced a law that put restrictions on neorealist filmmakers and a few years later published an open letter to Zavattini that criticized him and other neorealist filmmakers for 'washing dirty linen in public' and 'slandering Italy abroad.'

Cecchi d'Amico: His open letter was directed to the entire film production community that dealt with political themes. I remember,

with Zavattini, we kind of made fun of it. It was important, though, because Andreotti at the time was powerful. The fact that they would denounce this cinema we made, that brought so much respect to Italy from all over the world, was a major blow to us. The government always completely opposed cinema—with censorship, and in every other possible way. It was only with the advent of television in the Fifties that they dropped us.

Cineaste: What did the censorship entail?

Cecchi d'Amico: It was a terrible bore, a censorship constantly obsessed by possible political propaganda. Scripts had to get government approval. Censorship was ex-

remely strong because the first governments we had after the war were Christian Democrats, they weren't left wing. Today we're going through the same thing. Mark my words—censorship will start again. Politically committed intellectuals were left wing, they weren't with the Christian Democrats. We had written a script with Visconti, *The Wedding March*, that was rejected. They censored it because they said it would have encouraged divorce in Italy—divorce was not legal at the time and the film was favorable to it. So that was it, the film was never made. Instead of *The Wedding March*, we made *Senso!*

I remember a film by Castellani from that time, with an ugly title, *Nella città l'inferno* (*Hell in the City*), with Anna Magnani. It takes place in a prison but there's not a curse word in it, because we couldn't use them. Today it's one 'Fuck you' after another. In the film you hear—the censors allowed us to keep it, as an exceptional gift—once, and only once, 'Who gives a damn?' That line was a major issue for them, they stopped everything. We were told we had to loop it or cut it, it was inadmissible. Finally, after much back and forth, they allowed Magnani, one time only, to say 'Who gives a damn?'

Cineaste: Magnani was famous for cursing like a stevedore.



Simone (Renato Salvatori) and his mother Rosaria (Katina Paxinou) in Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), with a screenplay by Suso Cecchi d'Amico (photo courtesy of Photofest).

Cecchi d'Amico: Never on screen. Just that one time they let her say 'damn.' I have to say, though, that even though the film takes place in a prison, you never miss the profanity because it's very strong on its own terms. But you need a director's and a screenwriter's ability to bring out a sense of these characters' personalities.

Cineaste: Wasn't there also some censorship of Rocco and His Brothers?

Cecchi d'Amico: Some cuts were required, but not that many.

Cineaste: How did you react to censorship?

Cecchi d'Amico: We fought it. We held meetings. We met at cinemas to protest. There was strong censorship of artists on the left.

Cineaste: How did it work? At what point did the censors intervene?

Cecchi d'Amico: Sometimes the producer submitted the idea even before the script was completed. Especially when the project involved Visconti, who was always regarded as a suspicious element. These films required a producer's substantial financial commitment so, before jumping in, they wanted to make sure they'd get the Ministry's approval. If they rejected it, they could withhold permits to shoot in the street. Things would really grind to a major halt. Or they'd give you advice—change this and that and you could resubmit it.

But for *The Wedding March* there was just no way around it, so much so that Luchino started doubting—'It can't be true, it's impossible. It must be the producer who's getting cold feet.' So Gualino [Riccardo Gualino, President of Lux], who was a real producer and financed films out of his own pocket said, 'Bring me another proposal tomorrow and I'll show you I want to make a film with you.' Right around that time Bassani had come out with a collection of Camillo Boito's short stories that contained *Senso* and we figured we could get Gualino interested in that. The next day we submitted *Senso*, which in the end changed a lot from Boito's original tale, but that was more or less the story, and Gualino said, 'Go ahead.'

Cineaste: How did *Senso* change?

Cecchi d'Amico: In Boito the countess was much more hideous, really obnoxious. I'm not saying we justified her, this revenge she hopes to get. When I recommended the short story, right away Luchino said, 'Fine, but we have to do some work on her.' We liked the story, but we weren't crazy about her character. It reflected our historical times very closely, what with the war, the Austrians, and the partisans. These were all elements of our daily life. We thought that the censors would not find much fault in it because it was a story set in the 1800s. We were wrong, and the film had some cuts.

Cineaste: Didn't Tennessee Williams work on *Senso*?

Cecchi d'Amico: That was kind of an excuse because he always loved to come to Italy. *Senso* was not shot in English. Valli spoke her lines in Italian during the shoot. So Visconti invited Tennessee Williams to do the English version that was going to be used for the dubbed version. In fact the work was done mostly by Paul Bowles, who Williams had brought with him from Morocco.

Cineaste: When there were these international casts, how did the actors speak to each other, since most of the time the sound was done with postsynchronization?

Cecchi d'Amico: It depended. If the sound was recorded live, actors had to speak the same language. Burt Lancaster in *The Leopard* had a contract which said that the film would be made in English, but he agreed that each actor should speak his or her own language. He was an extremely gracious man and he wanted to help his Italian colleagues. It's difficult to act opposite an actor who says his line in English and you answer in Italian. Occasionally Lancaster would even make an effort to speak Italian himself.

Cineaste: Did you ever collaborate with Williams?

Cecchi d'Amico: No. He came to Italy a lot so we became friends.

Cineaste: Weren't you supposed to go to the United States to work on *The Rose Tattoo* with him?

Cecchi d'Amico: They didn't give me a visa. It wasn't just censorship exerted by the Christian Democracy, but by the Americans as well.

Cineaste: What happened?

Cecchi d'Amico: I didn't go because they told me at the American Embassy that the Italian Government had nothing to do with it at this point, that they could have made an exception and given me a restricted visa of some kind. I was considered a communist. I was very much involved in politics but I was never a member of the

Communist Party. So I told them, 'Think of me whatever you want, I'm staying here.'

Cineaste: But you went later on?

Cecchi d'Amico: I finally went, many years later, after everything calmed down a bit. I don't want to say something inaccurate, but I never had a normal visa. The two or three times I traveled to the United States, they always gave me a visa limited to that specific trip. I find that ridiculous because, as I said, I'm clearly left wing, but not a communist. My family is traditionally socialist, not Craxi's socialism, or later socialism, which we elders didn't really like.



The opening scene of Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* (1960), with a screenplay coauthored by Suso Cecchi d'Amico.

Cineaste: You wrote some of Anna Magnani's most memorable characters.

Cecchi d'Amico: We were very close friends. We spent a lot of time together.

Cineaste: How did you meet?

Cecchi d'Amico: She was a student at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. My father-in-law Silvio d'Amico was the school founder and chairman. I first saw her in the academy shows. It was a school for professional actors. She started out in the theater. My father-in-law was a theater critic and I always went to the theater. I first saw her on stage. She was a great actress. She quit dramatic theater early and did vaudeville with Totò—they were an unforgettable team.

Cineaste: Did she ever suggest changes on a script or participate in the screenplay?

Cecchi d'Amico: She was an open book to me. I couldn't make mistakes when I wrote for her, it wasn't an option. The films I wrote for her, like *Bellissima* and Castellani's *Hell in the City*, were tailor-made. They didn't know how to use her in the United States. There's a scene in *Bellissima*, when she is leaving Cinecittà, where everything has been a disaster, and she suddenly stops with her little girl. She's about to cry, and almost unconsciously blurts out 'Help.' She just

stopped on the set. She had this impulse and Luchino let her run with it. That was her thing. Her character wasn't based on anyone in particular, there were so many women like her. It was common for those stage mothers to transfer their ambition onto their children.

Cineaste: What about other actresses, like Sophia Loren? Did they ever make suggestions or ask to change something?

Cecchi d'Amico: Loren didn't say a word. I only worked with her at the beginning. We had to fight for her. On the first film she made with me, I had to impose her as the protagonist. [Ennio] Flaiano and I had written a story that our producers liked very much, *Peccato che sia una canaglia* (*Too Bad She's Bad*), but they wanted Lollobrigida and we wanted Loren. We had seen her in a small part in a film by Bolognini. No one believed in her. Also she was so tall and back then they still had this idea that actors had to be little. So we managed to impose her by telling them that we wouldn't otherwise sell them the story. Blasetti cast her and that was the beginning of her career. She made another film with him, *La fortuna di essere donna* (*Lucky to Be a Woman*), starring Mastroianni, that we also wrote. The story didn't quite work. Blasetti wanted to make comedies. He pulled it off with *Too Bad She's Bad* because De Sica was in it. He had excellent comic timing and he taught Loren. I really liked to write comedies, but they never let me do many of those.

Cineaste: I recently saw *Big Deal On Madonna Street* again. I've heard that's one of your favorite films. Would you tell us how it came about?

Cecchi d'Amico: I find that film really funny. We had fun writing it and I think it turned out well. We had founded a little cooperative with Visconti, Cristaldi, and Mastroianni for which we had produced a film called *Le notti bianche* (*The White Nights*), which was shot entirely at Stage 5 at Cinecittà, which is a massive soundstage. The set was the recon-

struction of an entire neighborhood in Livorno. Since it had cost us a lot of money, we thought about shooting another film there.

I was very busy at that time overseeing the postproduction of *White Nights*, in which I was involved even from the administrative point because it was a cooperative, so we asked Monicelli and Age and Scarpelli [the screenwriting duo of Agenore Incrocci Age and Furio Scarpelli] to quickly come up with a little comedy to be shot on that set. Up until that time they had written comedies—certainly more than I had—but they were less established. Monicelli, too, was coming up back then. He had made a very nice film, a comedy, *Padri e figli* (*Father and Sons*), but he wasn't the A-list director he later became. They developed the idea based on my suggestion of a story about some small-time thieves, but it took them so long that we got kicked out of Cinecittà. We ended up writing the screenplay in due time, but we ended up shooting everything on location—in houses, on the street—not on our set.

Cineaste: Your little comedy became a big international hit that inspired many other films and even spawned a few remakes and sequels.

Cecchi d'Amico: Sequels never quite beat the originals. They made several to exploit the title. I made one myself, with the same actors, many years later, as an idea to help a young friend who was directing

his first film, but it didn't turn out too well. Louis Malle did a remake, too, which was hideous. Actually, it was never clear to me why these other filmmakers even asked Cristaldi for the rights. Back then we signed these cutthroat contracts with the producers, that we didn't even read, where we basically sold our grandmothers along with everything else. But by the time of these remakes, Cristaldi must have made such good deals that, as he told us, 'You're not really entitled to anything, but I feel I owe you...' and he handed a few lire to me, Mario, Furio, and Age.

Now there's this new version, *Welcome to Collinwood*, which screened at Cannes this year and was apparently a hit. My journalist friends were calling to congratulate me, but I was saying, 'Wait, before you congratulate me, I haven't seen a penny.' The filmmakers have now called us and asked if they have to leave our names in the credits. You bet! At the very least!

Cineaste: When you write a script do you also write the camera directions?

Cecchi d'Amico: Some details have to be emphasized when they are important for the plot. Here in Italy we write directions much more in detail than they do, for example, in America—at least judging

from those American screenplays I read for the Oscars. The other thing for us, I'm talking about us elders, is that we come from the habit of working with nonactors. So when we wrote, we were very careful not to give them big mouthfuls or long lines, because they froze. They couldn't deliver the lines.

Cineaste: Did your writing style change from director to director?

Cecchi d'Amico: I always worked with directors I knew very well. I knew their work and, if I didn't know it, I immediately tried to find out, to figure out what that director could do. The screenwriter has to create the best circumstances for

the director, to put him in the position of doing his best work and not create difficulties for him. If you see that a director is good with actors, and gets good performances from them, let him guide them. And if he's not that good at it, keep that in mind when you write the script.

Cineaste: Do you prefer to write original scripts or literary adaptations? You have written screen adaptations of works by authors such as Camus, *Lampedusa*, and Shakespeare.

Cecchi d'Amico: They're completely different things. There are different reasons for adapting a book. Sometimes it's not a great work but it contains an idea that is dynamite for cinema. So you treat that book very differently from how you'd treat a book of which you may wish, instead, to suggest the literary style. When we did *The Leopard*, which is a story without a story—because, when all is said and done, it boils down to the first time a high aristocrat marries a bourgeois, not much else really happens—but there's the gratification of the writing, of Lampedusa's irony. His literary style is something I think we succeeded in re-creating in the film. Then, of course, you sometimes get bold. You dare, as we did in *The Leopard*, even though we wished to remain completely faithful to the book, to betray it. We cut the two final scenes. The film doesn't end with the



Burt Lancaster as Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina, in Visconti's *The Leopard* (1962), with a screenplay coauthored by Suso Cecchi d'Amico (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Suso Cecchi d'Amico and her 1938 model Olivetti typewriter, on which she has typed all her screenplays (photo by A.G. Basoli).

Prince's death—it hints at it. But I think that makes it even more faithful to the flavor of the book. Again, it's different from adapting a book because of its thick plot or a certain ambiance in which you feel at ease. So the approach is defined by your reasons for adapting a book. Your reasons for choosing it determine how you'll treat the text.

Cineaste: *What about adapting Shakespeare, as you did for Zeffirelli's version of The Taming of the Shrew?*

Cecchi d'Amico: Well, that's all about the Shakespearean text. That's a completely different way—it's very different when you're handling a classic, you can't manhandle that language. You can make only minor cuts in the text. You keep the situation in mind, the ambiance, the blocking, how to deliver the line. In that case it's more like the job of an assistant director than of a screenwriter because, as far as the adaptation goes, you really cannot touch the text. Adaptations of novels are different. Shakespeare is a classic author and classics are done so people can hear that specific text. You have to be extremely faithful. It's like putting it on stage.

Cineaste: *How do you see the situation of Italian cinema today?*

Cecchi d'Amico: Last year was fairly good. Several films weren't bad. But it's actually a very difficult time for Italian cinema because you can't recoup your expenses on a film. Distribution of Italian films in Italy has been killed by American distributors. And unfortunately, we don't have any more producers. Cinema hasn't changed, society has, and the role of cinema in society has changed. Cinema is exclusively seen as a way to make money. The situation has deteriorated so much that no one can get passionate about it.

We elders, I want to say this, we made cinema because we loved it. We loved it a lot. Maybe we just made films because it never even occurred to us that they could be so successful. We only did what we liked. Today's youth put the cart before the horse, they think about what will make them famous before they even know what they want to make. I find this really discouraging.

Cineaste: *But you remain active. I understand you've recently com-*

pleted a screen adaptation of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso.

Cecchi d'Amico: For Dino De Laurentiis. It was his idea. He asked me, 'Can *Orlando Furioso* be made into a film?' 'Of course,' I said, 'It's beautiful.' The script is beautiful, too, I must say. I did it with my son, Masolino d'Amico, who's a very educated professor. But we wrote the script without a director in mind, only the producer, so I don't know what will happen with it.

Cineaste: *You also recently wrote another script for Monicelli?*

Cecchi d'Amico: Yes, for Monicelli, one of the few survivors, like me. Our parents were friends, imagine that! We've known each other our entire lives. I've made so many films with him. The new script is called *L'Uomo Nero (The Boogie Man)*, and it will be produced by my daughter, Silvia d'Amico, who has already produced several of Monicelli's films. It's an ensemble piece with a lot of characters. The 'boogie man' is an illegal immigrant from Nigeria. He ends up as the caretaker of this eccentric old man who's kind of losing it. The old man has this big family and there are a lot of subplots and intertwined stories.


Cineaste: *What's your advice to young screenwriters?*

Cecchi d'Amico: Read, because that's your all. Read, read, read. Keep in your head an array of characters—from newspapers, books, magazines—read, read, read. Then you'll have these characters inside and you can elaborate on them.

Cineaste: *What are the requirements of a good screenwriter?*

Cecchi d'Amico: You need a bit of talent. Even when you have good reading resources, if you don't have a bit of imagination, you're lost. The screenwriter has to be a creator, has to have a bit of narrative imagination, has to know how to write and have a lot of curiosity. A screenwriter has to be curious, observant. Otherwise you'll never know how to suggest an attitude, a reaction. This is something you learn by observing. When you're in the subway, observe the person right in front of you so you can see how they behave and so on. This may make you a 'nosey person,' but it also makes you a good screenwriter. ■

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