

Francesca Archibugi was born in Rome in 1961. She is one of the most interesting film directors of the "new" Italian cinema. Since graduating from Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Rome, she has worked as a scriptwriter and directed several shorts for RAI, Council of Rome and Ermanno Olmi's *Ipotesi Cinema*. After winning the Solinas Prize in 1988 she directed her first full-length film, *Mignon è partita* starring Stefania Sandrelli, winning six David di Donatello awards as well as the Nastro d'Argento prize, Verso sera (1990, starring Marcello Mastroianni and Sandrine Bonnaire), *Il grande cocomero* (1992, starring Anna Galiena and Sergio Castellitto) and *L'albero delle pere* (1997, starring Valeria Golino, Sergio Rubini and Stefano Dionisi).

I have never held a conference in my life. I have done a great deal of press conferences but at a press conference you are always waiting for someone to ask you a question. Since it is always very difficult to organize a discourse from nothing I had a word with Annie and asked her if I could simply speak about my personal experience, how I started making movies, what motivates me, some of the changes I have undergone from film to film.

I got into cinema completely by chance. This, I believe, is the what marks a person out as an artist: when there is no precise vocation, you simply feel drawn to something despite yourself. I was sixteen years old and I was sitting on the steps in front of a church with some school friends when a director's assistant came by and spotted me. That is how I ended up in the part of Otilia in the television dramatization of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*.

I did not use to go to the cinema very often. I was more of a bookworm. At home, even the likes of Bergman or Fellini played second fiddle to Thomas Mann or Marcel Proust. My mother had her sights set on a more studious life for me and was somewhat disconcerted by the fact that I was working as an actress. However, she was of the Montessori school and could not stop me from anything. My father was a distracted, distant figure, a university professor of Economics. He was always off around the world with wife number two, three, four ... At the age of sixteen, I was free, I was on my own.

Once I had finished high school I could not have cared less about being an actress. I enrolled at the National Film Institute for the director's course.

The things I was writing at the time were more stories than screenplays. I was handing in novels rather than scripts. I was fortunate enough to have professors, all of whom were great, who recognized this peculiarity and allowed me to connect with a strong narrative soul and to cultivate something which, at the time, was very much a case of swimming against the current. This was the early 80s and cinema was just emerging from years of de-structuring.

Before I made my first full-length movie, *Mignon è partita*, I had already made various shorts. *Mignon* really was a novel of formation in the 18th century literary meaning of the word. *Mignon* came from Wilhelm Meister, she was the outsider, the person that comes along, touches people's souls and then goes away again, a literary archetype dipped into a rigorous cinematic realism. During my years as a student, while I was reflecting on cinema, I fell victim to a serious ailment which, at the time, I called the Ozu complex. I was unable to use lenses

that were different from the human eye and I was always trying to cancel myself out as narrator, so as to let the story tell itself.

This literary bent coupled with a strong sense of realism — two things that never go together — would prove to be the big innovation in my films.

My first film was a box-office hit. Personally, I do not believe this to be particularly important in determining how good or bad a film is. There are many random factors to be taken into consideration, but it certainly did not harm my reputation within the Italian cinema firmament. I left Rome and went to live on a mountain top in Tuscany where I was able to get on with my work in complete freedom, not something which happens very often in this country.

My second film, *Verso Sera* was, first and foremost, a costume drama in so far as it was shot in 1989/90 and was about the 70s, the previous decade during which I was not even an adult. In that sense, there was a mythical, dream-like quality to the piece. I was picking up on the way my brothers and my older friends would behave, their life which I was dying to be part of. As a result, it was virtually an historical novel. It was an important film for me, to an extent cerebral but reflective at the same time. It gave me the chance to work with Mastroianni, a man of uncommon intelligence and sweetness. After all these years, everything he taught me keeps coming back, like a hiccup.

Il grande cocomero came together with great difficulty. I had problems getting approval for the project: I was told that a story set in a children's neuro-psychiatric ward would be a turn-off, phony, and even if it turned out well it would put people off. Naturally, one of the reasons for which I chose to go into cinema was to satisfy a need that I had to make and see movies, which means not necessarily making feel-good pictures. I believe that a story, even a painful story, has the power to make people feel better. Only six prints of the film were made, which is absolutely nothing. There was no faith in the film on the part of the distributors. Soon, however, they were rushing extra copies off once the lines started forming outside the six cinemas showing the movie throughout Italy. The film was my biggest box-office success. I drew great strength from this: you must never go after your public but gently ensure that the public comes to you. In many other respects, that film was one of those truly life-altering experiences. With *Il grande cocomero* I was attempting another kind of novel, one that was based on reality. We were filming alongside the children's neuro-psychiatric ward and the exchange with the actual ward was constant. Young psychiatrists would come up to me with advice, as would the nurses and the little patients. Being on the set became a sort of therapeutic experience for all those involved, and shooting a movie went down in their medical records. I was aware of the fact that I was getting a lot from them and I tried as hard as I could to give as much back. I think that this tension is palpable, it warms the film.

After this film I felt, in a certain sense, empty. I have always written my own



FRANCESCA ARCHIBUGI
RISPONDE ALLE DOMANDE
DEGLI STUDENTI /
RESPONDS TO THE
STUDENTS' QUESTIONS,
COMO, EX CHIESA DI /
FORMER CHURCH OF
SAN FRANCESCO

screenplays. A large part of my life is dedicated to writing. Writing a screenplay can take anything up to a year and a half, two years. I did not feel like inventing characters, because it is really draining. I wanted to turn someone else's novel into a film. I wrote a screenplay for a novel by Federico Tozzi, a story set in Tuscany in the early 1900s: a very unhealthy love story between two neurotics, following them from the ages of eleven-twelve through eighteen-nineteen. The film was in two parts, one featuring child actors, the other with adult actors playing the characters as young adults. Paradoxically, this was the most experimental film I have ever made. Rather than do something that was the apotheosis of a novel, I came up with a costume drama. But I was able to take certain creative, expressive, and narrative liberties precisely because the characters were not mine. That is not something I usually do with a character I invent by myself to whom I usually submit myself. With this film I was somehow detached from the characters. So, I was finally able to free myself of my Ozu complex (for anyone who does not know, Ozu was a great Japanese director whose work I idolize; I used to idolize him to the point that I would try to imitate him, now I just idolize him!) And I was able to ... I made significant progress while I was shooting that film. I explored new avenues of cinematic language, because, I believe, I had borrowed characters that were not strictly mine. The film may not have worked out as well as other films I have made but it did teach me a valuable

lesson, especially since people who went to see the movie started writing to me, asking why I had abandoned my usual characters to shoot a costume drama. I suddenly realized that I had an audience, which I was unaware of before, an audience that was actually going to see my movies armed with certain expectations. It might sound banal, but I was somewhat intimidated by this relationship. I had discovered that out in the dark there was this abstract entity who wanted something from me while not even I was really sure what it was I was going to do. So I was not alone in my fight against ignorant and arrogant backers, producers and distributors. I had something behind me that gave me strength but at the same time took it back because it wanted something from me and I do not know what. Later on I made a big mistake: I entered into a contract with Cecchi Gori because I had quite a big-budget film in screenplay form and Cecchi Gori was a big enough company to assist me financially. It also happened to be putting out good quality films at the time. I set about putting the film together, I picked out the actors, and the locations but I was locked in a series of arguments with the production companies. The conflict was never violent because I never get angry, but, gradually, they started to poison my work bit by bit. I ran away like some housewife in the 50s escaping from a husband she cannot stand and leaves her home and her children into the bargain: I relinquished the screenplay and the rights. That was the extent of my association with them. I would have to write another screenplay but at last I was free!

I cried a lot at that time. I had a sort of breakdown and then I gave birth to my third child. I was tired because I had been breastfeeding him for a whole year. My husband, the father of my children, who is a musician, suggested I should go with him to one of his rehearsals to take my mind off things, rather than sitting on my own at home getting depressed.

At the time he was rehearsing with a town band (typical of Tuscany, where we live). I just sat there in a corner, sad, watching the rehearsal. Gradually, as rehearsals progressed, I began to see the glimmer of a story. Cinema has always helped me through the most difficult of times. I got the idea of trying something I had never done before: a documentary, a musical about my husband's new venture and about him as a person. That is how *La strana storia di Banda Sonora* came about, a light film by an artist fed up with working within the cinema business and all the restrictions that entails. It also gave me the chance to film in a totally different way with no script, no novel, no Goethe on my mind: I just filmed whatever was happening. It was a jazz film rather than a film about jazz. In a sense, between *Con gli occhi chiusi* (my terrifying run-in with a major (Cecchi Gori) and *Banda Sonora*, I managed to free myself from my Yasojuro Ozu complex and, free at last, I made *L'albero delle pere*, which I consider something of a touch-down in my narrative and artistic work thus far.

If I have been regaling you with all these anecdotes it is not out of any sense of

personal vanity. It is just that I believe that any artistic undertaking is interesting insofar as it is a life transformed into objects, a journey across internal and external eras crystallized in the form of films, novels, theater productions, figurative works, musical notions. Art does not necessarily have to be realistic in order for it to talk about Being and Time, and cinema is proof of this, precisely because it is the most realistic art form; while it does record reality, it also transcends it, capturing the director's unconscious, the invisible mists of the times. Perhaps this is why artists find it difficult to talk about themselves. It is like being on an endless walk; I feel that I am taking another step but while my foot is still in midair I do not know where my next film will take me.

Commentator - Would anyone in the audience like to ask a question ...

A woman in the audience - I was intrigued to hear about the film that was written but never made. Could you tell us a bit about it, what it was about, seeing as we will never get the chance to see it?

Francesca Archibugi - I hope to get the rights to it back one day. It was called *Il vento* (*The Wind*) and was set in a children's holiday camp in the late 50s. It is the story of a sex scandal, a female member of the staff at the camp is accused of having an affair with one of her female students.

A gentleman in the audience - I absolutely adore *Mignon è partita* ..., your first film, (like so many others, I was that thirteen-year-old boy, always getting top marks in Latin and Greek but having problems getting a girl). I would be interested to know how, at the age of twenty-four (that is, unless I am mistaken about, how old you were when you made the film) how you managed to penetrate the mindset of a male adolescent, a young boy? It is something that has always intrigued me.

Francesca Archibugi - Flaubert once said, "I am Madame Bovary." Being almost possessed like that is the very essence of being a narrator. The character begins to inhabit your head and you virtually start hearing voices. It is a question of imposing some order on things, placing yourself inside it, more often than not methodically. I am methodical in my work. Narrating truly is a vocation. There is nothing fanatical or esoteric about it. Rather than entering into the mind of a fourteen-year-old boy, you actually become that fourteen-year-old boy.

A woman in the audience - Apart from literary influences, have you been at all influenced by any other art forms, including the visual arts. If you have, which branch of the visual arts? Cinema itself? Painting? Comic strips?

Francesca Archibugi - The literature I talk about is a sort of peculiarity that is somehow perceptible in my films. However, it is not the essence of it. Cinema feeds on cinema.

Everybody complains about film school, but I took it all very seriously. I loved the teachers I had. I was fortunate enough to study under truly great people. I never skipped a class, and not just on the script-writing or directing courses but the costume course where my professor was Pierino Tozzi (the greatest Italian costume artist, the one always called upon by Visconti). He just knew all there was to know about the importance of image, how important it was to choose a white blouse over a pink one, how it would affect the dialogue.

I love figurative art. I do not particularly know how this passion of mine might make its way into my films. However, in the final analysis, there is cinema in my cinema.

A woman in the audience - I was particularly interested in this Ozu complex you talked about. I would like to know what it is about Ozu that influences your work and what other directors are important to you.

Francesca Archibugi - Obviously I was joking when I called it a complex. Let's just say that I have always found it difficult to use lenses that were not 35s or 50s. 50 is equivalent to the human eye, 35 two human eyes. I have never gone further than 35 and 50 in three films.

I ventured as far as 100 with *Il grande cocomero* and I was beside myself. Little did I know that soon after I would have graduated to 600s, 18s ...

Ozu is the unsurpassed maestro of naturalness, not to be confused with the flat-

ter naturalism. His camera was human eye height with a human eye lens to the point that it became a human eye. As a result, the story told itself. Any filmmaker will tell you that that level of simplicity is the hardest thing to achieve.

So I studied the Ozu rule-book. But of course I was not imitating him because I was doing dollys and trolleys. Everything I know about the relation between characters in the classic shot/medium shot I got from Ozu, as well as his secrets regarding glances. This is not a technical audience so I do not want to bore you. However, there is a convention in cinema when you are filming two people looking at each other: one has to look to the left of the camera, the other to the right. This optical division of the shot is called the 30° rule. Depending on the lens you are using, the right/left of the camera dichotomy can become excessively lateral; if you put a mark in the shade beside the lens and tell the actors to look at it, you can avoid that Brechtian foible of having the actors look directly into the camera. At the same time, the image acquires a more intense feel. All of my films are built on the importance of glances. Who in the audience is aware of something like that? Nobody, of course. Subliminally, however, by nearing that degree of incidence, you actually bring the audience closer to the intimacy of the glance.

A gentleman in the audience - You have been talking about some of the principles of filming. I would like to ask you how you see the role of the director of photography. Do you offer any suggestions or do you accept the light as it comes? Considering that lighting can even win a film an Oscar, is such a prize directly down to the director of photography or is it something that goes hand-in-hand with the work of the director?

Francesca Archibugi - Obviously, there are various approaches to being director of photography. Some directors of photography will apply their same style to every project they are involved in, with the result that what are completely different films turn out very uniform in terms of photography. I could never work with someone who insists on using his trademark gels or filters. And anyway it would not be possible because of the very nature of the films I make.

I am lucky enough to work with a director of photography who happens to be a genius, Luca Bigazzi. With him I decide on the formats, and the narrative just takes shape. Let me give you an example: I made my last movie, *L'albero delle pere*, in Cinemascope. Now that might seem paradoxical for a film that is set in a tiny house in a dark, nocturnal city. It is a small-scale film, the story of a fourteen-year old boy's odyssey, but I wanted there to be a lot of screen in order to give the little things, his little gestures, an epic scale.

One problem I encountered was with the huge Cinemascope camera I was using. We had to switch to a format called super 35 and a normal-sized camera, often hand-operated, that would fit into small spaces. The technique is translated into a narrative choice.

ANNIE RATTI, GIACINTO DI PIETRANTONIO, FRANCESCA ARCHIBUGI, MARIANNE BOWDLER CON GLI STUDENTI / WITH THE STUDENTS, COMO, EX CHIESA DI / FORMER CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO



The film I had in mind was to be both a childhood story and an epic and this helped me to achieve just that. Plus we were working in virtual darkness with children who would not be still for a minute, missing their marks and going out of focus. All this and we were using these absurd diaphragms, but not once did Luca ever say, "You can't do that." Since I have been working with Luca it is as if I have found my eyes. You've got the shot, a person, a street, a house, and everybody's quiet, and I think: I wrote that!

Some directors of photography might pick up vain awards for themselves, but Luca just seems to want the award to go to the film.

A gentleman in the audience - Since yesterday we have been talking about image and script but music and sound have yet to be mentioned. A debate has started up among critics, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, on the importance of having a good soundtrack and that it could account for half of a film's success. What is your position on this?

Francesca Archibugi - This subject is very close to me because it is my husband who provides the music for my films. We have been together since high school and since my first 16mm film at school he has been lending his music to my work. It is something that is so organically part of the film that it is hard for me to judge. I don't know ... It is as if my films were scored by themselves. Generally, I would say music is of prime importance to a film and many a film has been spoiled by having the wrong music.

A gentleman in the audience - I want to come back, briefly, to *L'albero delle pere*. First and foremost, I would like to say how much I appreciate all these insights into the tricks of the trade. I watch a great deal of films and read a lot about cinema, but you have shed light on things I was oblivious to, though I know they go on. They are little ingredients that you appreciate in the finished product. *L'albero delle pere* is the perfect example of all this work behind the scenes which results in a surprising simplicity, naturalness, efficacy and warmth that immediately captures the public. I probably became an Archibugi fan through *L'albero delle pere*. I am interested to know more about the screenplay and how it came to be. How did you think up the main character, one of the most well-rounded of all your characters, using the name as a starting point? When I heard that name I thought it takes guts to call your leading character Siddharta. But by the end, it all works out beautifully: the character infuses an aura of wisdom that somehow manages to contaminate the whole context: the family, his brothers, sisters ... How did Siddharta come to be? As an adolescent he is more evolved than other adolescents who have featured in your films.

Francesca Archibugi - I have no problems talking about the making of my films and how I write the screenplay. Even scriptwriting has a highly technical basis:

a plan, a developing theme, narrative rules. However, it is truly difficult to say how it comes about from the original nucleus because it happens without you realizing. The character, Siddharta, simply came to me one day, one night, actually, I can remember it very clearly, with his name and his destiny. Then I had to build everything else around him, which is a very painstaking process of ideation, writing, rewriting, re-ideation. The characters change sex, move around within the action, they crop up here, crop up there. Fundamentally, however, the original nucleus remains the individual destiny of the main character. This child, a little boy, with the onus of a name like that at his age, the first of many burdens his mother had lumbered him with from birth — that was how the narrative was ignited. Everything else seemed to follow as a consequence: you are fourteen, you live in Rome, your name is Siddharta, you are the father of your mother. As soon as I had chiseled him out from the block of wood, he just took off, with me in hot pursuit like Mastro Geppetto.