



Interview with Mario Garefo

James Rowlin

Mario Garefo's film *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* was awarded first place in the IAFOR FilmAsia Open Film Competition 2013 in the under twenty minutes fiction category, as well as the competition's Grand Prize. The following interview was recorded in May 2014.

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Tell me about yourself and your path to becoming a filmmaker.

I was born and raised in Athens. My parents belonged to a certain generation which tended to impose on its children a classical education in foreign languages, sciences and arts, with the aim of securing a different perspective and better prospects for them than they had benefitted from. In essence, with this kind of education, societies supplied children with the necessary tools for entry into cut-throat financial rivalry – societies today are even more cynical: they provide their children with the necessary skills to become, for example, simply great economists with no superfluous, unnecessary knowledge. However, this education – despite its indisputable value – unwittingly led me to take a different direction as I reacted against it, becoming more of an existentialist rather than a conformist. I was originally a good student at school, then a mediocre student and, in the last two years, a bad student. Luckily, my avid consumption of books and knowledge of literature provoked a friendly reaction from the teachers who, most of the time, let me “get away with it.” I also excelled in music, which I have practiced professionally since lyceum.

My passion for the cinema came when I understood how exciting it would be to reconstruct the way I saw the world through cinema. Reality is the palette which contains everything; it can be boring, but it is the way you approach it which makes it different and interesting. Prior to then, music was my chosen means of exploration. Although I loved it very much, I sensed that it was elusive and in the future I would be obliged to give it up. The images and words of cinema, on the other hand, seemed to me uniquely tangible, like the tools of a mechanic. I saw that I could make images that corresponded to the way I always liked to “see” and hear music. I would say that my encounter with cinema was with something pre-existent in me. I therefore studied directing and the theory of cinema in Rome, satisfying my passion for cinema, and Italian cinema in particular.

Talk about the genesis of *The Man Who Fed His Shadow*. How did you conceive of the idea? What were the constraints – technical, budget, time, etc.?

The script is a loose adaptation of the homonymous short story *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* by the Argentinean writer Leónidas Barletta. While reading the story, I happened to be listening to a song by Charles Aznavour, “Comme ils disent,” which is featured in the movie. On face value, these two works seem to be unrelated to each other – but they are not. Both works are about a mysterious instinct that obliges two persons to show loyalty to something others would call a foolish obsession. Although each hero comes from a different background, the deep faith they have in their art makes them similar; they are both believers in a system of values to which we pay no attention nowadays. This is exactly what caught my attention: that beyond ideology, religion, education and culture, there is an emotional value system which “weighs” things in a different way and exonerates people and their actions.

Regarding other matters, in Greece, before the financial crisis, the state funded eight film proposals annually – yet in the last four years it has funded literally none. The financial crisis, though, is not the cause but simply a wonderful excuse for the politicians to tell us “there is no money.” The truth, however, is that they have always been indifferent to supporting art and particularly cinema. Furthermore, the selection process is obscure – they have created a program which subsidizes approximately five

short films which they chose secretly, depriving applicants of the right to formally apply for the competition or to submit their proposals officially, as is usually the case in democratic procedures. Their aim is to offer funding to people as personal favours. This is indeed absurd for a country with such a big artistic tradition. It is no coincidence that accomplished artists have left Greece and gone abroad for a better future.

The Man Who Fed His Shadow was written five years before it was shot. I entered it into these financing programs on three separate years, but it was always disqualified at the final stage. I therefore decided to shoot it with whatever money I managed to raise from different jobs and with the assistance of two independent producers who helped me mainly in the renting of equipment, venues etc. It took me a long time to create the result I wanted. I worked for a year on the pre-production and for another year on the post-production – at a given point I was worried that the film would never get completed. This was very painful process which I don't recommend to anyone, including myself. It was when the film was finally finished that I understood that the effort put into the production had paid off. This led to an ironic twist of fate. After the film's premiere in Greece, I was accused of being an aesthete because of the supposed high production costs – whereas in fact the film's budget was one third that of the films from the national programs produced with subsidies.

The cinematography in your film is exquisite and of a superior quality. Tell us about the technical aspects of the shoot (digital or 35 mm?) and edit that made this possible. Did you take charge of the cinematography? How did you design the set?

I worked meticulously on the design of the shots, thought very carefully about the lenses I would use, and made sure that the sets and filming locations looked as natural as possible. I wanted to create an eerie atmosphere where “ghosts” from the past seem to haunt the walls and furniture. I was lucky to work with Thodoris Michopoulos, whom I consider a great director of photography with the potential for a brilliant future. Without his contribution the photographic aesthetic of the film would have been impossible. Assis Dimitrolopoulou also made a great contribution to the costume designs, art direction and production design. Giannis Chalkiadakis, maybe the best editor at this moment in Greece, was responsible for the editing. Our collaboration was perfect: I brought him satisfactory material, we agreed on the view and the style we wanted the film to have, and everything went smoothly.

Before I reveal the medium that the film was shot in, I would like to discuss the usual controversy surrounding digital and film. Digital or film? Should we build our homes out of stone or concrete? Should we use organic tomatoes in our salad or not? Should your hair be natural or dyed? Is the breast of the girl across the street natural or silicone? A lot of questions which seem obsolete to modern man. I can imagine how silly Visconti would seem to someone today, when one day, in a fit of anger, he broke all the utensils in the set because he felt betrayed when he realized that one of the glasses in a scene of *The Leopard* was simply glass and not porcelain like all the rest! Would this glass change anything in the final aesthetics? Probably not. But ask yourself: would we have such a legacy from him, or find such beauty in his films, if his temperament was not characterized by this obsessive mania, to the point where he thought his vision was compromised by a single glass?

Please, do not think that I am a fan of obsessive-compulsive behaviour. I am simply an admirer of beauty. Through digital means, one can get very beautiful results which can rival, at times, that of film. In a movie theatre very few people will discern the difference – yet there is one. Although viewers may not recognize it, I believe that film acts in the subconscious of the viewer. The Parthenon is made of Pentelic marble (as opposed to regular marble) and even this small difference contributed to its being a little more beautiful. This is of little interest to the spectators. I am talking to those craftsmen who are interested in adding a little zeal to their craft. In conclusion, I would like to mention that, to my sorrow, I was obliged to shoot the film with digital for financial reasons. And I say “to my sorrow” not for the result – I am more than happy for the result. I say “to my sorrow” because I live in an age of discounts. Discounts of every kind – even in the way we make love. Because the question of “film or digital” implies: “film or digital, because no financial ability.” If there was no financial reason, why would we struggle to shoot films in digital, which sometimes comes close to film? We would shoot directly in film.

Let’s talk about your influences. Am I right in seeing *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* as a tribute to the grand masters of Italian cinema, in particular Fellini and Antonioni?

My influences are mainly from Italian cinema and the French *nouvelle vague*. Fellini is, of course, very close to my heart. But also Visconti, Pasolini and Antonioni. I am also influenced by the cinema of Dino Risi, Mario Monicelli, Ettore Scola, Pasquale Festa Campanile and the *Commedia all’Italiana*. I consider all of them very important and still underrated compared to what they deserve. I also adore Bernardo Bertolucci. In fact, in *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* I make a reference to *The Conformist*. When the leading actor has an argument with Roland outside the dinner table, a song by the Trio Lescano (a female trio from the prewar era when Mussolini was in power) is playing. Bertolucci uses the same song to close his movie with Jean-Louis Trintignant sitting outside the Coliseum. A poster of *The Conformist* is hanging on the wall when the magician enters the cabaret. I admire many directors from French cinema, but mainly Truffaut and Godard as well as the poetic realism of Jean Vigo, whose work I consider to be the equivalent of Arthur Rimbaud’s poetry. I pay homage to them by carrying them in my heart and by choosing to be aesthetically influenced by them. A practical homage placed within a film can be risky and turn into poor mimicry, so I avoid it.

...and a tribute to Rossellini’s social realism by virtue of the film’s ending?

In the last scene, it is true that I had the neorealist era in mind, but mostly Visconti, and specifically the film *The Earth Trembles*. I imagined the last scene somewhat differently, but due to production costs I did not manage to do it exactly as I had intended. I wanted the leading actor to be in a minimalistic landscape, such as a remote house next to the sea, surrounded by at least fifty children of various nationalities and for the film to close with Aznavour’s song.

To what extent is the protagonist, the magician, a metaphor for the filmmaker? Is cinema a shadowy art – an illusion that breeds “fear, suspicion and doubt” and that is practised by fraudsters masquerading as men of science? Or is it something more celebratory, more magical?

I would answer that if the obscure and profound urges which an artist tries to bring to the surface cannot be considered as something festive and majestic by men of science, then he is doomed to be a fraudster, a terrorist, worthy of suspicion and evil – and we are still living in the Middle Ages. I have come to realize that writing is nothing other than puzzle-setting for an unknown participant – a puzzle about how one feels as a human being within a general picture. It seems that self-pity must be a strong incentive for the writer in order to go ahead with such a project. In reality, the whole process requires psychoanalysis. At the premiere of a film, rather than the audience asking the director why he made the film, the director should ask the audience, “Is there anyone in the theatre who can tell me why I did what I did?” I would say that the film is a child and you are its father. You see it live and mingle in an unsuspecting crowd; in some ways it looks like you, but you cannot do anything to change or reverse its fate.

Why is the shadow a woman?

In order to express the contradictory and unsatisfied nature of the magician’s existence.

Let’s talk about the burlesque cabaret scene, which is very sensual. Was this inspired by any films in particular? It rather reminded me of David Lynch ...

I had two things in my mind: the songs in the movies of popular Italian cinema, but mainly, the majestic scene of Luis Buñuel in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, where Fernando Rey, stunned to see his beloved one in a cabaret, dancing arrogantly for wandering tourists, is confused about whether he should feel hedonic desire or repulsion. In this scene I wanted to depict, through the singer, the protagonist’s lack of satisfaction and the aspirations that a man can place in another in order to give his own existence some meaning. It is possible that this kind of relationship commits people erotically. Lynch intensifies this, but he is more concerned by objects than people and despite coming from the performing arts, he tends to objectify his human characters.

Please discuss the significance of the street scene with the transvestites, along with, I believe, your cameo appearance. Is the artist a voyeur or a transvestite, who lives in a sordid milieu far from the bourgeois?

The street scene is the ultimate moment of general allegory of the film, in which the young man, played by the director himself, witnesses the tragedy of the leading hero. Throughout the film the magician plays various roles which prompt the audience to ask for clarifications. Is he a conjurer? Is he a father? Is he an imposter? Is he a transvestite? Is he honest? Is the shadow his ex-spouse or his daughter? Is he in league with his daughter?

I wanted to tell the protagonist's story through these multiple roles, but to stay at the level of only moderate allegory – moderate because I believe that allegoric films flirt with didacticism and that it would be unfair on my part to promote didacticism in a film with clear intensions and a sincere dialogue. Instead, I wanted to promote more of an existential discussion, which can be defined as follows: what dealings can this kind of artist have with an audience that is raised and bred on cheap fare? What place is there for an artist who wants to talk with sincerity in a world where science has imposed a compulsory optimism? At the party, will he not be considered a man of bad intentions whose aim is to spoil the “good mood”? Are not the guests – bourgeois nouveaux riches who have climbed to the top through indecent means – the real fraudsters, pedalling cheap optimism to cover up their mediocrity? Is not the modern age nihilistic? I intended the young man, who walks through these sordid streets and haunts and who is aware of all of this, to represent hope and resistance in this primeval battle between nihilism and culture.

Any thoughts on this dialogue from Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, where Belmondo, reading about Velázquez, says that “after fifty years, [he] could not paint anything definite... could not capture anything in the world except the mysterious exchanges that drive forms and colours to penetrate each other”? Is this close to the “essence” of cinema: an impressionistic medium?

Impressionism is a sincere approach and a possible solution. I say this in light of the fact that modern cinema has adopted a realism based on a misunderstanding about what realism is. Nowadays, as Wim Wenders correctly comments, the tendency to tell a story, any story, is on the wane. This is because we are slaves to a wrong view about realism. Nothing is permitted if it does not allude to current events – and when a film ignores them, it is considered out of time and place. Artists have been replaced by kinds of historical analysts. Just observe how many movies with great ideas are released but that lack any kind of “magic” because their heroes are restricted to behaving realistically, that is to say, conventionally (in terms of dress, reactions, decisions etc.). It takes courage to build heroes of the kind of Godard, Fritz Lang or Fitzgerald in literature. I hope we will find again such courageous artists.

What other awards has *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* won? Will this recognition help with future endeavours? What are your future plans and projects?

The film has won a total of twelve awards and has, to date, been included in thirty-nine official selections in festivals around the world. I hope the recognition from the IAFOR Open Film Competition will help my next film *The Spaceship* materialise. It is based on a script that I wrote four years ago. Unfortunately, I am having the same funding difficulties that I encountered with *The Man Who Fed His Shadow*. It has been preselected twice in the Greek funding programs I mentioned before and both times it has been disqualified at the final stage. Despite the recognition of the merits of the script and the success of *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* in international festivals, the funding regime in Greece remains obstinate.

Finally, how do you feel about the state of contemporary cinema, in particular the European art film? Which directors do you most admire?

Modern cinema, compared to the other arts, is at a disadvantage: it is enslaved by a censorship promoted by the big festivals. If one observes the awards given in renowned festivals, one understands that films are not judged aesthetically, but on their themes and politics (films made for humanitarian causes, for instance, etc.); it is obvious. I do not claim that it is bad to use the cinema for such causes – but there are specific festivals for such films. When this is done by original film festivals, they promote a generic style and this is bad. Paper can be used for writing novels as well as for printing fliers for political protests. This is exactly what I appreciated in IAFOR: an objectivity concerning the movie themes and a selection based on clear cinematographic and artistic criteria.

Of the modern film directors I like the most, there is François Ozon and Nicolas Winding Refn, as well as Lars von Trier, Michael Winterbottom and naturally Pedro Almodóvar.