

## Enzo Monteleone

### *Filming History*

Preceded by the screening of Enzo Monteleone's film *El Alamein* (2002)

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I have been invited to talk about one of the many possible ways of making movies. As you know, there is a personal story behind every film; perhaps they are all very similar in the end, but every project, from start to finish, is usually a personal journey for the director and producer, who have spent years in creating a film. When I was asked to participate in this meeting, I thought it would be interesting to talk about something concrete instead of discussing theory; to talk specifically about a film, from the initial concept, the initial idea, to the finished film. And I thought it would be interesting to tell you about the aesthetic and financial journey of a film I made two years ago called *El Alamein – La Linea del Fuoco*. I chose this film because there are a number of interesting things about it: it's a historical film, based on real events - the Battle of El Alamein in Egypt, North Africa during the Second World War; it's a war film and therefore a genre film; and it's also an Italian film. It may be that Italian cinema doesn't interest you as much as it used to but it's been years since films in Italy have tackled the war movie genre. The issue here is largely about finance and costs... In recent years there have been a number of hugely successful international war movies like *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Black Hawk Down*... They are all films with budgets ranging up to a hundred million dollars. The problem is that there is no one in Italy who can find a hundred million dollars for a movie – not Bertolucci, nor Tornatore, and they are the internationally best known Italian directors. Giuseppe Tornatore has been trying for years to make a film about the siege of Leningrad – the thousand day siege of Leningrad, a project that goes way back to Sergio Leone, who however died before he was able to make it. Giuseppe Tornatore had to stop work on the project, and now he's making an entirely Italian film in Italy. Anyway, the problem I had to face was the budget, though I know this is a problem most of us have to face – pretty much on a daily basis here in Europe. Hollywood can produce a huge range of movies of differing genres: from sci-fictions to epics like *Troy*, actions movies or war movies or political thrillers. The European film industry has instead the big problem of budget. So I really had to find a story that could actually be shot and that wouldn't just remain an unmade project because it was too expensive. So I wrote a screenplay that I thought was realistic both from a production and financial point of view. This is an important point we have to acknowledge, in the sense that anyone who writes a screenplay might have limitless imagination, and might be capable of inventing any kind of story, but then you come up against the hard reality of production costs. Don't think for a minute that I'm advising you to aim lower, or just stick to 'little stories' – no! We must absolutely keep looking for big stories, meaningful stories – but we have to remember that the basic factor, the economic factor, is very important. If you're really lucky you'll find an international producer who'll maybe invest a hundred million dollars or euros. But usually, European film has a very limited budget.

Anyway, it was also partly by chance that I came across the story of El Alamein. My knowledge of the story was more or less the same any else's, i.e. there was a big stand-off between Rommel and Montgomery, between the Germans and the English. Then I found a book in a second-hand book stall. It was the diary of an Italian soldier at El Alamein, explaining that there were not just British and German soldiers but also 60,000 Italians as well, and that the war in North Africa was basically a war between Britain and Italy, and that only in the second phase did Rommel and the Africa Korps intervene to help Italians in difficulty. So this book, and others I came across, were diaries, not history books. They were books written from memory, diaries by people who had actually been on the frontline. So I had the idea of telling a story that was not the official history of the famous generals, of Montgomery, the Africa Korps, the British Eighth Army and so on, but the story of a simple Italian soldier on the frontline. Italian soldiers, during the Second World War – you might be vaguely aware of this – were treated very badly, often abandoned by the generals, the commanders, by the political leaders. A famous example for this was the Russian campaign: when hundreds of thousands of men lost their lives; and the African campaign was in

some ways similar to the Russian campaign. In the past, already a few Italian films on El Alamein had been made: one in the 1950s, and one in 1968. They were very rhetorical films, and in my view they didn't really describe the horror and anguish of war, or the everyday life of an ordinary soldier on the frontline, in the trenches. After reading this book, I then discovered others of the same kind – diaries from the African campaign – and I began to realise that history books write a very different story; those men on the frontline are the only ones who tell us about what really happened. At this point, I got the idea of tracking down Second World War veterans, to meet those people face to face and get first hand accounts of their experiences, without all getting filtered by a book, a novel, a written recollection or a diary, just real flesh and blood men. This required research because as you know, when you write a screenplay on any subject, you must begin research in order to master the subject you're working on. So this decision to try and track down these veterans led to a desire to document their testimonies, partially because these men are now in their 80s and 90s; they are the last surviving custodians of these memories that in my view should be preserved. So I gathered a minimal crew, just three people, and travelled up and down Italy from north to south, looking for these veterans. I had them tell me about their experiences on the front and from these experiences the documentary *I ragazzi di El Alamein* was developed. The documentary includes archive footage from the 1940s Fascist repertoire which celebrates the African campaign as a great Italian victory as well as the veterans who actually fought that war – and they tell a truly different story. These testimonies were very important in the writing of the screenplay, because apart from describing the overall scenario of the situation, they provided me with explanations and gave me lots of ideas for dialogue and situations that we then put into the script. So today I wanted to show you a piece of the documentary beforehand, to let you see how the film progresses through its various phases from conception to finished film. So, we'll look at part of the documentary and then talk afterwards.

This was the beginning of the documentary which lasts about an hour in total. What struck me about these interviews was that these people always talked about very concrete things such as illness, food, dirty water – they didn't talk about politics, they didn't talk about the English, the Germans, Hitler or Mussolini, because for these soldiers who fought the war on the frontline the problem was survival, trying to stay alive each and every day and not about how to be a hero. I think that movies, especially Hollywood movies, have created a culture of war cinema, an imagery of the beauty of war, and most of all, the cult of the hero. But in fact war is horrendous – there are no heroes; there are only dead people and men who want to save their lives and get home. As you'll see, the people I talked to in these interviews showed me a whole other side of war. I'm lucky, as you are, to live in an age where we have no exposure to war, at least directly; the wars we see are those on TV. But people who have experienced war first hand remember it in this way. So this was a useful preparatory exercise for writing the screenplay because it showed me the direction I should take in order to dramatise this story, which is a story based on historical facts. The task I set myself as a screenwriter and director was, "I am telling a true story, so I don't want to take too many artistic or cinematographic liberties." It seemed that it would be a lack of respect towards those who had gone through all those dramatic experiences. Therefore, I wanted to be as realistic as possible, also because of my position on spectacular war movies. Hollywood movies have given us quite a lot of these recently, the most prominent one being Pearl Harbour. As you may know, Pearl Harbour, a 200 million dollar movie, is the most expensive film in history. In my opinion, this kind of cinema is pornographic, it makes pornography out of war, it makes it into a special effect, nothing more than a special effect. It completely lacks any sense of real life, of suffering, of the horror of war. So this preparatory work helped me to find a solution to the main problem: how to make a war movie today in Italy without a hundred million dollars. You might be interested to know that the film you will now see cost three and a half million euros and was shot in seven weeks. And I knew that this was the biggest budget I could ever expect to get. I also knew that the kind of cinema I could make as a director had to be a story about men, about real people. Of all the stories told to me by the veterans, the one that attracted me most was the story of an abandoned outpost – a sort of variation on the Gordon Douglas western, *Only the Valiant* (1951) which in Italy was released under the title of *The Outpost of the Lost Men*. This was because one of the biggest battles of the Second World War took place on the El Alamein front, so there were men lost and abandoned in the desert. This is what I wanted my story to be about, and this was achievable from the production point of view. Now, I don't know about other countries – probably in France, Germany or England they can afford to be more ambitious, but in Italy – sorry if I repeat myself – the budget problem is absolutely fundamental. My starting point was the veterans' diaries that I'd found, then the eyewitness

accounts, then the documentary, then I wrote the screenplay. The documentary was useful also because it enabled me to visit the places in Egypt where the battle actually happened. The images you have seen, the ones in colour, not in black and white, are those I had filmed during the scouting location trips. So I was able to see the actual sites where the battle of El Alamein took place. Later the film was filmed in Morocco, because Egypt is a difficult country to shoot in; Morocco, on the other hand, is very helpful to filmmakers. The main industry there is tourism and the second is filmmaking. The biggest of the Hollywood movies, from *Lawrence of Arabia* to *Black Hawk Down* to *Troy* and *Alexander*, were all filmed in Morocco. So the fact of having done the documentary in Egypt was a big help when I had to find the right locations. The documentary was also very useful in pushing the project of the movie forward because even my producer and the distribution company didn't really understand what the film was supposed to be about, from the visual point of view, until they saw the documentary. This was the progressive process. Now I want to show you few scenes of the film shot in Morocco.

As you have seen, a lot of the veterans' stories ended up in the film, above all the spirit of the soldiers on the front line, the everyday problems in a siege situation, like water, illness, the lack of adequate weapons, being generally ill-equipped and being pretty much forgotten by the high command. The idea was to be right there in the trenches with them, to experience their fear of living on a razor's edge, between life and death, to be alive one minute and to be turned to sand the next. Some of the dialogue was taken directly from things the veterans had told me – that ability to hear the sound of the shells before they landed, of the artillery fire. One of the veterans said that at a certain point he was able to distinguish those bombs that fell further away from those that were going to land right on top of them. The first thing you had to learn was to save your skin, and indeed this was the first thing our volunteer learned, after seeing the corporal being turned to sand. And there is the landscape naturally, the Qattara depression. Morocco also has the same kind of desert that exists in Egypt. However the big challenge was to recreate the everyday lives of the Italian soldiers on the front – in a specific zone of the front. Now I have to give you some historical background: El Alamein is a little village on the Mediterranean coast. In the coastal area there was an asphalt road and a railway, but the front ran south for 70 km to the Qattara depression, and that place was really Hell on Earth. These soldiers were positioned right in the deep South, a place you went to and never came back from. And in fact, on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, when the big battle began and the British broke through the Northern lines along the coast, the soldiers positioned at the North managed to somehow save themselves during the retreat. But those soldiers stationed in the South, where there were no carriageways, no roads – they were practically all wiped out or taken prisoner. When you are filming historical events you have to be as faithful to the truth as possible. It's also a form of respect for those who were involved in the tragedy. Making fiction out of war is very difficult. The cinema has done it ever since the times of D. W. Griffith and will continue to do so. The biggest risk is that you end up making entertainment out of war, and I think that we, who have the opportunity to make films and therefore reach a wide audience, should make it a matter of conscience to show the reality of war and therefore its horror. This film was made possible only because – and I'm talking in technical, not artistic terms – because I had written a script that was technically achievable, from a budget and shooting point of view. And this, unfortunately, is something that all of us have to bear in mind. The other films I've directed were almost always based on true stories. I made a film about the life of an Italian actor, then a film about a 1970s anarchist bank robber breaking out of jail, then the story of two Italian students in Berlin in 1961, who dug a tunnel under the wall to help people escape to the west. I've always chosen real stories, things that actually happened, historical subjects, you could say. And the problem I've always had to face concerns this fact of sticking to the truth, because when you are writing a screenplay you have to have some emotional interest. So in this war movie about El Alamein, I think the heart of the story lies with the lives of these soldiers. We grow fond of the characters, we develop sympathy for them. That motorbike takes us right into the trenches of the front and for two hours we live together with them in the trenches. In this film, just as some of the veterans testify, we practically never see the British, we only see their gunshots and the might of their weapons. We see them only on two occasions: when they launch the decisive night attack and their tanks go into action, and later when they capture a group of Italian soldiers during the retreat. So it is a threatening presence – they are never seen but this is almost more frightening, because we know they are there and that they might appear at any time. Another technical thing I want to point out, one that helped me a lot in the making of this film, is that the famous attack of 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1942, when the great battle of El Alamein began, was carried out at night basically because of the weather conditions;

it was too hot during the daytime – a searing heat, and furthermore in such a desolate landscape any kind of attack would have been identified immediately. So the British attacked at night, and as you can imagine this was a great help to me because the entire Eighth Army was hidden by darkness and this was the motivation for the night attack. Just as in the Western films, the Indians attack at night, and there are huge numbers of them. It only takes one arrow in the darkness to suggest how many Indians are about to attack. In the same way, the noise of the tanks moving in the darkness created a great feeling of tension. I point this out because I think that when you write a film you have to use all the means at your disposal, all the storytelling tools you can muster, to recount the events but at the same time create cinema. You'll have to forgive me if I keep going back to the topic of budget, but I think it is absolutely crucial – at least for we Italians it is crucial; when I talk with colleagues the main topic of conversation is always production costs and budget. From the production point of view, we have to be crafty in the construction of our stories – we have to be smart, very smart – if we can't get access to big budget productions then we have to be able to make big films with limited means. For me this particular adventure was very fruitful in this regard, in trying to find an accommodation between this story of ambitious scope and a relatively limited budget. A historical film naturally presents particular demands in terms of location, costumes and vehicles – a problem that doesn't exist in contemporary films. So in American and British films, all the vehicles, the trucks, the tanks, motorcycles, etc, are fibreglass replicas of the originals, but fitted with efficient modern engines. We, on the other hand, had original 1940s models. The trucks, the motorbikes the vehicles we used were genuine museum pieces. You can imagine the problems we had with these 1940s machines in the desert. This is the kind of problem you have to face when you decide to make a film with a historical subject. As I said before, you need to be sufficiently clever to get around all these problems and to somehow resolve them as much as possible during the script phase, because if you work your script out properly you can avoid loads of problems that would otherwise pop up on the set. Before becoming a director I was a screenwriter. When you write for other directors you perhaps have more freedom, since the problem of your script's achievability is, in this case, the producer's – he has to say this costs too much or you can't say that or maybe the director himself will say this isn't possible. Nevertheless, initially you have quite a lot of freedom, even within clearly defined limits. Whenever I'm writing for myself, however, I become the director and have to tackle this basic problem of filming the script. I can't write a script if I know that it can't be produced. It would perhaps be interesting to hear about the situation in other countries regarding this problem. All in all, it is really very difficult to do historical drama in Italy. In Italy we practically make only contemporary films, films about everyday life. It's difficult to tackle big historical themes and it is especially hard to do war films precisely because of their cost. So this film was a bit of a gamble. It was very hard to make – it took me three years to complete the film – but somehow we managed it in the end. I think this can be true for anyone who has ideas that in the beginning you think are all too difficult to be achieved. However, if you work on the script you'll find some way to do it. I don't know what your experiences are; perhaps you want to ask some questions...

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** I am a producer from Greece. My partner and I once made a documentary based on historical facts, with the research, the interviews, etc. And the question is this: I feel one is always tempted to think, "What if it were more spectacular, what if there was a bigger budget to make it into a full story, to allow for a larger scale?" Has this ever occurred to you? Have you ever been tempted?

**MONTELEONE:** Yes, at the beginning. Among all the books I read, diaries and so forth, I found the diary of a tank driver of the Ariete armoured division. The first person who speaks in the documentary is the sole survivor of the whole division, because the Italian tanks were known as 'tin cans' or 'flaming coffins' because they all caught fire, and when I read in this diary about the story of the division, and how the Ariete, was involved in the events of El Alamein, it was absolutely heartbreaking because they all died, except for one man. Now, from a visual and emotional point of view this is fantastically rich, but as an Italian, as a film professional working in contemporary Italy, I knew that a film with the Ariete armoured division, with tens or hundreds of Italian tanks, and on the other side the British and German tanks – it would simply never have been produced. For the simple reason that it would take a hundred million dollars of computer graphics to do it all. So I realised that a story like that would have been thrown out definitively. So in this way it is a kind of self-censorship. Or another example is a marvellous story, again from the Second World War, about the Italian submarines that entered the port of Alexandria and sank the British warships there. If this were a Hollywood movie, it would already have been made, but given European and



Italian production standards, it's much more complicated. As I said, Tornatore, who is one of the most powerful and internationally well known Italian directors, and who works for the Americans, because films like *Legend of Novecento*, *Malena*, etc. were American co-productions – not even he managed to get his Leningrad movie made – too expensive. However, Jean Jacques Annaud ended up making *Enemy at the Doors* so it is also a question of contractual power, economic power. I don't know what stage you are in your careers, but the bigger and more powerful you are, the bigger the films you'll be able to make. Of course, the issue of budget is absolutely central and I can say that in Italy, we do not make thrillers or gangster films or sci-fi films or films about ancient Rome, like *Gladiator*, and we are the homeland of gladiators. Though I do want to tell you something that seems like a joke but is perfectly true. A year before the film *Gladiator* came out, a producer friend of mine said, "I've got this great idea for a film. We'll do 'The Gladiators' in complete period style, but we'll shoot it all in five weeks in the ancient town of Pompeii." You need to understand that the Italian cinema of the 1950s invented the Gladiator genre; in Italy they were called 'Sandalonì' (Big Sandals) or peplum, but they were ridiculous films. If you watch them now they are just very cheap and ludicrous... Anyway, this Italian producer was still thinking with an old mentality: the idea was fine but the production system had stopped evolving sometime around the 60s. The following year, Ridley Scott made his *Gladiator*, with a one hundred million dollar budget and subsequent huge international success. The only advice I can give, then, is go to Hollywood! In fact, films like *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Godzilla* and *Independence Day* were made by a German director, a German director whose final thesis project at the Munich School of Film was a sci-fi film. If someone has that kind of imagination, and that kind of cinematic vision, I think the only way to realise his dreams is to become an American director. In fact, films like *The Day After Tomorrow* or *Godzilla* are not German or European films, they are totally American.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: I am learning Italian and I watch Italian television on satellite in Hungary, and I was taken aback by the extensive programming of historical films on TV, like *La guerra è finita*, *Cefalonia* and all the period drama. Does this not contradict what you say?

MONTELEONE: This is interesting, this is very interesting. While the Italian film industry nowadays goes towards contemporary drama or comedy, on TV we make a lot of historical stuff. *Cefalonia* is about World War II ... The problem is that since you have to deal with the broadcast companies they want a hero, a love story and an happy ending even in the most dramatic situation. A hero, a woman, a kid and, most of time, a priest.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: I saw something set in Ancient Rome...

MONTELEONE: Yes, *Empire* with Peter O'Toole, but that is American, these are co-productions with American networks...I made a movie for TV, for Canale 5, called *The Tunnel of Freedom*, it's set in Berlin, but we shot in Hungary, in Budapest, because of the budget of course, because in Berlin it's too expensive. The problem with Italian TV is always the budget, because the TV-movies are not that expensive, they are very low budget; they usually make two-part films, that is, two movies of an hour and a half each, but the shooting schedule is the same as for one movie, usually nine weeks. You know they used to go to Rumania, Bulgaria to cut down on expenses... But it is true that all historical stories like *Elisa di Rivombrosa*, *Orgoglio* on TV - it sounds very strange to me because they look like Brazilian 'telenovelas' from twenty years ago, now we discover the Brazilian ... Italian 'telenovelas' in the year 2000 and it's a big success. They are not expensive because these are series, they shoot so many episodes, in the same location. Even now they are shooting something here in Sorrento, a series called *Capri*, but they are shooting in Sorrento because Capri is too expensive. They started in the summer and they have been shooting since then and will finish at Christmas...Yes, *Perlasca* was shot in Hungary... and we are very smart in making things look better than they are. From the technical point of view, I used the same crew, director of photography, set designer etc., that I had used for *El Alamein* also for the TV movie that I shot in Hungary, but for *El Alamein* we had seven weeks shooting in Morocco and mostly one big location, that is, the desert. For *Tunnel of Freedom* I had nine weeks for two movies because they were 90 minutes each. The setting was Berlin in the sixties, lots of different locations in Budapest, bad, bad weather, so it was much more difficult to make the TV movie than the feature film. But it is true that historical films nowadays in Italy are made mostly for TV.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: I found it very interesting that your film deals with those who lost the war, of course it's very difficult to speak about the fascists in Italy, the 'bad guys' and we haven't seen the whole of your film, but we have seen so many World War II films about the winners, that it is interesting to see something coming from another point of view.

MONTELEONE: Unfortunately the Germans are the really bad guys, because they were the Nazis, they had the concentration camps, they did the Final Solution. The Italians were the 'not so bad guys.' We have to make a difference between the fascists, the fascist regime and normal people, because not all Italians were really fascist. The so called 'camice nere', black shirts, those were the real bad guys. I preferred to tell the story of normal soldiers, the ones who had to go to war, not through choice. I just chose to have a volunteer because I needed one idealistic young guy...The big mistake, the big problem with the generation of our fathers, is that they were born at the wrong time in the wrong place, they were people born in the Twenties and were 20, 22, or 25 during the war in Italy...Fascists came to power in 1922. Everybody born in Italy in that era was a fascist, the same way as we are all Catholics, just because we are born in Italy or another Catholic country.

What interested me more was to show the ordinary people. The real bad guys were the generals and the politicians. The thousands of soldiers who died were normal people, ordinary people who only wanted to go back home.

On the other hand, sometimes, it is very interesting to write a story, a script from the point of view of the bad guy. In gangster movies, say Scorsese's *Goodfellas* you're absolutely on the side of the bad guy or in *Casino*, you love De Niro, you are with him even though he is a gangster. In movies you can take the wrong side. The problem is to feel empathy. We have a gangster movie out in Italy, now called *Romanzo Criminale* which is about a band of gangsters in the seventies and eighties and it's quite good, a film about the 'bad guys' from twenty years ago...

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