

**Heidrun Schlee**

**on co-writing Gabriele Muccino's *Ricordati di me / Remember Me* (2003)**

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This lecture is called – like others you've done – Sources of Inspiration, which, of course, is a difficult subject matter, especially for a scriptwriter because you always have to work elbow to elbow with a director. You have quite a restricted range of inspiration, and it's not always desired. What you would maybe like to know is where the sources of inspiration lie. I'm German, so I'm very rational about this. I've never been hit by a flash of genius or inspiration. For me, inspiration is a tough job because I look for the sources, and try to find them by myself. For me, it's a lot of work. When I work on a certain plot, I read everything there is about it. The novels on my night table relate to it. I really get into this and very rationally search for my inspiration.

When I went through the SOURCES 2 documentations, I saw that mostly directors spoke about inspiration. I think it's the director who is inspired to choose a particular topic and make the film in a certain way. Usually I work on the storyline; I work on the idea with the directors. So when they asked me to speak about my sources of inspiration for this particular film, I was a bit shocked and embarrassed because this was perhaps the most unusual working situation I'd ever had in terms of inspiration.

When Gabriele [Muccino], the director, contacted me, we spoke about this. He told me he wanted to make a film about the plots we see: about ambition, a broken family, egotism, egoism in the nucleus of a family. And I said: "Okay, let's see what we can do about this." First he wanted to work this out and put it down on paper. The next thing that came to me was a scene-by-scene break-up of an eventual script with 257 scenes. No, there were more than 250. The film you see has 257 scenes, which, in a way, is a shock. I had never been in this situation that the action was already all worked out. He knew exactly what he wanted. He was coming from a film which was quite successful in Italy, so he had very strong ideas of what he wanted.

Obviously, as a scriptwriter, you wonder: "Where is my space, where is my inspiration?" This was quite difficult; it was not a re-write. Then I thought: What inspired him to call me to do this work? So I went through all the possibilities, and concluded that maybe it was because of the adult characters. He is very good at working with youngsters in lessons, because that's what he used to do.

The characters were all there. They had names. Even the dog had a name. They had their jobs. I had to work on this really strict regime of set-ups, so I went for the action. I said, "What should I do? Just do the dialogue?" But then I figured out that maybe I should be inspired by the characters, who actually weren't that clear-cut. They were doing things he wanted them to do, and I said: "So let's work all the way back, because I want to know why they do these things. I know I cannot change their action, but maybe I can change why they do it, and make it a little bit deeper."

Usually I start with the characters, unless, of course, we have a biblical theme like a death, which has to do more with humanity as a whole. So, he had a little crisis, there's a family. At this point, I would have started from the characters. But this time around, I had to start with the action and work out the characters because this was all fixed. My only inspiration, actually, was what was not there and then. So I tried to get inspired by what they suggested to me. I tried to work some depth into these characters, which was also very difficult because as you can imagine, with so many scenes, you cannot use much dialogue. When these characters speak, it's always very straightforward. What they think at one particular moment, they say. There are no little dialogue tricks you can play. There's no understatement. It's all right to the point. And then you have no time. I thought it would be a 90-minute film with 250 scenes. What does this give you per scene? Twenty seconds! And what was it all about?

Of course, I said I'm German, so the first thing I did was to calculate this. When I saw this break-down of scenes, I said: "Are you sure?" And then he said: "Oh yeah, I'm perfectly sure. Don't worry. It's going to be a bit longer, but I can handle this." I said: "But that's three and a half hours." "No, it's not."

So I went to see the films he had made before, and counted the scenes. This was true. Then I wondered how he did this. As you see, the scenes are never prepared. He zooms right into the characters with the camera. I'm not used to this. I usually prepare a bit of dialogue so we can speak about something else, because you want to say something else that you can play with. You can play with ambiguity, you can play with language. But in this case, we could not. Then he never leaves time to chill out because you're immediately in another scene. He never even leaves you time to think about what they said. So it can never be too complicated or too sophisticated because it has to sink right in.

For me, this was a problem because I'm used to working in a completely different way. I had to figure this out. The dialogue was quite interesting because it's not what they say – it's all on the surface – but how they say it. There were a few scenes where there was a terrible risk of being ridiculous because it's also outspoken. The worst scene for us that we worked on a lot is when Julia [the mother of the family] goes to the theatre director and says she's in love with him, and he says he's homosexual. That was very complicated because there's a risk that the audience would crack up laughing. You want them to smile but not laugh because involuntary comic language is terrible for a film.

Other scenes took some risks, for example, when Alessia [former love of father Carlo] proposes to him to go to the house by the sea: It's obvious what she is proposing. Usually in a film – I mean, she's a woman with children – she would leave the children somewhere. Against her motherhood, against anything, she has to propose to a man to have a sexual affair that afternoon because she is free. This could be very unpleasant. Usually you would have time to work out why she does this, but we had to do it all in one scene. We had to work very hard to not make her look trashy and to leave her motherhood intact.

I was really aware of the women in this film. This is another challenge. For me, this film was a challenge not only as a writer, but also as a woman. The women characters are always overdone. They scream a lot in these films, and they're always very hysterical. Obviously, that was a bit problematic for me. I knew I could not tone them down, but somehow – I don't know why – I tried to save them. This was another inspiration: saving some of the female characters here. I'll tell you how I did this.

Paolo's [the son] little girlfriend: in the beginning she was someone who was just playing with a kid, and there we have another cruel woman who just plays with a kid. I don't know whether it's my protestant moralism, but I didn't like this much. I said: "Let's make her nicer. Let's give her something." My first idea, which was of course too moralistic but the first thing which came to me, was that she's not from the same environment, she's not bourgeois. You understand this when you're Roman. So I said: When he brings her home from the supermarket, let's say she has to watch all her little brothers. It maybe excuses her a little bit. I have this social worker thing in this. Then I said: Let's let her have a handicapped brother, so she has to work a lot. He would not have the handicapped brother, but you have a little scene in which she's bathing her little brother. I tried to work on this, so she would not just be bitchy. This was her.

And then there's Valentina [the daughter]. I always wanted to figure out how far she would compromise. For me, it was a big difference as a woman. I said: "But I have to know this. She's seventeen years old. She could also be a virgin. How should the audience know?" So if these are her first relationships, she's terrible. I would not accept this as a woman. So we worked out that she had been burnt by a lost love before. That's why there's a scene with a man who is walking a dog. So at least she had a frustration in her life before, and she is not selling her virginity to some television star. I really insisted on this.

Another female character is Alessia, who hadn't really existed before. She was this little love affair from the past which comes back, and romanticism. But we never saw any of her home life. She existed solely in her function for Carlo. In the beginning, we never saw all this stuff in the house. It was not because Monica Bellucci played the role, because we didn't know this at that point. It was because I thought we should also know more about her, about another mother. Maybe strangely this is the character who says a

bit more about the feminine side because she actually has the guts to leave her husband in the end. I wanted to have this worked out, and we did.

There I had another social thing, which was cut; we did this before. We had a very cruel husband. We see a scene where he beats her [Alessia] up. Then he asks her to undress and stay in the bed as she always used to. But this was cut out. Later we're going to come to the cuts, which are also very important in this film.

This is about characters. I'm speaking mostly about characters because that was my job. Because there was a line which the director set, it's on the surface where depth lies. This is really true for these characters. I don't know whether these depths always come through, but with the limited amount of time and the rapid pacing of the action, this was quite hard. But I think we succeeded somehow.

In terms of my characters, I'm against poetical inspiration because I think in a film it's fake. Our sort of inspiration has to serve a certain aim, and so it's actually a very manipulated inspiration. We can do nothing with a poetical inspiration if it just stays that. It's wonderful, but sometimes it does not have a place in a film. I think we always manipulate our sort of inspiration to get somewhere. Maybe the only poetical inspiration that I, and of course Gabriele, got was that I read many times that these characters watch themselves in the mirror. They always watch themselves in the mirror at a certain point. It's not a metaphor. It's obvious what it is: it's their weakness, it's them, it's just the person.

All this mirroring immediately made me think about the family. For me it was hard to accept while I was reading this in the beginning. I said: "Okay, here is a family which is composed solely of selfish members. I can understand this, but there must be a time when they speak to one another, when they have some exchange." But they did not. He did not want this. Obviously he has a reason for his view of a broken family. So I said: "But they don't look like they belong together. Somehow you want to breathe some family spirit into them." And through all these mirror things and sometimes through reading – which I think in the beginning was more accidental – I said: "But there are a few things where they look common. There is something in common between the father and the son, and the mother and her daughter." And I said: "Instead of having this just alluded to accidentally, why can't we do this on purpose?"

Once again, you might have understood that I'm a terrible moralist when it comes to characters. I want them to have to pay for their actions or be punished by life. By the way, in Italy you say: "You get two pigeons with just one bean string." This is true for this. When they started to look more alike and we worked on them, the parents got punished for their own negative attitudes by their own flesh and blood. They felt this on their bodies. The selfish mother, who doesn't even realize what her children are going through, only studies her script, then we see her in a little offbeat theatre. Then at the party, when she sees what her daughter has got for ambitions, she is punished by her own behaviour. The same thing happens to the father because of his passive attitude. It starts to be really tough because his son has the same attitude, and doesn't know what to do with his life. Actually, they genetically pay for these defects with their flesh and blood. This comes through a little bit. We worked on this. Of course, if there were fewer scenes, this would possibly be one topic. You could make an entire film out of this. But here there are many topics, and, of course, not every one was that important to the director to develop. But I found this a very nice topic, which works here and there.

Anyhow, there is always this cynical twist that nobody learns his or her lesson. What happens when there is the accident? I always wondered why this accident was in the script. It's because they should get shaken, they should learn something. They just won't learn their lesson by betrayal or anything else. So when the father has the accident, we had long discussions about this, and he [director Gabriele Muccino] didn't want this. It would be a *deus ex machina* incident, and he didn't want them to learn their lesson yet, which, I find, also worked. In the beginning they're scared, but they're an unlucky lucky family, because the father is immediately okay and – as it was written and edited – you immediately hear the music, and the girl is once again doing her dance lessons, and all the others do what they have to do or think they have to do. They are still the same selfish individuals as they were before. This is about morality.

Oh, I forgot to tell my anecdotes about the inspiration and the sources. Of course, the first thing we did regarding all this showgirl business was to go to the studios where all these showgirls are that you see on Italian television. We went to all these big studios and talked to them, and watched all the shows they did. This shocked us; it made such a tough impression on us – nothing but flesh. We were really so shocked! When we came back from Milan by airplane, we both had this blank stare, and then we looked at each other, and said: “Are you shocked, too?” And he said: “Yes.” And we said: “We don’t want to have anything to do with this; we don’t want to get inspired by this,” because for us it was so bad.

When they were doing the tests for the show, the camera operator had a scrap of paper where he had all his shots written down. He dropped it, and we picked it up. It read: “face, ass, face, ass, face, ass.” When we looked at it, we felt really sick. They claim we wanted to make them look bad. I think we didn’t, because reality really was about fiction there. It was really unpleasant.

This was one thing. When you work so closely with another person, what sometimes happens – which is nice – is that one inspiration triggers the other. When you have such a day, it’s very good. Maybe it comes from a line, and the other immediately has another line, and you laugh. Once you have this confidence, maybe you can work better together because you know the spirit of the other one. Then we could throw around lines because we always worked together. We wrote every period, everything. We never separated. I often have this with a director: it becomes like a Cronenberg twin thing.

Once we’d gotten to know each other better, he asked me: “Do you mind working with music?” And I said: “Well, I don’t know. Really loud?” And he said: “Well, music. I get very inspired by music.” So we had certain records. One we had for the kids, which we said we have to change. And then we had the father, and that was mostly Leonard Cohen. Then we had the television stuff, which was other soundtracks. Sometimes we were writing with the music, and then we said: “Oh, this scene is terrible, this dialogue is awful, nothing will come out.” And then we said: “Why, but it should be good. What happened?” Then we laughed and said: “Let’s change the record; this is really terrible.” So sometimes we changed the music, and it actually was better. This never happened to me before – to work a month with music and change the records.

Another thing about this film is that there is a certain choreography in scenes, which I had also never done before. It’s not only that the characters were fixed – they had names – and the action was already done, but Gabriele is also someone who knows exactly how he wants to shoot a scene. He doesn’t know why because this is, I think, his director’s inspiration. So maybe I would write static scenes because I thought they should be that way, and he would say, “No, I have to move, this is all moving, this has to be very fast.” This also had an influence on the dialogue and on what would happen in the scene because sometimes he saw it moving already. Everything is done with the doors, with the telephone calls, and there is never silence because even the silence has its own choreography: you always have a radio, a phone. We had this from the beginning because Gabriele wanted it this way. Then we always had to write: “the doors, the corridors.”

I think this works very nicely in the scene when Valentina gets the phone call from the guy from the studio and learns that she has not been taken after the screen test, and the father wants to call his ex-love. Here this all works very well because you see the choreography of this family. Gabriele also knew how he would shoot this. He wanted something moving, and I said: “But what is moving in a telephone call? There is nothing worse than a telephone call.” And he got this in a movement, and something else comes out. For me, telephone calls are always a drag unless you can make something really good out of them, but this is really, really difficult. In fact, when I write I always say: “Okay, there are telephone calls where you want to see only the one person, and the other one is only a voice. Or maybe you don’t even hear the second voice, but get it from the reaction of the person calling.” That’s the first thing I ask when I see all these telephone calls: “Do I see the other line?” And then: “Do I always see this?” I don’t like it if you see it only when it’s useful and not the rest of the time. Of course, you can cheat a little here and there. But here the script was full of telephone calls, and we decided to see the counterpart.

Gabriele also wanted these phone calls to have movement. When the two girls are crushed with disappointment after the screen test, they start making calls. Of course, these were stupid calls, but Gabriele wanted them to have movement. It seems silly to say this now that you've seen the result, but we had to work a lot on this because we couldn't figure it out. They were always long. You always saw too many people. And then he always had them cross, and it was like one said the line of the other who was calling. So this worked because he wanted this short. But however we tried it, they always got long because this other guy had to give the answer, and it was terrible. So this trick did work. And it's a movement, so there's not too much on the telephone.

Another thing the director was very sure about is obviously also the theme of the film. He wanted every character to say at least once: "How do you find me? What do you think of me?" We knew we had to use it. And we used this, I think, in a comical way. We had to put this in and find the right spot. There the source of inspiration was the line, and trying to figure out where to put it and where it would fit best. The same is true when everyone in the story says (this came up while we were writing, and then we adjusted everything else): "I'm better than you think I am. I'm gonna show you." These are actually exactly the same. This came out then. So they are repetitive, but in a way that shows they are a family, in a cynical way. Because of their insecurity, their ambitions, and their having the same line, they belong to one another.

Another thing which the film is about and which I never figured out is whether or not these guys have talent. That's what it's about. But maybe it's not about whether they have talent. Could you tell as an audience whether Carlo could be a good writer? Is she a good actress at this little theatre? Maybe it's not that much about talent. That bothered me in the beginning: Do they have talent or not? So we discussed this, and decided the important thing is that they get their chance. So in way, even if only in a tiny way, they get their chance. It's not important if they have talent. For Valentina this is different. She does have talent, which is obvious if we want to recognise this as talent. Of course, this is the provocative aspect of talent in this story.

Where I also had some problems is that they are like a middle-class family – a father who wanted to write, a mother with acting ambitions. In the end, they sit almost adoringly in front of the television and watch their daughter. I would have a nervous breakdown if I had a daughter who did this. I mean honestly, how can they accept this? Maybe it's because their daughter's success makes up for their shattered dreams in a cheaper way. So, I accepted this. It still astonished me that no one criticised this. But then, it's the daughter. Maybe it's the only time they accept her and her weaknesses.

Maybe I should say something about the structure of this film because it looks like it doesn't have any. Of course, you have your turning points, you have your twists. But in such a long, episodic film, I didn't think we would control it this way; I didn't think we would structure it this way. Gabriele's last inspiration was to add the voice-over, which I don't think was necessary. But he thought it added something, like an appendix, a novel or something of this family saga. He wanted to do this. So we had to look for spots where we could add it. We didn't know what kind of voice-over. He knew that he liked the introduction, which actually comes after the exposition of the characters. This is okay because it's logical. But then we also chose the other points. And strangely, maybe by instinct at this point, we chose them at the turning points, where they introduce another act. Obviously here it would be two main acts. We have a little exposition of a character in the beginning, and then we have the little ending, which I call the pigtails because it surrounds all the rest. Actually it is a two act, and the exposition of character because if you check where the voice-over is, it's exactly in these spots. We figured out the voice-over would be best there. So maybe it was more reason and a bit of experience than purely instinct. So in a way, it is a bit structured.

The film's cuts are very interesting, too. Some people would think this [the film] is all my work, but the funny thing is, it's not. It's very similar, however. There's a scene where Valentina succeeds in going for the big guy at the television station. In the gym, she meets her friend, but doesn't tell her because she wants to keep it to herself. This is the version you see. But actually we had them both standing naked under the shower after their dancing lesson. Valentina confesses to her friend, who is mad with jealousy.

They beat each other up under the shower, and throw shampoo at each other. This was really tough; they had a physical fight. But this was cut.

Then when Carlo is in the hospital, we wanted some elements of real life. Actually we had written this scene with an old man behind them who dies. So there was a sense of urgency, and she always says to him: "Don't look! Don't look!" I was fond of this scene because the accident had had no effect on their selfishness. But it was cut. It was also violent. Strangely there has been a lot of self-censorship of violence, including psychological violence. For instance, the scene when Alessia's husband beats her up as I mentioned before. This is another scene which disappeared. I don't know why, but I think it has to do with violence, or that Gabriele wanted to keep this away from this film.

This brings us to environment, because you don't actually have the environment around the characters. This was difficult, too. For the adults, you have only a fake environment of a political party, which obviously does not exist, but we can imagine who this is and what this means for Italy. But they are their own environment. We never have an external influence on these characters, and that makes it very hard. We could never describe them through their environment because they never match and they're never the exact contrary of it. There is no clash with society in something that surrounds them or with other people. When she says to Carlo: "You could not have slept at a friend's. You don't have friends." - see, we never see them with friends. It's the same with Julia. She has this friend who gets her the theatre job, but this friendship seems to have no meaning in her life. Actually it was all in what they said and how they behaved in this moment. It's really all played out, which is difficult.

*Ricordati di me* comes out on the 12<sup>th</sup> November [2003] in France. It was at the London Film Institute, it won the audience award at the Sundance Film Festival. It's been successful. There was a lot of anticipation about this film because Gabriele made a film before it called *The Last Kiss*, which is all about thirty-year-olds who are not exactly bourgeois, or are bourgeois but wish to drop out of life a bit. He works around these characters, which had a lot of appeal to young people. But those who liked *The Last Kiss* are not very fond of this film, and the other way around. Obviously in *Remember Me*, he deals with adult subject matters, and maybe it was wise under these circumstances to remove the violent scenes, which were elements of real environment that might have been disturbing – not so much to the audience, but also to Gabriele at some point. He was very tempted to include these scenes because these were his ideas. Everyone would have thought they were mine, but in this case they were not. But then he censored himself. Maybe this was okay. However, I was surprised at some of the scenes he included that we were not so sure about. There were courageous things I didn't think he'd include such as the scene of Paolo masturbating, which is quite explicit. I didn't think he would do it, but he did. This is also very different from his other characters, so it's not true when they say he's copying *The Last Kiss*. It's different, it's growing.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: Did the script change after you began shooting?

SCHLEEF: The cuts I mentioned and other small things in terms of cuts.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: But the day-to-day never changed in the script?

No, the problem is how you see it: It's written. If you change one little thing, it's not like twenty scenes break down on you, but 120 come barrelling toward you like a train. When you get into these operations, it's really tough.

We took out another violent scene: After the birthday party, which ends in a cloud of marijuana smoke, Paolo is furious and runs to the other party, where the girl is. They're all slam dancing and he joins in. Then he gets into a fight. This was also Gabriele's idea, but then he censored it. The problem, I think, is that these things were so tight on action and movement and so precisely choreographed that you have to be very careful what you take out. Most of the cuts he decided on beforehand so he didn't shoot them. He did shoot the shower scene, but he didn't like it, so he took it out. But I think he did this for the same reason: it didn't add anything new to the story.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: Have you ever been on set during the shoot?

SCHLEEF: Yes, but as a writer, I'm not fascinated with being on set. I usually go for the last few days, but this is a matter of courtesy and solidarity, of course. And as a writer, you really don't have anything to do there. You stare, you're curious. You're always somehow in the way, which isn't very pleasant.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: Have you ever noticed any big differences between the directors and the way they direct what you've written?

SCHLEEF: Yes, as a writer you always do. Of course, they're always different. You're surprised. It can happen that you're very shocked. This has also happened to me. And then you can be pleasantly surprised. But I'm not a writer who really sticks to the script, not even in my first experience. You're really shocked if you expect to see exactly what you wrote. This can't be, and not only for the director. The script could be a good source of inspiration on the set. So when a scene is well written, I'm not offended if it's not my lines. If the actors do something better because the script inspires them to come up with something else – which sometimes happens – it's inspiring because you're astonished by your own work. I like it when my lines inspire them to come up with new lines of their own. Of course, sometimes they cut things I'm fond of, but it's the director. So we have a very particular status in this, especially in the ending. It's kind of a Freudian thing: the director has to kill the author, I think. It's always like this. If the film is bad, it's also the screenwriter's fault. If the film is good, it's always the director who is applauded. This is my experience.

End