



## INTERVIEW WITH ALAIN UGHETTO

We had the chance to exchange with the director Alain Ughetto following the selection of his film *No Dogs or Italians Allowed* at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam. Awarded by the Annecy Festival Jury Prize, the animated film tells the story of the director's Italian grandparents at the beginning of a twentieth century in perpetual change. Through this moving story, memory passes from hand to hand.

**In your film, languages are very porous, we understand Italian without speaking it, through gestures and intentions. What is your link to French and Italian?**

My grandmother wanted to be more French than French people, so I never heard Italian at home. I went to French school; I did everything in French. Except for my name, nothing bound me to Italy. During family dinners, when we heard about Italy, I saw my father's eyes shine. But he didn't speak Italian and my own link to the language was limited. I was more interested in Italian cinema – with subtitles – or Italian literature – through translations. That's why I'm happy to go back to it today.

I am from the second generation. When I went to Ughettera in Piedmont to see if there were any Ughetto, I met many. I meet Ughetto everywhere now! And what surprised me most was that there were many cars with French plates. I wondered what they were doing here. Some of them had bought a second home, others were retired, they were people who, like me, had skipped a generation and returned to Italy. It had somehow grown into a smooth process.

In my grandmother's time, Italians were frowned upon, they were the scoundrels who pulled knives over nothing. It was a different time and that's why she hid herself, hid her Italian side.

Now I'm going to Banon, where a lot of people have asked me to come because they are from small villages around Ughettera.

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**The xenophobia your ancestors were victims of must have left some scars. Did the initiative come from them, or were you the one who first wanted to interview them?**

The transmission came late. You can only do this work when you are at peace. They have lived through wars, misery... And those who are hungry think only of that: how to eat, how to drink. I am at peace; I can do research. I wanted to know where we came from. This silence was strange to me: what was there to hide?

There was in fact nothing to hide but they refused to talk about the war. My father used to tell me "What do you want me to say, it's the past, it's only trouble". For our parents, the best way to protect us was to not say anything. They didn't want us to worry. But I wanted to get to the bottom of this.



I was intrigued as soon as I looked at the genealogy. The whole family was naturalized French before the Second World War. Italians became French and a few months later, Mussolini invaded four French departments, including the place where they had settled in. The tragedy was already written. I wondered how they had lived through it. By investigating with brothers, sisters, cousins, all those who had known Luigi and Cesira, I was able to recreate their journey through France.

A book by Nuto Revelli, Italian resistance fighter and sociologist, was the starting point for the film. In *Il Mondo dei Vinti* (the world of the vanquished), he gathered testimonies of peasants who were the same age as my grandparents and lived in the same area. It's such a strong and rich testament when they speak in their own words about the misery and the war. That's when I realised there was a film to be made. And then the machine started working.

**How much of the film is fiction? The story about the bicycle that creates electricity, for instance.**

Everything is true! In the testimonies I received,

I was told that in Paradis, there was no electricity and that this bicycle system had solved the problem; they had to take turns to have light. Knowing my father, he would tinker with something for sure! As for the part of fiction in general, I would say yes and no. Even a historian, in his reading of the facts, makes links between events. In a film, everything is false because it is many staged shots blended, but the film as a whole is true. All these lies form a truth! [laughs] And of course, there is a Chinese whispers phenomenon. For example, when the word spreads that dollars grow on trees in the United States, it was sterling at that time. But then it would have been necessary to explain what sterling was. For the sake of comprehension, we make little lies or at least an interpretation of the story. In this scene, what is important to understand is the part of the story where they lose everything at sea.

**You dedicate this film to the exiled. To what extent is your film both a personal testimony and a universal message?**

My goal was to bear witness, to pass on my family history. First for myself, to understand where I came from, and for my children. Then I realised that my family history spoke to a whole bunch of generations, before and after me. My children hear about Ukraine today. For them, the news is distressing. Migrants have a terrible life, and given the welcome they receive, we should open up a little, remember our history. I wanted to be as sincere as possible, to bear witness without being moralistic.

Luigi and Cesira are a couple which came together almost 160 years ago. They lived through three wars and Spanish flu epidemic that killed more people than the war. They remained standing, proud, dignified: it is a fabulous example.

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**They are truly resilient characters...**

Yes, partly because it is an intimate struggle. How can we ensure that our children have a better future than ours? That's the role of parents, it's painful not to be able to do that.

**Does your film also target a younger audience?**

I didn't ask myself that question. In fact, the most important thing for me was not to be dull!



I meant to tell a family story, and in my family, we laugh and cry. But we also laugh! I wanted to mention everything, including death, which is sad but natural. The dead are always by our side, in the beginning there is pain, but we then remember the good times. It was important for me to keep the oral memory going. You remember your parents, you remember your grandparents a little, but you don't remember your great-grandparents at all. All this is mixed up in the Great History. I wanted to preserve the memory of these family moments that I was told, the spoken memory. Putting it on film is a way to hold on to it.

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**On the topic of oral memory, we learn a lot of things in your film that are not recorded in history books, the way in which the fascists recruited on construction sites for example. Is this based on your father's testimony or on a documentary work?**

My father didn't want to talk about it, but I needed to know. One day, I invited him to a restaurant with a friend. I told this friend that at some point, I was going to ask him about the war and at that moment, she would have to ask him a question. For an hour, he told us some harsh, abominable things. At the end, I had written everything down and I was happy that he had confided in me, but at the same time, I felt guilty. I said to myself: he's going to spend a night with his eyes wide open for sure.

It must have felt terrible to stir up these memories.

**Can you tell us about your next project?**

We are still in the writing phase now, but we would like to work on child labour... **You love working on some very cheerful issues!** [laughs] Yes, I love it because I find it easier to make people laugh about complicated subjects! It's typical of Italian cinema. I'm thinking of *Ugly, Dirty and Bad* (Ettore Scola), *The Easy Life* (Dino Risi) or *The Scopone game* (Luigi Comencini). The Italians are very good at taking a very harsh story and making us laugh all the way through. I find it a magnificent beauty and elegance. As I had this Italian root, I told myself that I had to extend it in the way I made the film.

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**As you said earlier, your link to Italy was forged rather through your admiration for Italian literature and cinema than through language or family tradition.**

Yes, when I saw *Ugly, Dirty and Bad*, I told myself that if one day I made movies, I would love to do something similar! There is an incredible richness in Italian literature and film. Italy is a being that vibrates inside, something very strong. At the beginning, for me, it was a country of cousins, friends and ice cream scoops. Today it's much more. I write and read Italian. Art has allowed me to fall in love with Italy again, with Fellini, Scola, all these artists.

## What does stop motion allow you to do that animation does not?

It's passing down a knowledge from hand to hand. My grandfather made his tools with wood and iron. My father used to go to Castorama (hardware store) to buy his tools, but he built his own house. And he passed it on to me. It made sense for me to be drawn to stop motion, where all the characters are made from scratch: the heads are made from elastomer (synthetic rubber), the hands from resin, the kneecaps from iron, you must play with the clothes and find the right scale effects... It's a great moment of tinkering. I found it interesting to tell the story of Luigi and Cesira with many little hands working on the project, as little hands had made the dams back then. This team came from Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and Portugal. We made a little Europe in our studio where everyone brought their culture and their strength. I was working with young people like you! The filming was a wonderful human adventure.

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**You chose Ariane Ascaride to do the voice of your main character Cesira. Can you tell us the reason for this choice and your way of directing?**

We don't do post-synchronisation; we do the voices first and then the animators adapt the animations to the voice's intention. It's done in reverse. I heard Ariane say in an interview that her father didn't want her to speak Italian, and I found the same childhood experience echoing in my mind.

I thought she could lend my grandmother her voice, that it would give her presence, strength and experience. Ariane already had a series of drawings that replaced the shots with dialogue running underneath. She threw herself in the game even though she had never done anything like this before.

I have a funny anecdote: at the end of a screening, a young woman said, "we all dream of having a grandmother like Ariane Ascaride"! I sent it to Ariane who replied "Awesome!" and signed Ariane Cesira. [laughs]

**So, you were able to meet your audience: what did this experience mean to you? What were the feedbacks?**

It was quite unanimous: everyone liked it. I found people I hadn't seen for years who sent me very kind messages. I also presented the film abroad: in Japan, in Sydney, in Korea. In Belgium, for example, the story is a bit different: the Italian immigrants were more involved in the mines than in the dams, so they don't have the same memories, different images - like the black faces of the coals. In Belgium, I met ladies who had seen this sign "no dogs or Italians", who had experienced it. It is moving. But the most touching thing is the young men and women bringing their mothers or grandmothers to the cinema, almost as a gift. At the end of the screening, grandmothers had teary eyes! It is a wonderful gift to see this transmission.

Interview by H el ene Le Corre and Pauline Blache on February 27th, 2023 for the Alliance Fran aise d'Amsterdam

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