

CINECENSURA

FILM REVISION AND CUTS: CHANGES AND RETOUCHES

by *Maurizio Negri*

Italian law n° 938 of 20 December 1949 states that any film intended for public screening (features, shorts, cine newsreels, advertising etc.) is subject to authorisation, issued through a ministerial decree, in accordance with the terms and standards established by subsequent modifications and additions provided for in law n° 161, 21 April 1962.

The decision as to which films are granted authorisation for public screening is made by commissions set up for the purpose, made up of representatives designated according to a series of specific criteria, set forth in the law itself.

First degree commissions may grant authorisation for all categories of audience without age restrictions, or restrictions for minors below the ages of 14 or 18 (16 under the old legislation). Naturally, in cases where the film is denied authorisation or should viewing by minors be restricted, there is the possibility of appeal, with any changes being requested or suggested by the commission or decided upon autonomously by the film's producer or director.

Lastly, should the works presented for revision not succeed in obtaining authorisation even after going to appeal, it is possible to submit them for a new inspection, having replaced the title and certain sections of scenes or dialogue, as long as the changes made clearly show that it is a different cut than that already reviewed (art. 11 Presidential Decree DPR 2029 of 11 November 1963).

However, over time this legislation underwent changes and variations due to various measures which in effect repealed the previous provisions set forth in the laws and regulations.

For specific information regarding these legal provisions, visit the detailed section on the examination of the laws and decrees regulating the film industry.

At this point it is appropriate to recall a memorandum written by the General Director for Film Nicola Borrelli (dated 13 January 2010) who decries the increasingly frequent practice of resorting to second, third and often further re-cuts of cinematic works "due to the attempt, on the producers' part, of obtaining, sooner or later, for the purposes of greater potential for exploitation, a loosening of the restrictions placed upon the film by the revision commission (from an 18 certificate to a 14 certificate, to no restriction at all). Now these attempts by businesses generally take the form of making a few, indiscriminate cuts, but enough to be able to consider the version presented *new* or *different*".

The General Director continues in his memorandum, reflecting upon the risks which are run in the absence of any clear legislation: "On one hand, many films undergo a gradual, unnatural artistic distortion as a series of changes are made in quick succession, inspired by nothing but the wish to make them available to a wider audience, but which merely result in altering the film haphazardly, sometimes making it incomprehensible; in a short space of time three, four or sometimes more versions of the same film are created, and it ends up losing its *identity*, for legal purposes and for the purposes of bureaucracy and even of regulated television broadcasting."

Now, with the exception of a few cases, it is clear that the process described is mainly linked to the prospect of broadcasting filmic works through television channels (art. 15 of law 223/90 states that "films rated 14 cannot be broadcast either wholly or in part before 10.30pm and after 7.00am", and section 11 of the same law states, "in any case films which have been denied authorisation for public broadcast or screening or which have been restricted for viewing by those aged 18 or above must not be broadcast").

It is equally clear that every effort is made to obtain authorisation with no age restrictions, since broadcasting a film in the early evening will undoubtedly have a greater impact on audience figures and therefore will boost its competitiveness against

other programmes on other channels (it is worth briefly recalling how important audience share is for obtaining and assigning advertising space, among other things).

This practice encourages indiscriminate changes to the integrity of the original work, sometimes to the extent of subverting its meaning and betraying or even altering the filmmaker's concepts (a danger to which the aforementioned memo by Mr. Borrelli refers).

Naturally, in this case we are referring to "auteur" films, leaving aside for the moment works of pure entertainment or interventions for simply streamlining the film, which have little or no impact on the comprehension or integrity of the work.

The most blatant and notorious case was that of Luis Buñuel's *Belle de jour* (1967), a film which upon its release was restricted to age 18 and over, and was approved with no cuts. In 1983, RAI submitted a request for a second cut, suitable for television broadcast; the "negotiations" with the revision commission for this version led to around 30 metres of film being cut. Some of these cuts were simply made to shorten the film, and altered the original work only partially and not particularly significantly. However, two cuts did in fact risk distorting a fundamental element of the Spanish director's intentions. Namely, the scene in which the main character refuses communion, included as a flashback while she is climbing the stairs to the brothel for the first time; and the other flashback – in the same situation – in which as a child, she ignores her mother's calls as a plumber caresses her knee.

Subsequent copies of the film issued on VHS or DVD include the same cuts made for the television version, thus making it difficult and nigh on impossible to view the work in its entirety; it is not clear whether this was done out of convenience or necessity.

Another interesting case is that of the film *Lola Montès* (1955) by Max Ophüls. It was presented to the commission on 20 January 1956 in its original version, and was approved for public screening with no age restrictions; meanwhile, the dubbed version submitted on 3 February the same year was restricted to age 16 and above. The motivation given was that the situation of the character which inspired the film (a real person, a famous ballerina known as Countess Maria Dolores of Lansfeld, who was mistress to various historical figures, from Liszt to Dumas and even Ludwig 1st of Bavaria) represented a "continuous chain of events in the free life of the protagonist". At last, on 27 January 2006 a new submission for revision was presented for a re-cut, justified by the fact that the criteria stated fifty years previously had dated somewhat. Yet this latest version is 31 minutes shorter than the original, and has removed or shortened many of the sequence shots which are the expressive and artistic characteristic of Ophüls.

The Night of the Iguana (1964) by John Huston tells the tale of a former pastor-turned-travel guide, accompanying an all-female bus tour to Mexico. He is fought over by a teenage girl and two older women, before finally finding his inner peace with a hotel manageress. Presented to the board on 17 September 1964, it was given an 18 certificate; however, the second cut, presented on 4 December 1987 for the purposes of TV viewing, was approved unconditionally, but with 475 metres of cuts. All of the scenes in which the defrocked priest expresses doubts, perplexity and remorse about his new vocation were cut out, detracting remarkably from the original spirit of the work.

Stanley Kubrick was undoubtedly one of the most scrupulous filmmakers, with an almost obsessive attention to detail, to the specific rhythm of the edit, and to sequences which must not be open to any interpretations other than those which he had in mind. It is hard to adapt, cut or thin out his films without running the risk of misrepresenting or corrupting his original ideas. Yet, in various attempts to obtain permission for television broadcast, he has been one of the most targeted and ill-treated film directors. A mention of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) shall suffice (leaving aside other Kubrick films). Two versions were awarded an 18 certificate, but the film was eventually approved for television broadcast only after an appeal to the TAR (the *Tribunale Amministrative Regionale*, or Regional Administrative Court), which conversely found highly positive values in it (the violence provoked by the rules of a violent world), thus lowering the restriction to persons under 14 years of age.

Much heavier changes were made to *The Shining* (1980), and were intended to completely remove any restrictions so that the film could be broadcast during prime time. The conditions (which, it seems, were not obligatory but were decided upon autonomously), were to cut some 608 metres of footage. The result is that the nightmares caused by isolation and loneliness were softened or removed altogether. After these changes, the film seems to be substantially different in terms of its underlying implications. If a director decides to convey anxiety and turbulence through sequences which may, for some viewers, be repulsive, the intention is clearly for certain themes to be filtered through the inner workings of the receptors. Naturally, while the most vulnerable viewers must be safeguarded, the question remains whether it is more appropriate to maintain the integrity of the filmmaker's ideas, or to forego television broadcast altogether.

With the exception of *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964), all of Pier Paolo Pasolini's films have had to struggle before being approved for television. Exceptions to this are *Mamma Roma* (which, bizarrely, was awarded a 14 certificate right from its first release in 1961, and therefore did not require any further appeals), and *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975), which never managed to obtain anything but an 18 certificate, despite attempts to get around this obstacle by using a complex expedient of filters (which in actual fact temporarily gained it a 14 rating, which was later rescinded after ministerial organisations filed an appeal to the TAR).

Accattone, on the other hand, was rated 18 upon its release in 1961; this was reduced to 14 in the second cut (1972), which eliminated 82 metres of film in total; while the final version (2008), with a small 15-second cut, was approved for universal viewing.

A more complex situation developed with *La Ricotta* (*Curd Cheese*), an episode which is part of *Ro.Go.Pa.G.* (1963), a film directed by Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Pasolini and Ugo Gregoretti. Pasolini was charged with blasphemy and ultimately given a four month suspended sentence, for contempt to the State religion. The trial resulted in various misadventures (the prosecutor had requested a one year sentence without parole, which was the maximum for this sort of crime). However, a second edition (1978), renamed *Laviamoci il cervello* (*Let's Have a Brainwash*), was approved for universal viewing, following some brief, insignificant cuts to Pasolini's episode.

Uccellacci e uccellini (*The Hawks and the Sparrows*, 1966) jarred with the severe standards of the ministerial commission's censors. They did not approve the film for viewers under the age of 18; this was motivated by, among other things, the "close-up shots of the vagrant woman's labour", the "sequence in which the young prostitute lures" first the father and then the son, and the "references to the use of contraceptives". The appeal to this sentence was recognisably written by Pasolini himself; the result was that without any changes, the film was granted a 14 certificate instead, and then went on to be shown on prime time television (1993) with no further problems, after a simple, insignificant cut of 3.5 metres.

Naturally, the films in the so-called "Trilogy of Life" series met with difficulties. *Il Decameron* (*The Decameron*, 1971) was eventually granted a 14 certificate, but with the elimination of the entire Masetto episode along with other cuts, totalling 391.7 metres.

I racconti di Canterbury (*The Canterbury Tales*, 1972) was initially denied authorisation for any kind of audience; however, after an appeal it obtained an 18 rating. This was followed by a lengthy legal battle, in which every effort was made to confiscate the film definitively, despite widespread recognition of the work's artistic merit. In the end, in 1988 it was granted authorisation for broadcast as part of the late night schedule. *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* (*Arabian Nights*, 1974) met with the same fate, but with some 1023 metres of cuts.

Each of these cases shows how, in one way or another, all the films mentioned underwent deformations which in most cases corrupted, to all effects, the integrity of the original work and therefore of the auteur's philosophy in making it.

None of the great directors was immune to this practice, which was often dictated solely by the desire for greater commercial exploitation. Films by Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Marco Ferreri, Luchino Visconti, Mario Monicelli and many other recognised "greats" ran into problems. Naturally, this practice of appealing to subsequent cuts, in order for a film to be approved for television broadcast, did not concern only art-house films. By citing the maturation of the

audience's sensibilities, due to the time which had passed since their first release, the "execrable" pseudo-documentaries made about wild neon-lit nights which flourished in the early Sixties could later be screened with no cuts whatsoever. However, perhaps the most curious example is that of films which were, upon first release, considered "damned". Just one example is Salvatore Samperi's *Malizia* (Malicious, 1973), the sexual initiation of a young, underage boy with an uninhibited, provocative housekeeper in an upper-class household. But above all, *Quel gran pezzo dell'Ubalda tutta nuda e tutta calda* (Ubalda, All Naked and Warm, 1972): following its initial 18 rating in 1972, in 1990 it was authorised without age restrictions (but with cuts of around 133 metres).

The number of Italian and foreign feature length films which were initially restricted and later submitted for revision with a request for a re-cut totalled, between 1960 and 2013, 1183 Italian films and 976 foreign films:

	ITALIAN	FOREIGN
1960-1969	59	12
1970-1979	89	67
1980-1989	170	144
1990-1999	507	478
1990-1999	358	275

Maurizio Negri was born in Varallo Sesia in 1943. His involvement in cinema began when he was still a student, through various projects, including seminars. He began his career in 1965 as researcher and writer for the Schedario Cinematografico film directory, first in Milan and later in Rome. He has worked as a freelance journalist and as a reporter for numerous daily newspapers and periodicals. He is former National Secretary of the Centro Studi Cinematografici (CSC – Centre for Cinema Studies) and of the Federazione Italiana dei Circoli del Cinema (FICC – Italian Film Club Federation).