

CINECENSURA

JACOPETTI AND CENSORSHIP

by Luca Martera

Gualtiero Jacopetti is one of the most unusual and eccentric characters in Italian cinema. The cineaste-adventurer, born in Barga (Lucca) in 1919 and died in Rome in 2011 at 92 years of age, was the innovator, if not the inventor, of satirical film journalism in Italy, besides being recognized as the godfather of mondo-movies with the film manifesto *Mondo cane* made in 1962 with Franco Prospero and Paolo Cavara.

Passed off as documentary investigations, Gualtiero Jacopetti's films, from the exemplary *Mondo cane* to *La donna nel mondo* (*Women of the World*, 1963)

right to the masterpiece *Africa addio* (*Farewell Africa*, 1966), all show the shocking things that happen over the world in a frenetic cut of bizarre, morbid images interconnected by an association of ideas. They are feature films which amaze the audience, rake in the cash at the box-office, win awards and stoke up controversy.

It is only in the past few years that journalists, critics and film historians have begun to write about Jacopetti underlining his undoubtable technical merits in having invented a genre – which happily blends satire, parody, documentary and journalism – in which much of today's TV has its roots, from reality TV to satirical commentary and investigation.

But what kind of relationship did a natural-born polemicist and anti-conformist like Jacopetti have with the censors? That is just what we plan to discover here, placing the work of the director in a cultural, historical and sociological dimension, one free of prejudice, scandalous overviews or political revisionism. The aim is to understand a phenomenon that still today provokes great interest, both in Italy and abroad.

In 2003, the Bradford Festival in England was the first to dedicate a retrospective to his work, in the same year that the American documentarist David Gregory made the film *The Godfathers of Mondo*. In Italy, a timid attempt was made in 2004 with the screening of *Mondo cane*, during a show named *Gli italiani si guardano* by Maurizio Cabona, but the first complete retrospective came in 2007 at the RomaDocFest held at the Cinema Trevi in Rome; then there was an evening-event at the Casa del Cinema, part of the Rome Film Festival in November 2009, with the screening of the film dedicated to him, entitled *L'importanza di essere scomodo* by Andrea Bettinetti and the never before seen industrial documentary *Operazione ricchezza* made by Jacopetti in 1983.

Newsreels (1956-1960)

A fully fledged journalist with experience at the newspapers *La Nazione*, *Oggi*, *Il Corriere dell'Informazione*, *La Settimana Incom Illustrata* as well as at the newsreel version of the latter, in 1954 Jacopetti founded the illustrated weekly *Cronache* giving birth to an original melange of politics, society news, gossip, centred around surly ministers, deposed royalty, drunken film stars, millionaires fallen from grace, speculation on where dictators had ended up, stories on miracles gone wrong, all embellished with galleries of photos of scantily clad girls. Amongst them was a very young, buxom Sofia Loren, who did not yet spell her name in the more Anglo-Saxon way "Sophia". These picture led to a series of charges against Jacopetti for distributing obscene material. Crime news was not dealt with, as the censors from the Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo (Tourism and Entertainment) were most severe: in those years, you could not yet use the word "lover",

“divorce”, “member of parliament”, and there was also a very Italian form of self-censorship, which went beyond what was imposed by the State censors.

The magazine closed after about a year, with much of the staff joining the newly founded *L'Espresso*, edited by Eugenio Scalfari. Jacopetti, who had been involved in sex scandals, even serving time in prison, decided to change track: penmanship was not enough for him now and, thanks to the media magnate Angelo Rizzoli, who also owned newsreels, he unleashed his liberal anarchic vein in the form of satire. A pupil and companion of uncomfortable, controversial contrarians like Curzio Malaparte, Luigi Barzini jr, Leo Longanesi and Indro Montanelli, Jacopetti remembered their teachings, writing about reality based on a very simple principle: “What people do is the best entertainment in the world.” In this sense, his newsreels represent an excellent tool to reflect that climate of bourgeois respectability, fake decency and ideological shams, which the director helps demolish between the end of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s.

The first illustrated newsreel he founded and edited is *L'Europeo Ciac* in 1956, and he organized genuine ambushes for his shoots, for example pieces where the scissors a Minister uses to cut a ribbon are replaced with a pair that does not cut.

In an interview Jacopetti gave in 2005 to Barbara Palombelli, he recalled: “The member of parliament, almost always Andreotti, would have trouble cutting the ribbon, I'd keep filming and the public would be dying of laughter. Politics was all about the red, white and green ribbons and openings.”¹

So in these newsreels, there was not so much news about government, but more bikinis, slums and swimming, surgical operations and police operations, starlets, Fascist salutes and jokes about those fallen from grace.

Jacopetti gives the whole thing his own new, personal imprint, in anticipation of his style as a director, partly as a challenge to the budding competition from television. He makes unscrupulous use of visuals and sound, heavy on the off-screen ironic commentary. Not to mention the ribbing and raspberry blowing to RAI television journalists, in the pockets of the politicians. One of these, Carlo Mazarella, who covered film for the network, was the subject of an irreverent piece showing him as a socialite dandy mixing with film divas at cocktail parties, rather than doing his job criticizing films for the public. This didn't go down well with Mazarella, who sued for defamation. But Jacopetti avoided another lawsuit thanks to Rizzoli, who settled the issue in the old-fashioned way: pulling out wads of cash. It was not an isolated case, though, because in 1962, another journalist, Sante Monachesi, pressed charges against *Paese Sera*: “I was the victim of a set-up too. Jacopetti sent some of his contributors to ask me questions: these questions were then falsified during editing, making my replies seem absurd and ridiculous. In addition, my answers were distorted by continuous repetition, another editing trick.”²

The censors who had to give clearance to Jacopetti's newsreel also brandished their own editing style; if we rifle through the documents in the archives of the

Direzione Generale per il Cinema, we come across contradictions that are not only ambiguous but also absurd.

For example, notes on 1959's piece in Jacopetti's newsreel asking that the piece *Le forchette aumentano* be cut, with some edits made to the commentary of the piece *La carne rosa*.

This is the text for the first piece: “70 chefs from the USA arrive in Rome for a specialist course. Rome certainly needed a few more chefs. More forks.” The allusion is to the Christian Democrats appetite; at the time they were dubbed ‘forchettoni’, that is to say ‘forks’. Despite the fact that the word was used in an appropriate context, the mere use of the Italian version of the word ‘fork’ was enough to raise the hackles of the diligent ministerial officials, who strangely enough asked that two cuts be made to – but not the elimination of – a

piece in the same edition of the newsreel which reported on the sale of indigenous babies in rich countries. The report reads thus: "Naples. Following the last, painful case of child emigration to the USA, a proud cry goes up in the south of Italy: 'Children are not for sale!' Giuseppina Gentile, the most recent pitiful victim, rebelling against her fate – BEGIN CUT – saved from deportation thousands and thousands of innocent children, perhaps destined for the most vile market – END CUT and helped them stay under the affectionate care of their parents [...] SECOND CUT Everyone is right, until the causes are tackled rather than the effects of this wretched misery. Everyone will always be right until we are tempted to thank whoever takes away a creature from this incredible world where children only wash their faces during watermelon season."

Another taboo subject was royalty, who can be poked fun at without exaggerating. From the censorship commission reports of the 1960s concerning other Jacopetti newsreels, we learn that the horse Ribot cannot be mentioned in the same sentence as the Queen of England. The eliminated text: "About the good life: at the gates of Rome, on the estate of Marquis Incisa, where the undefeated world champion Ribot, today put out to stud, receives dozens of the most beautiful mares in Europe. Amongst the visitors, the Queen of England and Princess Margaret." And Grace of Monaco's underwear could not be referred to either. The eliminated text: "The Princess of Monaco arrives in Anzio, on her personal yacht, whose regal traits were immediately recognized by the port authorities, who have the task of identifying the nationality of every vessel from the colour of the underwear hanging from the flagpole."

On the subject of sexual allusions, censorship of a 1960 newsreel was particularly entertaining: it was forced to cut the frames containing the road sign 'Via delle Zoccollette' (Tart's Road). This is the complete wording of the piece: "The writers of so many wonderful television programmes could all be accommodated in the same road (this is followed on screen by the road sign 'Via della Bufalotta' – Spoof Road). From what we have learnt from Fellini, for certain foreign actresses, we could build a nice hotel in some road in the centre of town (followed by a take of the sign 'Via delle Zoccollette')." The censored version is lightened to: "For certain foreign actresses, we could build a nice hotel in the centre of town (followed by a close-up of the sign 'Via dell'Oca' – Airhead Road).

In a 2004 interview to *Sette-Corriere della Sera*, Jacopetti writes: "My newsreels were childish pranks. Twenty years ago, Italy was sleepwalking, with Christian Democrat censorship and a hypocritical bourgeoisie ready to be shocked at the slightest provocation. So I tried to have some fun, highlighting the nastiness and the lack of culture. It was a time of first tentative steps, but the ministry's interference helped make me run. I produced three newsreels per week, and there were only three of us working on them: me, my excellent cameraman Antonio Climati, the son of another cameraman, and an extraordinary commentator, Nico Rienzi. At the time, we were used to hearing a rhetorical tone of voice in commentators, but Rienzi was detached and told the story without adding his own emphasis, with speed and perfect diction."

Of these newsreels, there are still some of Jacopetti's lines in a reportage on the film *Le notti di Cabiria* (*The Nights of Cabiria*) where he talks about "Giulietta sprint, the wife of the king of the road (a play on the Alfa Romeo car model)..." In his following film, *La dolce vita*, Fellini modelled a great part of the cynical, immoral, seductive rascal of Marcello Mastroianni's photographer on Jacopetti, adding though, a kindness and melancholy that the original probably did not possess. Jacopetti continued to produce newsreels, named *Ieri, oggi e domani*, until 1966, alternating this work with directing mondo-movies.

Mondo cane (1962)

A winning mix of information, gossip and entertainment, blended with a hefty dose of mockery and sneering jokes, irreverence towards those in power and trends was taken to the extreme by Jacopetti with *Mondo cane*, the first ever newsreel about the whole world, no longer simply about Italy.

Watching this film again today may bring a smile to your face for the sarcastic moralism of the spoken commentary, but the same cannot be said for the cruel, bizarre and extreme images that overturn the canons of the classic ethnographic documentary in the style of Folco Quilici. Both directors convey, however, a sense that human behaviour is not based on principles or some kind of law from above, but simply on the nature of the beast. They attempt to understand the social system behind the rituals and behaviour, behind fetishes and taboos. According to Jacopetti-Prosperi, savages and the civilised alike have the same propensity towards violence in a world that does not want to change and in which man lives just waiting to be domesticated.

Now let's see how the film was welcomed by the Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo: in March 1962 it got clearance to be distributed, with a ban for under-16s, thanks to the following cuts, requested by the revision commission, having been carried out:

- the elimination of the scene in which the prostitute in a Hamburg nightclub pulls up her skirt to reveal her panties and suspenders;
- the toning down of the scene in which the pigs are killed, especially the close up of the dying animal being beaten on the face. The number of frames from when the native hits the pig for the first time with the stick until the last animal dies was reduced by 1006 frames (19 metres);
- the reduction of the blood ritual, known as "vattienti" in Nocera Terinese (Catanzaro);
- in the first sequence on the monument to Rudolph Valentino in Castellaneta (Taranto), all the frames in which His Excellency Alberto Folchi could be seen had to be cut. Folchi was the Minister of Turismo e dello Spettacolo and Jacopetti was forced to concede this time, having to be satisfied with Gabriele Semeraro, a mere undersecretary, who was 'ridiculed' by a vertiginous cut to the tune of a tango by Riz Ortolani and a gallery of bizarre faces.

It is of interest to note the reasons why Reteitalia (the former film division of Mediaset), the owner of the rights to the film, obtained the revision of the film in 1996 in order to broadcast it on TV after 10:30pm. The Mammì Law of 1990 did not allow films banned for under-18s to be broadcast on TV (for under-16s for films made prior to 1962); Mediaset, who owned all the rights to the Cineriz films (including those by Jacopetti and Fellini), asked for another inspection, 31 years after it had first been screened in public, for the following reasons:

- the film was dated (both in terms of content and narrative) compared to documentaries made for TV in the past few years: *Mondo cane* is an investigative film from 1962 on the weirdest customs of the various populations visited;
- that many cuts had been made, meaning that all the scenes of a disturbing nature had been eliminated, leaving only the revealing ethnographical side of the film;
- the absence in the film of scenic/narrative elements that could disturb today's under-16s;
- the profound changes that have taken place in Italian society since the film was made, thereby making the film permissible even to said minors.

For these reasons and bearing in mind the basically documentarist nature of the film, the ban is asked to be withdrawn. Authorisation was given and finally TV viewers could see Jacopetti and Prosperì's most notorious film for the first time at 2am, or tape it on VHS, as it was still the era of the video recorder.

La donna nel mondo (Women of the World, 1963)

The life of women in the most far-flung nations, is illustrated in all its glory. The 'narrative' technique is the same as for *Mondo cane* and the bizarre connotations are highlighted by the narration, written by Jacopetti. The splendid soundtrack is provided by Riz Ortolani and Nino Oliviero.

The film experienced trials and tribulations due to the censors. In November 1962, it was rejected by the censorship commission on initial evaluation and the production was forced to appeal, stating its willingness to cut, re-edit and eliminate many scenes, including:

- the use of a chastity belt in a Hottentot village;
- details of child delivery in a Milan hospital;
- changes made to the narration in a scene in which two girls of eight and ten years are interrogated in a Hong Kong police station.

These cuts were not enough because the second-degree commission confirmed by a majority the negative opinion expressed by the first board, stating that the film could not receive clearance for screening in public, because in many sequences, and overall, "it presents aspects and an assessment of life that does not conform to commonly-held ethics and moral standards, as understood by laws and the general public in Italy. To be more precise, every frame represents women in the worst possible way; and around this, it builds a framework of elements that induce anything but a spiritual reaction, highlighting the most vulgar aspects of sex, unjustifiable for documentary purposes, presented in such a way as to provoke sexual stimulus rather than ethical evaluation; this would not be so serious if the crude representation of such elements were not also obscene[...]."

It was January 1963 before clearance was given after numerous cuts both in images and narration; that times were changing was proved by the fact that the film remained in circulation despite the formal complaint of the Crociata Nazionale Antiblasfema (national anti-blasphemy crusade), based in Brescia. They asked the censorship commission for the film to be withdrawn for the following reasons:

"It has been noted that the film contains scenes with women with completely bare breasts. Other scenes show women in Adamitic costume (scenes of Israelite women in tents and other scenes). In addition, towards the end of the second part of the film, a baby is shown to be forcibly withdrawn from a woman's vagina. We see the baby being pulled out violently in a close-up. The woman's legs are wide open. In the presence of such scene, doubts arise as to whether such sequences were in the copy of the film that the commission revised or that they could have been cleared, if so.

If the former is the case, we beg you to notify us so that we can begin legal proceedings in accordance with art. 688 of the penal code. If such scenes were, on the other hand, tolerated, we beseech the commission to adopt a harsher stand, considering the moral and physical damage caused to spectators, especially when said film is distributed to small villages. It also seems to us that the film (although we are not certain) was only banned for the under-14s, not the under-18s. This, too, leads us to believe that the version presented was not complete."

The complaint got an immediate response from the ministerial secretary, who sent a letter to the Brescia prefect asking that he notify the 'crusaders' that "the commission felt it was right to ban the film for under-18s, in view of the sensitivity of the age of development and to protect minors".

Despite a few pseudo-ethnographic nudes for the purpose of entertainment – the film *Helga - Von verden des Menschlichen Lebens (Helga)* by Eric F. Bender with the first shocking childbirth scene would be released in 1968 – the State censors keep playing the part of the prissy bigots, and the citizens' organisations often also hide double moral standards.

Brescia, the same city that played host to the Crociata Nazionale Antiblasfema, a few years back saw the scandal of the Balletti Verdi following the publication of a short notice in the *Giornale di Brescia* and a few lines in *L'Unità* about sexual meetings with minors. Hysteria reached such heights that well-known personalities totally uninvolved with the affair were dragged into the picture:

Mike Bongiorno, Dario Fo, Franca Rame, Gino Bramieri and the choreographers Rai Bud Thompson and Paul Steffen were interrogated by investigators and immediately released. The entertaining episode of the film *I complessi* (*Complexes*, 1965) entitled *Il complesso della schiava nubiana* with Ugo Tognazzi in the role of a bigoted Christian Democrat Minister who ends up by mistake in a gay orgy was based on this.

Africa addio (Farewell Africa, 1966)

Only three years had passed since the release of *Women of the World*. The events of May 1968 and sexual liberation had not yet happened, and cinema opened up horizons thought impossible just a few years earlier. The nature of the documentary, even its shock value, allowed Jacopetti e Prosperi's definitive masterpiece, *Farewell Africa*, to be released on the big screen without too many hitches, a mere ban for under-14s, something the producer Angelo Rizzoli didn't even appeal against. The film documents the historical moment in the mid-60s when many African states were acquiring independence from the colonial super-powers.

"The film reveals how vile, cruel and foolish man is: it is a lesson in humility. It breaks our heart with the senseless slaughter of men, women, children, both blond and black, of wondrous innocent animals: so it is a lesson in humility. Morally, it is a purge of rare energy. There is perhaps a negative side.

Voluntarily or not, *Farewell Africa* appears racist, setting out to show that the negroes of Africa are inferior, and that having given them freedom and independence was one of the biggest mistakes ever made by the west."⁴ These are the words of Dino Buzzati in description of Jacopetti and Prosperi's film. How much of what we see in the film is real, how much created by clever editing and how much – an accusation often aimed at Jacopetti – was provoked merely to be filmed?

This is one of his famous replies: "If I say that in Africa 180 hippopotamuses die each day, I have to show twenty or so of them, right?"

On February 2, 1966, the first degree film revision commission gave clearance for screening in public with a ban for under-14s, for the following reasons: "Considering the numerous scenes of violence on men and animals and particularly chilling details that accompany them (e.g. corpses and skeletons strewn everywhere, injured men, blood flowing, as well as cut off hands, public executions)."

Addio zio Tom (Goodbye Uncle Tom, 1971)

Goodbye Uncle Tom is the history of slavery in the USA as no one had ever told it before: in 'mockumentary' form, as we would say today. It is one of the high points of the Jacopetti-Prosperi duo in filmmaking. Indifferent to the cultural marginalisation of the issue, Jacopetti shot most of *Goodbye Uncle Tom* in Haiti, thanks to Papa Doc Duvalier allowing him access to thousands of extras. The film is a fictional investigation into slavery in America in the previous century, on the movements which tolerated and promoted the practice, on the abolition and the consequent Civil War.

On September 9, 1971, *Goodbye Uncle Tom* hit the big screen followed by the latest violent defamatory campaign against Jacopetti. The film was authorized for public screening for over-18s, due to "the sequences of particular violence – of an erotic nature – which cannot be allowed to be seen by minors". Euro International Films, headed by the Countess Marina Cicogna, did not appeal.

The film's release was further delayed by a few days due to the title change – to Zio Tom – because the original name is identical to the Italian version of an American novel. The production company was forced to withdraw and reprint the posters, promotional material and edit the opening titles.

In mid-October 1971, trouble began. A police report reads: "In the past few days in Bologna, the screening of the film in question provoked protests from university students from the movements Lotta Continua and Potere Operaio and from black students, who view the film as racist. Upon the evening screening on the 7th of this month, around a hundred students gathered outside two theatres, attempting to bar entry to spectators." The result: the film was seized on October 16, initially in Rimini on the orders of the State Prosecutor, who defined it "obscene and racist", then in Bari, for being "against good moral conduct and ethical and social responsibility due to the frequent scenes of vulgar sexuality, the exasperated representation of race hate and the tragic and bloody massacres of race battles portrayed in the name of entertainment."

On March 21, 1972, the film was released from seizure, due to it having been established that no crime had been committed, and the production company was once again forced to present the film to the revision commission on March 30, 1972. It was totally re-edited with the addition of scenes of current events (the funeral of Martin Luther King, Black Panther and hippy marches, pilgrimages and historical re-enactments, the New Orleans Mardi Gras, clashes between protesters and the police in Washington) and the elimination of certain sequences (a slave trader, a professional whipper, a Northern agitator). The film was cleared with a ban for under-18s, but its fate had already been compromised, and its duration on the big screen was brief. The film was remembered 40 years later by the director Quentin Tarantino in his *Django Unchained* (2012); the main character was the black slave of the title, owned by the villain Leonardo Di Caprio. The actor Samuel L. Jackson declared in an interview to "The Hollywood Reporter" that Tarantino watched Jacopetti's film over and over as a source of inspiration and documentation, but perhaps the true value of this much-contested film is even more inflated if compared to the recent *12 Years a Slave* (2013), by Steve McQueen, dripping with rhetoric and low Hollywood blows, in an Oscar-grabbing move.

¹ Barbara Palombelli, E Nenni disse: ai comunisti il cinema, i libri a noi, *Corriere della Sera*, May 7, 2005; then published in *Registi d'Italia*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2006.

² Anonymous, Anche Sante Monachesi vittima del cinegiornale di Gualtiero Jacopetti, *Paese sera*, November 24, 1962.

³ *Sette-Corriere della Sera*, January 21, 2004

⁴ Dino Buzzati, *Corriere d'informazione*, January 1964.

Luca Martera has been a freelance media professional since 1997. He had been behind hundreds of specials, monographies and documentaries, as both writer and director, working for over 10 years with Giovanni Minoli for the programme "La Storia siamo Noi". As an Italian film and TV historian, he wrote "Lo Spettacolo in Tv - La Tv è meglio farla che guardarla" (Dino Audino Editore 2000, preface by Aldo Grasso) and curated a retrospective on mondo movies, along with Domenico Monetti and Anthony Ettorre as part of the RomaDocFest festival in 2007. In 2009 he wrote, produced and directed his first low-budget film, entitled "Sexual Radar". Between 2011 and 2012 he lived in New York, shooting documentaries and projects for startups. Since 2014 he has been working on the web content for the satirical show "Striscia la Notizia". He is one of the major expert of Italian and international audio-visual archives and the creative use of archive images.