

## Salvo Cuccia

*SC (talks about his latest documentary Partenza, spartenza that will soon come out): Tommaso Bordonaro wrote his story that was later published by Einaudi. The manuscript received the Saint Steven prize for biographies and was published by Einaudi in 1991. Then it was re-published by a publishing company from Palermo under the name 'La spartenza' (the Separation, from the Italian partenza – departure), therefore separation and departure, as also my work talks about, the topic of migration. He not only wrote his biography, but several years after migrating from Italy he bought an 8mm camera and started recording, I believe it was from 1953 to 1973-1974. The total of 5 hours of footage depict New Jersey, New York and Italy/Sicily (Bolgnetta), but also the rest of Italy – Rome, Spain. He was travelling by ship so he did several stops, where he filmed: Barcelona, Lisbon, Gibraltar and so on. Thanks to an intellectual from his town, Santo Lombino, who curated this book, Bordonaro left everything, all the material he had to the Library of Bolognetta, his home town and also his musical instruments (he was a member of the local band), his trombone for example but also all his documents. This is an opportunity to work on home movies and tell a contemporary story through a story that represents a historical advent. This is to remind us that we all come from another place that is people have been migrating since distant times. So it serves to remind us of this. Yesterday like today. On the contrary, this fact fuelled also humanity, its diversity and the flourishing of cultures.*

*RL: Looking at Sicily's history it is obvious.*

*SC: I talk in general, also about the United States and other forced migrations, both historical and more recent ones. I am not a pure documentary filmmaker, in the sense that I like working on this sector and I like working in the field as a container of different languages. For me this physical, physiological aspect of the reel, of the video, has a particular importance. Even today I record scenes in super8, 8mm, which are far better than HD images. I do it because I like the trace of the grain. In the past I used to say for the video images that they were newsreel testimonies, while the reel was already history. In fact the use of super8 is interesting because the relationship between the images in super8 and the images in video format, is totally disproportionate. Because I use almost all that I record in super8. It already gives you this strong evocative feeling. The video needs a different construction to acquire this evocative power. The relationship between the fake footage that I use, which I record myself on reel, the real archive material that I integrate and the video images is very interesting. It is like writing with different instruments: the stenographic pen, the pencil, the brush which enables the use of a palette of colours. These are different instruments. This is the case of amateur images, as they have more grain, they are more 'intense' with respect to filmic images, that in the past few years have been complying more and more with the video and high definition images. It remains as smooth as possible, as defined as possible. A friend of mine, photographer used to say to me that the film strip towards High Definition, towards the 'acquarium'. Super8 instead has an internal story, a story and depth belonging to its own nature, to its own way of writing with images. Then again there is something in this medium that escapes your control, something that is already poetic, interiorised and becomes something that is able to build history. In a certain sense it is already film, already narration.*

**Q1Q:** ...even if home movies are often regarded as material lacking a linear narrative base. I wanted to ask you how you would describe home movies to a person who has no knowledge of the concept.

**Q1A:** First of all I grew up surrounded by it. My grandfather opened up a cinema in our small town, so I always had a somehow different approach. My father used bot super8 and 16mm. Some of the

16mm images shot by my father you could see in the documentary 'A soldier in love' (soldato innamorato). These images were shot with a Kingston, received as a gift from his godfather, a man who often travelled. I still got the camera, which has a fixed optics and which I would have liked to use in my documentary, but unfortunately was hard to manage and therefore not possible to use. From a conceptual point of view, the home movie definition depends much on the person who shot it. This is because home movies have this documentary approach, which keeps mainly in the sphere of family life and its events such as baptisms, recurring festivities or weddings, but which also leaves a trace of the places, of the social sphere (also made of traditions). This is a very important aspect in my opinion. Nowadays their historical importance is attributed to this capacity of reflecting a past that does not belong to official history, to history as we learned it. Then there is the difference between filmmaker and filmmaker. Those who acted like filmmakers, just like Bordonaro who acted as a director with his movies; in some scenes it is visible how he organizes 'the set', how he makes the characters of his home movies 'catwalk' in front of the camera, creating a sort of mini-directing set.

Q1Q: So his style is closer to the idea of 'cineclubs', which in the UK for example had a major role in developing the amateur scene, but one with more 'claims' towards professional filmmaking.

Q1A: This goes instead towards another sector, which is more curated and authorial and which are present also here. In Palermo during the 70s there were groups of 'superottisti' engaged in more professional filmmaking, some three or four. Then the ability of the filmmaker is essential. In this sector we can find material that is high quality. Then the importance of super8 and 8mm is the documentation of places that they enable. You have the main characters, then you have on the background different places, squares and streets that have changed. Often for those who are making a 'reconstruction' work like I do, these images are very important.

Q2Q: Regarding the public of this material, how do you think it was changed during the past years?

Q2A: With respect to documentary, I believe it has changed dramatically. Documentary influenced fiction cinema in a radical way. So much that cinema has borrowed this need to tell stories, to simulate somehow reality, above all in the topics that are approached. Therefore documentary had a strong impact and that the cinema industry is doing this in another way: it uses it in order to re-propose a documentary form inside fiction, in order to tell stories that becomes more evocative, based on different effects. I think documentary has given a decisive turn to cinema, which is a cinema mainly based on reality, both if you speak about families and intimate issues, or historical and social facts. The documentary that narrates stories using home movies, had had obviously an influence on these developments. The idea is also that the home movie literally speaking, is the document by excellence, in the sense that costume designers and production designers do not only get inspiration from archives, but they also go and see how people lived. In my opinion, above all in America, both actors and filmmakers have a great interest in seeing home movies, as this material reveals traditions and social practices, and from this footage they are able to individuate human typologies, their movements and their gestures.

Q2Q: A nice scanning of the past.

Q2A: Yes, and if they need to get inspiration from different characters, the home movie is fundamental, because it conveys the spirit of a period.

Q2Q: What do you think about experimental cinema with this footage?

Q2A: This is something that I experimented myself, to work directly on the reel, to alter it by scratching it or pouring over them corrosive substances. In my opinion it was a beautiful thing to look at the film still with a lens and observe how this modified. Mechanic interventions have the peculiarity of creating a specific effect at a given moment, which is unrepeatable. I call them unique mechanical processes, which I applied to super8, while letting myself inspired by the cinema of the 20s until the 60s and 70s and then I continued with the video. I often work with these mechanic effects, for which I do a separate folder on my computer where I store them. I have been experimenting with these effects since the 90s, as I was not satisfied with pre-fabricated computer effects or editing software effects and I had no financial means to use important special effects. I worked on multiple layers: recording the scenes, then overlapping these images with different optical solutions such as pouring water on the film strip or overlapping the image with various membranes; these have left unrepeatable effects. I started doing this with 'cieli altissimi' which is an artistic installation and performance on multiple monitors; for this work I called several directors to do the live work, the audio part, which was quite peculiar. Then I reproduced a video of 12 minutes that is based on this thing: we were in the studio and I was dissatisfied with the effects achieved, so I started recording the effects. I started working like this on multiple layers, like a painter who spreads several layers of colours on the canvas. Overlapping these effects with the initial recordings and the visual effects of the computer, I was able to develop something satisfying. But this is born from the fact that I also worked even if briefly on super8, scratching the reel, applying acids or markers. As Hitchcock used to say: I like cinema, but before this comes the film reel, in a material way. Then growing up inside a cinema – I lived above the cinema, like in Cinema Paradiso and in the evenings I often stayed inside the projector room – gave me the possibility to see the film from backstage since I was a child. I was able to see how film was made, the material it was composed of, that is was made of many photographs called stills that were illuminated and projected in a sequence. Also for home movies it is a similar situation. I started experimenting directly on the film and damaged many reels, but fortunately I stopped in time. My work is based on this aspect. Also in 'La spartenza' I used mechanic effects. For example the ruined image of the main character – I do not know if I have something here. Also in this case I used mechanic effects. Let me see if I have here something I can show you. (Pause) Since the beginning of cinema, the fact of working on an object that possessed its consistency, the artist tried to leave their own imprint on it; because the interesting thing is to look at reality, but also to have the possibility to modify reality not for the sake of transforming it to appropriate it, but to see it better. All this takes us back to reality and to abstract cinema; reality is what is inside our minds and in front of us. These are two complementary things. What you see is the live streaming (like in TV) and inside is this hard disk. Memory elaborates images in their own ways. It re-works them during dreams. All the works done by artists since the existence of the reel is also this, I mean both theoretically, internally to one's own expressive language and externally, from a practical perspective, acting upon the film, upon the image. My teacher, Paul Ruiz used to paint on small pieces of glass; some images of 'the city of pirates' are painted. The landscapes become somehow strange, because its colours are vivid. He also liked to intervene on the film during the recording of the images. So the modification of reality is not modifying it in an objective....(pause)

Q2Q: falsification?

Q2A: Yes, we can say that falsifying reality is necessary in order to narrate it. Everything starts with editing, then we pass to what you decide to frame, where you position the camera and so on. Surely this fact of acting upon reality is already part of this intervention on the film.

Q3Q: What kind of outputs do you think are more suited for the reuse of home movies?

Q3A: Definitely a strong role for the field of documentary. But at times they are being reused also in cinema.

Q3Q: Like Scorsese who reused this kind of footage.

Q3A: Yes, also in fiction film. Well a film that you know for sure is that of Alina Marazzi, 'For one more hour with you'.

Q3Q: Yes, of course.

Q3A: Among others, the sound was edited by Beni Atria, with whom I collaborated on different films and who became a scene editor thanks to me; I called him as a scene editor because I always worked on the relationship sound-image. It is strange to talk about it, as super8 scenes are mainly soundless images. Often we worked on this diachronic relation between sound and image, i.e working with past images and contemporary sounds or the other way around. We have done this with De Seta footage, but continued with other editors on a similar line, using sound unconventionally.

Q3Q: As you mentioned fiction film. How do you think it fits for the reuse of home movies?

Q3A: There are different cases of this kind of use, one I believe is also Italian. Personally, the feeling I had when recording in super8 was similar to that of splitting myself in two, one part of me becoming my father or my grandfather who used this medium. I do not often use super8 or 8mm in an authorial form. I need some images, but it is as if I identify with my father and his was of recording home movies. It is strange, but I have this kind of doubling, because the impact of this practice of the home movie (producing and watching them) had a strong influence on myself. In a certain way it leaves me with the impression also of being a tourist, a person who sees a place without knowing it. So you try to record everything and don't miss anything. A classic approach belonging to whom recorded at that time but who uses also today these formats, is that of wanting to capture, to see everything. And at this point you start making errors, because if you want to see everything, the church for example, you start performing lateral movements, up and down movements and so on. You would like to record it all but the medium does not permit this, as it can't capture the entire image. Then your eyes starts to wander. But wandering enables you to find also different things. The so-called errors of amateur filmmakers build the richness we have today. Then you need to...yes, this is what I was forgetting to say. The crucial thing about amateur film that clearly differentiates them from the same formats shot today is their standard length of about 3minutes/reel and the filmmakers had to address an economic and temporal question. The time aspect had made so that the filmmaker was performing an in-camera editing. You do not record freely as with digital and video where you can record limitless and can re-watch all the material you recorded. This is the turning point: you know you have a limited time during which you are able to record. You need therefore to select and put everything on a single reel, but without cutting scenes – this was something done by the more advanced filmmakers. In home movies can mainly find in-camera editing; good or bad as it is. For sure there is a will for synthesis, which is dictated by the medium. This is fundamental.

Q4Q: During the creative process, did you see any difference between your own family's home movie scenes and home movies belonging to other archives?

Q4A: I can say that I am very detached from the process. I have been doing this for such a long time that I took some distance from the material in order to be able to work on it. In reality it is true that there is a very strong emotional factor in this kind of footage. Seeing my father's footage I was asking myself where my father was positioned at that moment in order to do the recordings. It is as if I was seeing him while he was shooting the images. It is as if I see myself too at those times, where I was positioned when my father was shooting the scenes. It is similar to a mirror. This memory has become as sort of a mirror.

Q4Q: Is it a moving mirror, that shows different things each time you see them or not?

Q4A: I can say that I was very moved when I edited 'Frank Zappa in Sicily'. I found there the images of a father figure who stands there in the town, looks at me and comes towards me (I recorded those scenes). But this was not because I had recorded those scenes. It is because he is looking at me, he looks in the camera. Often before the end of the reel, he used to rotate (and this was a thing that was common to more filmmakers) the camera towards himself and perform a greeting looking into the lens. This end of the reel where the filmmaker reveals his own identity is very interesting, as it is like a sort of a signature but also as a sort of heritage. In the documentary of Frank Zappa, as it talked about the relation between me and my father and the relation between Luise and his father, it becomes very powerful. Maybe it happened to also cry together. He cried a lot here in Sicily, so that his mother made me cut some scenes from the film. In reality this gave me strong emotions and I am still touched today.

Q5Q: Do you think there are also difficult aspects of working with home movies?

Q5A: In general the work of the filmmaker is a long one. On the other hand also when you want to tell a story through images that you produce yourself (the so-called real cinema), you need to engage a lot with people and to dedicate time to specific situations. Then also in the editing phase you need to select scenes to do the final work. It happens therefore also in the case that you need to record the scenes, not only if you want to reuse archive images. It is the same situation, you need to dedicate time in either of the both cases because you need to find a specific situation. You find it in both cases by employing time.

Q5Q: Other difficulties do you see? What about the vision of the filmmaker that you need to integrate in your work.

Q5A: Well I can cite a phrase by Frank Zappa: 'life is made from contrasting material'. The main point of this documentary is this. The wife of Frank Zappa cites this phrase, which is important. If your work is like this, like life, made of contrasting material, also Frank Zappa's music is made from contrasting material. I use archive footage of any kind, both of low and high quality, which I put together in order to create a sort of an epiphany, a final composition that is similar to the body with its different parts. For me they confer harmony and balance, to the entire work, as Truffaut used to say in his film 'The man who loved women'. This diversity of material and its richness is important for me. The other day I went to see a film on Henry Clapton, his story and several years ago I had seen a similar work on Joe Strummer (the founder of Clash). What is beautiful in these films is the audience experience of the parts recorded in super8. For example the childhood moments in super8 make you want to see more and more. This is the issue of dosage of this material inside a documentary. Maybe inside the documentary I did not like other things. But that thing to go and find

that material, that has specific colours and is recorded in playful conditions; for example there are images where he plays as a child in front of his own house. These images have a strong evocative power, that it becomes universal. Beyond the special things with my father's recordings of which I was talking earlier, used in specific context, this type of material is able to give a sense of human universality. This is why they trigger strong emotions. Without this material, how are you able to tell the story of the life of a person? If he does not have this, the author needs to invent other things to substitute this material. It is important. I am answering now the previous question...

Q6Q: Do you think that home movie, being closer to everyday life and its emotions, is able to alter cinema through its evocative power?

Q6A: Yes, there is this capacity. Lets say that the authors using this footage guided the emotions and the reactions of the audience. Despite of having this brief timeframe of around 3 minutes during filmmakers were able to edit the scenes in the camera, what they filmed was not a synthesis. For example one entire reel contains no linear narrative that brings together various scenes, while the editing of this material by various authors, renders visible these crystals, these gems. They emerge like they emerge from the searching process among various notes, in an archive where all material is random. At a certain point you find that specific page, that spot that evokes emotions. This is our role, of us authors, through the work we do, may it be right or wrong, to bring to light these gems, that evoke special emotions. This is not because they are forcing us to feel, but because by being embedded into a wider structure, like precious gems, a balance is created, which the audience feels. For me this is fundamental. I think that the reuse of home movies is something very important, essential.

Q8Q: As you have watched so many Sicilian home movies, did you find recurrences in the way of shooting Sicilian home movies? Can we talk about a Sicilian 'way of doing'?

Q8A: More than a regional distinction I see a personal distinction; because each of us has his own way of doing and thinking and when using the camera without previous technical preparation, each of us manipulates the camera in a different way. At this point your material is somehow different from all the rest. I do not see specific differences, except for ...(pause). You can analyse them from a different perspective. If you see for example footage shot by the grandfather of Alina Marazzi, who was a well-educated person, coming from a high social class, you realise that he had an incredible 'eye'. This footage is beautiful because a person with a rich culture and openness and sensitivity for the technical aspect has shot the images. He observes things very well and records images as well as he is able to see things. You remain speechless. The beauty of those images is so strong, compared to the footage produced by a person like Bordonaro, who goes to the US and records images that leave you with the sense that his method is basic. It is not only about the cinema culture you have but also about intention. In my opinion it depends much on the person shooting the images. Then again the social context, which appears in the images changes. There is an obvious difference between who shoots in Milan and who shoots in the South of Italy. As example the light plays an important part. With the Sicilian natural lighting the images you shoot have a different feel, the strong counter light offers an incredible effect to the scenes. For sure the clear difference can be made from person to person. These works do not have a technical structure behind them; they were done with the intent of documenting one's own family life. Therefore, I do not feel a specific difference. There is one

aspect nevertheless: who used super8 was mainly part of a given social class that for sure did not belong to the farmers for example. My father for example and his friend were people who already had a certain social level. The poor classes could not afford it. The extraordinary case of Tommaso Bordonaro is that: the first thing that he does when being well-off is to buy a recording camera, because he needs to prove that he can make it. He proves it through the images. He goes to the US, records his house and when he returns he shows his home in the US to his family. Let me show you some parts of it. This is a lower quality version but it renders the idea (sound in the background). The footage was already quite damaged; a VHS recording that was in a bad state. (sound in the background). Here for example I edit my own and his footage in super8. I show you some brief examples of how he recorded his home in the US. I have shot these images in New Jersey. These are images of the 1950s.

Q9Q: It is nice this vision of contrasting material that takes the role of different parts of a body. In 'Soldier in love' you used footage from various resources. What part of this body do you assign to home movies inside this documentary?

Q9A: For sure the heart, the upper body part. I realise that the answer is foregone, but it is like this. Talking about my own family's home movies that I used in this documentary, it is clear that this type of material can become for a filmmaker a sort of a trap, because it gives you emotions while others are not touched by the material as you are. You are too much connected to this footage. I had the need to tell this story written by my grandfather. It was a sort of redemption, a big or small one, I don't know, but either way it was redemption. I redeemed somehow my grandfather's will in his attempt to fix his memories in time. In that documentary I did an operation. I used super8 not only in the form of material that was recorded by my father and those during the World War. To make this documentary I first travelled in the places depicted in the footage I had, from Yugoslavia to Friuli, carrying with me a super8 and recording various settings. I wanted to be by myself and think while I was reading my grandfather's manuscript. Then I went to record various scenes with my super8, many of them shot from the car while driving around. It was an easy task with the super8, as it did not pose me any of the difficulties that appear with modern technology.

Q9Q: This is somehow strange because you would think the contrary, that with today's technology where everything is automatic you can shoot easily any kind of scene.

Q9A: Yes, it is like this, but it is true. With super8 everything is automatic; I already know the reaction of my camera. With a hand I was driving, with the other I was shooting the images. In the end I did not have the need to have a driver with me, as I was shooting the scenes myself. The conclusion in all of this is that this format is somehow interiorised; it is as if you have a super8 in your own mind, from which you put the images together. Somehow it is strange. It is as if things seem to overlap, but not completely. That what you see in super8 is slightly shifted, with regard to what you bear inside your own mind as a memory. It is as if something is changing, but it is somehow the same; I have my memories in super8 but each time they are revived.

Q9Q: To me it happens often with dreams, with situations that I live during the day which recall me of a state of dream.

Q9A: it is probably the same mechanism. If we look at home movies, with the arrival of the video, everything is transformed as it becomes decadent. This enforces my statement. The signs impressed on the film reel were building in their own right a narration; a story that becomes history and that is

not similar to the newsreel (like the video recalled). The decadence of memory begins with the obsolescence of the medium of the film.

*RL: It is nice to see your recordings in super8 that offer somehow a nostalgic feeling.*

*SC: Yes, here for example the first thing that came to my mind seeing those adolescents skating were connected to Frank Capra's film 'Life is wonderful'. Here I found some material from the 2000, shot at Massimo Theater in Palermo, where Giovanni Solima has done Elis Island. And in the beginning of the first act of the play he introduced some word of Tommaso Bordonaro's book. Until a certain point in the play there is also this actor next to Bordonaro. Here he says for example that he started recuperating his life. He was passionate about gardening.*

*RL: Very vital images, transmitting the joyfulness of life.*

*SC: At this point he buys a house. These recordings accompany his sons growing up from children to adults, until they get married. He was always in his garden. This is his house.*

*RL: it seems he want to record everything, in order not to miss anything.*

*SC: Yes, it is like documenting his own life. Because what he wants to say is that: I worked hard but I managed it, I am well-off, I bought a house. He shows these films to his family back in Sicily. Then we has this will to record the first time back to Sicily, which is a very poetic scene. These are the words of his book and the images shot. There is Lisbon, Barcelona, Capri. Here he arrives in Palermo in 1955. (background sound of the documentary). He even records the harvest. This was his father. These images are very theatrical, very peculiar. He records it because he needs to show this to his family and friends in the US. Then we see his father. You need to see this because it looks like Dolce & Gabbana (background sound of the documentary). This is a Sunday of September 1955. Here they also dance among themselves. He wanted to make then the filmmaker. It was not a very common thing at that time. There was this tendency to arrange characters in order to record them, but not to choreograph them this way, like he did. You can see this directing in these scenes.*

Q10Q: As a last question I would like to show you some material and know from you what impression it leaves, what you think about it.

Q10A: Ouch, this was something my grandfather did (looking at the scene with rabbits). Looking at these images is like seeing my childhood again. I was born in 1960, so these images belong to me genetically. The scenes you have selected show also this social class difference, of places. Because the child who is at the sea is the son of someone who is wealthy, otherwise he was at work. Most probably his father did not work in the fields. In the 60s I recall this fact, uhmmm, for example the two elderly people talking to each other, I wonder if they have ever seen the seaside.

Q10Q: This scene is part of a larger recording belonging to a family living in a fisher village.

Q10A: Ah, ok, so this is at the sea.

Q10Q: Yes, it is a peculiar recording where they show their everyday life: fishing, but also playing and joking around. It was interesting for me to see also this vision, the low class society that shows life how it was: the happiness and sorrow of it. Were you touched by any of these scenes in a particular way?

Q10A: I did not know it was a fisher village. But if it was an inland village then for sure these people had never seen the sea. This is to say that people lived in the space of few kilometres distance from each other. So when someone shot these images, he found it as a sort of treasure, because there was no easy communication so each situation was a story in its own right; so much that the use of the

language is different. This difference makes you understand how life was 60 years ago in Sicily. Finding this humanity recorded in this way is very strong. Not only De Seta did this in a very big way, but through these images this happened at a lower level. What I can say about these images is that the first thing that got to me were the 'smells'. The first think I thought about was: what smell did these streets and these people have? This is a world that returns to me completely. I cannot say I was more touched by a scene rather than another, because they are all part of the big mosaic that is my memory. I was born in the 1960 so it is part of me. My feeling is also influence also by the historical moment. I have looked for example at the difference between 8mm and super8 images, at the ads from those times. It is interesting to look at the context and the time various scenes of my family's home movies were shot, as you perceive the difference through the passage of time.