

Valerio Ruiz' *Behind the White Glasses*¹

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On the night of the 27th of October 2019, 91-year old Italian director Lina Wertmüller finally received her honorary Oscar in Hollywood alongside David Lynch, Gina Davies and Wes Studi. With the award in her hands, she invited the Academy to give the prestigious laurel a female name. ‘Anna’, she suggested. That’s right: ‘Anna’. Lina Wertmüller is in fact the very first woman to ever receive an Oscar nomination for best director in 1977, thanks to her masterpiece *Seven Beauties*, a film which was not even shot in English. Since then, only four other female directors have been conferred that nomination: Jane Campion for *The Piano* in 1994, Sofia Coppola for *Lost in Translation* in 2004, Kathryn Bigelow in 2010 for *The Hurt Locker* and Greta Gerwig for *Lady Bird* in 2018.

With 32 projects among films for theatrical release, documentaries and TV movies, Lina Wertmüller has not only been a force of nature in the film industry, but also an exceptionally talented multi media artist who has created and directed a number of progressive TV films and series, such as 1964’s *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca* (‘The Diary of Gian Burrasca’), casting the young singer Rita Pavone for the role of the male protagonist, as well as a plethora of successful theatre shows. The latest one, *A che servono gli uomini* (‘What are men good for?’) opened in early 2019, while Wertmüller was 91. On top of that, she has also directed some of the most famous lyric operas, including Bizet’s *Carmen* and Puccini’s *La Bohème* in the 1980s and up to Giuseppe Verdi’s *Macbeth* in 2016 for which Valerio Ruiz has contributed as director’s collaborator. Working with music was not something new for Lina Wertmüller, as she had often written and interpreted most of the songs of her films.

¹ Ruiz, Valerio, *Dietro Gli Occhiali Bianchi (Behind The White Glasses)* (2015), Italy: White Glasses Production, Recalcati Multimedia

When Valerio Ruiz met Lina Wertmüller in 2006, he was an unknown first-year media and communication student at Sapienza, University of Rome. He had applied for an internship at the Ravello Festival, where Wertmüller was in charge of the creative direction of the film section. After a few weeks working side by side, Valerio courageously revealed to Lina that becoming a director was one of his greatest dreams. Surprisingly, she invited him to work as second assistant director on the set of her upcoming film for TV *Mannaggia alla miseria! (No English Title)* (2009). Once on set, Ruiz realised that the peaceful and kind woman he had met in Ravello had suddenly turned into a meticulous and charismatic ‘general’, to use Valerio’s words. Quick of thought, she had an ability to communicate with all members of the crew with a straightforward attitude.

After that experience, Ruiz remained close to Wertmüller in all subsequent projects until 2012, when one of the most important publishing companies in Italy, Mondadori, expressed their interest in releasing her autobiography - something that Wertmüller had never thought to write yet. In order to help her complete this book, Ruiz started diving into Wertmüller’s personal archive, re-discovering a treasure trove of scripts, stills and production material covering over 60 years of the history of Italian cinema.

This experience taught Ruiz that Wertmüller did not only had enough material for an autobiography, but also for a potential documentary. A few weeks after the publishing of the book, Ruiz started to conceive his own film. However, as Valerio explained:

Lina was not particularly enthusiastic about the idea of filming a documentary on her life. She has never liked her story to be told by others and most importantly, she wanted to avoid something too celebrative. However, she agreed to read my treatment, before making a final decision.²

² The interview with Valerio Ruiz took place via Skype conference call on Friday 24th January, 2020.

Eventually, Ruiz' proposal was so strong that it made Wertmüller change her mind. A few days later, the documentary officially moved into the pre-production stage. *Dietro Gli Occhiali Bianchi (Behind the White Glasses)* (2015) is the final result: 112 minutes of road-movie which owes its title to Lina Wertmüller's passion for collecting white glasses - over 5.000 pairs, according to what Wertmüller herself states in Ruiz' film. The documentary is structured around two parallel levels: the main storyline takes Wertmüller back to the key locations of her films. From the small village of Minervino Murge, which hosted the set of her first feature *I Basilischi (The Lizards)* (1963) to the dreamy Sardinian coast of *Travolti Da Un Insolito Destino Nell'Azzurro Mare D'Agosto (Swept Away)* (1974) and even inside Wertmüller's private house and personal archive in Rome. At the same time, a number of peers comment on their personal relation to Wertmüller, from Sofia Loren to Harvey Keitel, Giancarlo Giannini, Marina Cicogna, Nastassja Kinski and even John Simon and Martin Scorsese. No one is pushed aside by Ruiz's camera. Each of these special guests explain how they came across Wertmüller and what influence the Italian director had on their career. The interview format is pretty simple: a one-to-one intimate confession which takes place in a neutral studio space with Lina's signature lamp at the side of the frame: the only prop that links the interviewee to Lina Wertmüller's concomitant journey on the screen. In relation to this, Ruiz has commented that he only wanted 'Lina to be moving in real spaces and locations in order for the audience to empathise with her as much as possible'.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Figure 1 - Valerio Ruiz and Lina Wertmüller on the set of *Behind The White Glasses* (2015)

Ruiz makes frequent use of fictional elements to document Wertmüller's journey. For instance, this is particularly evident in the sequence where the Italian director returns to her

husband's studio - Enrico Job's - commenting on their relationship both as life and artistic partners. The environment is well illuminated and well suited to the sequence as a proper fictional set. Ruiz also uses a number of different shots and angles which demonstrates the number of takes filmed that day. That being said, Ruiz's tribute to fiction cinema is also evident in the majority of the outdoor sequences, for instance when Ruiz edits together the walk that Wertmüller takes for the tiny roads of Minervino Murge and the footage of her protagonists in her debut movie *The Lizards* (1963).

Combining elements of pure documentation to scripted situations is part of Ruiz' artistic stance on the project. He has commented that:

I wanted to put Lina at the centre of the narration to benefit from her direct experience on the one hand, yet I also wanted to create a journey rather than simply digging into a memory book. And to do so, I wanted to tell Lina's story as if it was a film. I believe that the life of a director, and especially Lina's one, is to not separate from her work on the screen. In the end, it is not contentious to say that her life has coincided with her ability to direct a film. This is why the overwhelming majority of the sequences where you see Lina on the screen have also been carefully designed in terms of mise en scène.

However, this stylistic trademark did not prevent the unexpected from popping up here and there. In Ruiz's words:

I planned the sequences and the topics I wanted her to discuss in a specific location, but I often had no idea of what Lina was about to say and most specifically, *how*, she was to say it. This is the essence of my use of the documentary form, which is also the essence of Lina's own viewpoint and humour.

Some serious issues on set also played their part in the making of the documentary. For example, in Sardinia they were supposed to film in Cala Golone, on the beach, which is where Lina filmed the beach sequences of *Swept Away* in 1974.

But the wind was so strong and the sea so dangerous that we could not really sail the way I wanted to. Also, the shore was unexpectedly full of tourists, which made it impractical in terms of filming. But that wasn't all. On top of that, the previous night's storm had left an enormous amount of debris on the sand so I really had to change my shots in zero time.

Ruiz's difficulties not only came when filming the sequences with Wertmüller. In fact, 'another important challenge was to contact the list of celebrities I wanted to interview around the world. With John Simon, for instance' - the man who first wrote a positive review of Wertmüller's work in the United States back in the 1970s – 'I tried to contact him through the New York Magazine for which he had been working for decades, but I did not receive a positive response'. So Ruiz decided to google Simon's name and found out about his newly established blog. 'He replied straight away with something I will always remember. He said he would accept my invitation as he was always happy to talk about Lina'. In eight months time and while still filming Lina's journey in between, Ruiz managed to complete his interviews in numerous cities around the globe including Rome, Naples, Geneva and New York.

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

Figure 2 - Valerio Ruiz and Lina Wertmüller on the set of *Behind The White Glasses* (2015)

But the most significant change of schedule happened at the end of the post-production phase right when Valerio was preparing the Digital Cinema Package (DCP). One day, he received the surprising response from Martin Scorsese's agent confirming the availability of the Italian-American director to be interviewed for *Behind the White Glasses*. There was only one requirement: Scorsese would register the interview himself in New York, following the detailed list of questions and visual references that Ruiz had sent. On this, Ruiz commented:

I really wanted to include Scorsese in the film and not only for obvious reasons. When I was working on Lina's autobiography a few years before I found out that the two of them had already met in the 1980s when Lina was filming her documentary *E' Una Domenica Sera Di Novembre (It's A Sunday Evening In November)* (1981) about the devastating earthquake in the Irpinia region. Scorsese's family was originally from that part of Italy, so there was an existing connection between them.

Fifteen days before *Behind the White Glasses* was due to premiere in Venice, Ruiz had to re-open the final cut and re-edit the bits of Scorsese's interview into the documentary. When asked about how he coped with that pressure, Ruiz explained that actually 'it wasn't that difficult' as he already had in mind where he would ideally want 'to place Scorsese's comments in the bits of the film.' On the other hand, the Venice Film Festival had also agreed to wait for the final cut past the deadline. 'It was kind of an unforeseen circumstance they were happy to excuse', Ruiz explained.

After the successful premiere of the documentary at Venice Biennale, the San Carlo Theatre in Naples dedicated a special event to *Behind the White Glasses*. 'A Social moment', to use Ruiz's words, 'as the screening was opened by conductor Andrea Griminelli who played

some of the most famous songs and soundtracks featured in Lina's films'. In the same weeks, the film hit theatrical release in over 40 Italian cinemas. But that is not all. In the past five years, *Behind the White Glasses* has also been broadcast on Italian TV and gained international visibility. Prestigious distributor Kino Lorber has screened Ruiz' work strategically, hitting fourteen American cities in conjunction with the first comprehensive Lina Wertmüller exhibition. 'The most touching American screening' - Ruiz explained

was the one in New York City, at the Quad Cinema, which had reopened only ten days before. It was the same theatre which had screened all of Lina Wertmüller's films in the 1970s. It was a very unique and special feeling as the new opening was entirely dedicated to Lina's retrospective, and also included my documentary.

The documentary has recently hit London, with a dedicated event at the Barbican in March 2019 during the retrospective *Love and Anarchy - The Films of Wertmüller* curated by Alex Davidson.

But the distribution of Ruiz' documentary was not limited to solely English speaking countries. 'The reception of the film in South America has been totally unexpected', Ruiz commented. '*Behind the White Glasses* had received many reviews from important newspapers and journals, such as Variety and The New York Times'. Not all reviews were positive - such as the one in which John Simon gets highly criticised for saying that, in his opinion, Lina Wertmüller is one of the only two great female directors of all time, the other being German director Leni Riefenstahl. 'But the review I was particularly touched by is the one written in The Buenos Aires Herald', Ruiz explained. The Argentinian newspaper, which has unfortunately been recently discontinued, praised Ruiz's film as

more than the sum of its parts. What matters the most in auteur cinema is how the documentary maker achieves a certain personal feeling, an air of familiarity with which to invest their object of desire. And Valerio Ruiz [...] seems to feel so much affection for her that he can effortlessly ring the best out of her reminiscences, idiosyncrasies, *joie de vivre*, and sense of irony and grotesque - and not by resorting to broad strokes, but to details that speak volumes. (Suàrez: 2018)

This affection is truly palpable and in fact, when I asked Valerio what is the best memory he has taken from this experience, his reply was pretty straight-forward.

Being next to Lina is so inspirational. In Italian cinema there's no one else like her. She has worked across a number of platforms and she is able to keep everyone's mood up in a project. She's a true leader. I will always be grateful to her for her courage to support my project. I was a young student who had only filmed a little before this experience and she trusted me instantly. It's something I will always remember.

For those who would like to view *Behind the White Glasses*, the documentary is available on Kino Lorber DVD as well as and Criterion Channel, ITunes, Amazon and Google Play as main VOD platforms.

References

Suàrez, P. (2016). 'A Lovely portrait of the lady with the white glasses', in *Buenos Aires Herald*, 18th August.