

Sydney Film Festival—Part 6: Bernardo Bertolucci's rise and fall

Richard Phillips
18 August 2012

This is the last in a series of articles on the recent Sydney Film Festival. See parts 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Italian film director Bernardo Bertolucci was the subject of a special retrospective at this year's film festival with screenings of *Before the Revolution*, *The Spider's Stratagem*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *1900*, *La Luna*, *The Last Emperor*, *The Sheltering Sky* and *The Dreamers*. Several of these were new prints restored under the supervision of cinematographer and long-time collaborator Vittorio Storaro. *The Conformist*, the filmmaker's most fully realised artistic work, however, was not included because of ongoing legal conflicts between the movie's Italian and American distributors.

While Bertolucci has been the recipient of much praise, several Oscars and numerous other film awards during his 50-year filmmaking career, the value of his legacy has been vastly exaggerated. *Before the Revolution* (1964), *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970) and *The Conformist* (1971), which attempt to explore aspects of fascist or contemporary Italy, were followed by a series of increasingly ill-conceived and disoriented films.

Born in Parma, Italy in 1940, to a left intellectual, middle-class family, Bertolucci began writing poetry and making short 16mm films as a teenager. His father Attilio was a well-known poet, professor and film critic in his own right, and a close friend of Cesare Zavattini, the so-called father of Italian neo-realism.

Attilio Bertolucci helped Pier Paolo Pasolini to publish his first novel, and the latter repaid the favour by hiring the precocious Bernardo as assistant director for his ground-breaking feature *Accattone* (1961). The following year Bertolucci was assigned to direct his first feature, *The Grim Reaper*, a dark neo-realist story about the sex murder of a prostitute and based on a Pasolini script.

Before the Revolution, Bertolucci's next film, is semi-autobiographical and loosely based on Stendhal's 1839 novel *The Charterhouse of Parma* but placed in a contemporary Italian setting. Its central protagonist is Fabrizio, a relatively privileged middle-class youth, grappling with his sexuality, political views and the sudden death (a possible suicide) of his close friend Agostino.

Fabrizio (Francesco Barilli) rejects Catholicism, which he says represents "every privilege, every surrender, every subjugation", and, under the influence of a father-figure teacher, toys with the idea of becoming a communist. He is unable to reconcile this aspiration, however, with his well-to-do background.

Engaged to Clelia (Cristina Pariset), his conservative childhood sweetheart, Fabrizio begins an affair with Gina (Adriana Asti), his seductive but highly-strung older aunt. The affair ends, Fabrizio becomes disillusioned with the local representatives of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) leadership and decides to marry Clelia in what will probably be a passionless relationship.

Before the Revolution is a self-assured and relatively honest effort by the then 23-year-old director and uses tight close-ups, jump cuts, pop music soundtrack and other interesting techniques. The film was heavily

influenced by French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard, Bertolucci's mentor at this time, and is an interesting creative departure from Italian neo-realist filmmaking conventions.

Before the Revolution opens with a quote from eighteenth century French diplomat Talleyrand: "He who did not live in the years before the revolution cannot understand what the sweetness of living is."

The film's main themes—religion, sexuality, communism—however, are never fully explored. Fabrizio rejects the Stalinist PCI but his reasons are entirely personal and superficial. Nevertheless, *Before the Revolution* tapped into concerns by workers and sections of the middle class about the PCI. These inchoate sentiments resonated in France where the film was widely praised and won the critics' prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

A number of critics have argued that Bertolucci anticipated the May-June 1968 general strike in France and the eruption of the "Hot Autumn" wave of industrial struggles in Italy in 1969-70 that brought millions of workers out of their factories and onto the streets, but the movie has an ironic tone. Like Fabrizio, the possibility of socialist revolution in Italy or France was far from Bertolucci's thoughts.

In fact, Bertolucci, like many other leftist intellectuals, was completely rattled by the eruption of the working class. Rather than being repelled by the Stalinists who betrayed these struggles, Bertolucci joined the PCI, claiming that left-wing criticism of the French and Italian Stalinists by students and workers was "anti-communist."

"The Italian Communist Party," he told one film writer, "ever more faithfully expresses the reality of the proletariat, and thus of Italian culture. I feel it allows space for the intellectual and serves as a link between him and those aspects of existence which he has often avoided."

Bertolucci's response to May 1968, in fact, was part of a stampede to the right by large sections of the so-called left. The yearning for a "space for the intellectual" for these layers, however, had nothing to do with a turn to the working class or Marxism but a political refuge, from which they could pursue their own middle class interests and personal concerns.

As Bertolucci told a *Sight and Sound* interview in 1971: "The most important discovery I made after the events of May 1968 was that I wanted the revolution not to help the poor but for myself ... I discovered the individual level in political revolution" (Gerard, Kline and Sklarew(eds), *Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2000, p. xiii).

While Bertolucci is a filmmaker and not a politician, he was clearly influenced by all manner of unhealthy sentiments wafting through sections of the Italian middle class during this period. He never seriously examined the PCI's history or differed with its nationalist and reformist defence of Italian capitalism.

Bertolucci became an ardent supporter of PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer and the so-called "historical compromise" with Christian Democracy. He later praised Berlinguer's infamous 1977 accusation that Italian society was dominated by "consumerism" and agreed with the PCI's loyal parliamentary support for the right-wing Christian Democratic

government and its social austerity measures.

In 1969 Bertolucci also began intense Freudian psychoanalysis and later declared that *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970), his next feature, should have named his psychoanalyst in the opening credits. Bertolucci's view that human behaviour was determined by individual psychology and sexuality, and that society can only be understood through an examination of these factors, increasingly came to dominate and have a detrimental impact on his work.

The ironic tone of *Before the Revolution* was even more pronounced in *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970). Based on Jose Luis Borges's *Theme of Traitor and the Hero*, the enigmatic story places a question mark over the legitimacy of the Italian anti-fascist resistance.

Athos Magnani (Giulio Brogi) is the son of Athos senior, an anti-fascist hero who was murdered in the fictional town of Tara in 1936, by fascist thugs. The son returns to the town three decades later and meets Draifa (Alida Valli), his father's mistress who wants him to find out who killed the father. He initially rejects her request but begins investigating after discovering numerous unexplained mysteries about his father.

The film moves from past to present in dreamlike fashion with Brogi also playing the part of Athos senior. His father's anti-fascist group planned to assassinate Mussolini during a local performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, but the Italian dictator's visit is suddenly cancelled after the plot is discovered.

Athos junior later finds out that his father had told police about the planned assassination and then concocted a complex plot in which he would be murdered by his own comrades in order to make it look like he was killed by the fascists.

As Athos senior explains in one flashback: "It is more useful to have a hero" than a traitor. "We'll offer the spectacle of a dramatic death to catch the people's imagination," he declares, "so they will continue to hate, increasingly hate fascism." Athos junior eventually decides to accept the local mythologising of his father, but when he tries to leave Tara discovers that he is trapped—the railway station has no trains and the tracks are overgrown with weeds.

Bertolucci claimed *The Spider's Stratagem* had no underlying political theme but the film's message was obvious: the anti-fascist resistance was a 'constructed reality' that politically entrapped contemporary Italy. Whether conscious of it or not, Bertolucci's film dovetailed rather cynically with the PCI's deliberate mystification of its treacherous role, ensuring that the anti-fascist resistance was disarmed and the Italian ruling class put back into the saddle after WWII.

The Conformist, Bertolucci's next film and his most artistically accomplished work, was also set in 1930s fascist Italy. Based on Alberto Moravia's book of the same name, the film is a complex non-linear psychological thriller with some striking cinematography by Vittorio Storato.

Marcello is a deeply-repressed intellectual from a dysfunctional upper class family. Traumatized by a childhood homosexual encounter, he comes to believe that the only way to overcome his guilt and shame is by total subservience to the ruling fascist regime.

Marcello agrees to help set up the assassination of an Italian anti-fascist leader living in Paris, who turns out to be his former university professor. Using his honeymoon as an excuse to visit Paris and the professor, Marcello, however, becomes sexually involved with the anti-fascist's young wife with terrible consequences. The film ends in Rome just after Mussolini's fall from power.

Bertolucci said that he made *The Conformist* because he wanted to warn audiences that "fascism was still alive" and the film certainly has some powerful and chilling moments. The movie, however, is also influenced by figures such as Erich Fromm (*Escape from Freedom*) and Wilhelm Reich (*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*), who falsely rooted the growth of fascism, not in the role played by parties and working class leaderships,

but in psychological and sexual repression.

Last Tango in Paris (1972), Bertolucci's next feature, is a demoralised, voyeuristic story about a sadomasochistic relationship between an American widower (Marlon Brando) and a young Parisian (Maria Schneider). While it was banned in Italy until the mid-1980s, the film was a huge financial success. *Last Tango in Paris*

Bertolucci appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and the film was praised by the *New York Times* as "the most powerfully erotic movie ever made." American novelist Norman Mailer stupidly declared that "the cry of the fabric [when Brando first seduces Schneider] is the most thrilling sound to be heard in World Culture since the four opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth."

Pasolini apparently detested the film, declaring it "the product of a subculture. It is supposed to portray something new, but it does not. What's so new about sadism?" Forty years on *Last Tango in Paris* looks silly and self-indulgent and a clear indication that Bertolucci had little interest in exploring any of the pressing issues—artistic and political—posed in the early 1970s. The revolution, he declared, was about sexual liberation.

The financial success of *Last Tango* ensured that Bertolucci obtained the funding for *Novecento* or *1900*, a big budget, but stylistically conventional historical epic about two men—Alfredo (Robert de Niro), the son of a bourgeois landowner, and Olmo (Gerard Depardieu), the son of a peasant—born on the same day in 1901. Olmo later becomes a socialist and Alfredo a fascist supporter.

The movie purported to examine the social and psychological forces that shaped the two men's lives over the next four and a half decades. Bertolucci pompously declared *1900* had not only replicated history but made it "more truthful".

The original film was over five hours but was later re-edited and released by Paramount in the US in a four-hour version. Although *1900* contains some effective scenes about the class tensions in Italy and includes a couple of interesting cameos by Burt Lancaster and Sterling Hayden, the film is a rambling, artistically patchy and confused work that falsely implied the peasantry was the leading and driving force for socialist revolution. The multi-million dollar production was a commercial failure in the US.

Interviewed by *Roma Giovani*, the PCI youth organisation's monthly journal, Bertolucci declared that while Italian culture had been "massacred by consumerism," things were different in Emilia Romagna. The Italian region and its peasantry, he claimed, had been "socialist ever since socialism has existed and communist ever since communism has existed."

Bertolucci released *La Luna* in 1979, a further retreat into his preoccupations with personal identity, family relations and controversial sexual behaviour. This was followed by *The Last Emperor* (1987), a commercially palatable and superficial historical epic about Pu Yi, China's last imperial ruler and a series of other banal and artistically empty films during the 1990s, including *The Sheltering Sky*, set in North Africa, and *The Little Buddha*, which celebrated Tibetan Buddhism.

In 2004 WSWS arts editor David Walsh reviewed *The Dreamers*, Bertolucci's then latest release and set just before the eruption of the May-June 1968 events in France.

Walsh noted: "With the emergence of a new mood in the European intelligentsia in the latter half of the 1970s, 'consumed,' according to one commentator, 'with cynicism, lechery and suicide,' Bertolucci also lost his way. All that was weak, insecure, unresolved in his aesthetic and social world-view came to the fore."

An objective study of Bertolucci's cinema and the filmmaker's ignominious artistic collapse after *The Conformist*, fully confirms this analysis.

Concluded



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact