

Bernardo Bertolucci. Still Dreaming

Inga Pierson (December 14, 2010)



MoMA celebrates legendary Italian filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci with a retrospective of his work. Showing through January 12th, the program includes screenings of iconic masterpieces "The Conformist" and "Last Tango in Paris" in newly restored prints.

Undercutting the laudatory tenor of the many introductions made on his behalf, the director of "The Conformist", "Last Tango in Paris", and "The Dreamers", addressed an audience of journalists and young filmmakers at the Italian Cultural Institute Monday playfully, "probably I make films because they are less boring than my real life". Quickly turning more serious however, he reflected that he has always remained faithful to an inner vision.

The subject at hand, the retrospective of his oeuvre - Bernardo Bertolucci - which opened Wednesday at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, celebrates nearly 40 years of filmmaking. Across 4 continents - from China, India and Africa to the cosmopolitan cities of Paris and Rome - Bertolucci has revolutionized cinema several times over. The retrospective features 20 films in



newly remastered prints and includes some rarely seen gems: Bertolucci's first film, "The Grim Reaper" (1962) - a thriller set in Rome-, the U.S. premier of his 3-part documentary series, "Oil" (1967), and the original 5 hour director's cut of "1900".

For Bertolucci, who came of age in the era of free love, sexual experimentation, and social revolution, the experience of creating, of building and sculpting characters, is distinctly sensual. In his work, the human body is the canvas on which history unfolds and human psychology releases its breathless beauty and harrowing fragility. His interiors are sparsely decorated and the landscapes are empty - the human presence, however lost and small, looms disproportionately.

Somewhere between fantasy, dream, and mystic rapture, Bertolucci sees filmmaking as a kind of ecstatic experience. Responding to questions Monday evening, he defined his opus as "one long, continuous film", a procession of images externalized and governed by poetic inspiration. He affirmed that, although he writes and re-writes his screenplays, he never looks at them once he begins filming. A neorealist tradition, perhaps, but Bertolucci's films are far from documentary in spirit. They inhabit an alternate realm which, however coterminous with reality, is rather the inexpressible world of mortal confusion - or with Shakespeare, "the stuff dreams are made of".

Likewise the relationship with his actors is an intimate one: quite unabashedly, he declared that he "falls in love with the actors". Indeed, the love triangle Bertolucci, Brando, and Maria Schneider in "Last Tango in Paris" is famously one of the most arresting and decadent dysfunctional relationships in the history of art. Dismissing the fictional concept of character, Bertolucci explained that he needs the interaction with the human person, he needs "a face in front of [his] camera" and that he uses the camera to delve into the mystery of that person, "to uncover the secrets of their being". At times the director's intensity and extraordinary talent for inspiring complicity, have proven to be dangerous and even ruinous. Both Brando and Maria Schneider were said to have felt violated by "Last Tango in Paris" and Brando refused to speak to Bertolucci for nearly 15 years.

In a list of incredible talent that includes Jean-Louis Trintignant, Massimo Girotti, Dominique Sanda, Gérard Dépardieu, Robert De Niro, Donald Sutherland, Jill Clayburgh, Debra Winger, John Malkovich, Alida Valle, Anouk Aimée, Peter O'Toole, and Jeremy Irons, Brando stands out as a "sacred monster", and the director was clearly as marked by the experience of "Last Tango" as his actors. He cites the film's aftermath as one of the two great artistic crises of his career. (The other being the controversy over the length of his virtuoso epic, "1900".)

As rare as the retrospective itself may be, it is even more exceptional to have the artist on hand to discuss his work. And though a veteran of the industry, Bertolucci seems to have lost none of the wonder and excitement of a young director. Far from disdaining television and new media, he extolled the virtues of Mad Men, comparing it to the 19th century novel - a "Dickens for the 21st Century" - and he confessed to being utterly vulnerable to its charms. He sees digital technology as the "digital chance" - the democratization of filmmaking - and he observed that television and cinema seem to be exchanging their essential functions and properties.

Even in English Bertolucci is uncommonly articulate. He arrived almost punctually - especially impressive in the world of Italian celebrity. He spoke candidly and sincerely but also very clearly and eloquently - demonstrating the passion and feeling of an artist as well as the keen insight of a practiced master of his craft. He seemed happy to talk with journalists, colleagues (cinematographer Vittorio Storaro made an appearance), and students alike. And even after hours of interviews he graciously entertained our request for a digital "autograph", allowing us to stage the exclusive photo above.

Best of all? We may see more of Bertolucci's cinema in the near future. The director revealed, with some excitement, that there is a new project in development.

Organized by Cinecittà Luce and The Museum of Modern Art and curated by Jytte Jensen, of MoMA's Film Department with Camilla Cormanni and Paola Ruggiero of Cinecittà Luce in Rome, the retrospective opened Wednesday December 15th and continues through January 12th. It is sponsored by Eni S.p.A, an Italian energy company.



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}p.MsoNormal, li.MsoNormal, div.MsoNormal { margin: 0in 0in 0.0001pt; font-size: 12pt; font-family:

"Times New Roman"; }div.Section1 { page: Section1; }The director of "The

Conformist" (1970), "Last Tango in Paris" (1972), "1900" (1976), "The Last Emperor" (1987), and "The Dreamers" (2003), met the press at the

Italian Cultural Institute to discuss the retrospective of his work -

Bernardo Bertolucci - which premiered at the Museum of Modern Art

Wednesday. Bernardo Bertolucci encompasses over 40 years of filmmaking

across 4 continents - from China, India and Africa to Rome and Paris -

and it features 20 films in prints newly restored by Cinecittà Luce.

The cinematic gems to be shown at MoMA include the critically acclaimed

films mentioned above as well as Bertolucci's first film, "The Grim

Reaper" (1962), a thriller set in Rome, the U.S. premier of the rarely

seen 3-part documentary series, "Oil" (1967), and the original 5 hour

director's cut of "1900". Jytte Jensen, of MoMA's Film

Department, Edoardo Gheci, of Cinecittà Luce, and Riccardo Viale, of

the Italian Cultural Institute were on hand to introduce the director.

Vittorio Storaro, cinematographer and longtime Bertolucci collaborator,

also honored the director with his remarks. With a

certain humility the maestro confessed that he makes films "because they

are less boring than my real life" while asserting that, throughout his

career, he has always remained faithful to an inner vision. The

influence of his predecessors, celebrated filmmakers such Roberto

Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni and Luchino Visconti, emerged in a

series of neorealist precepts: the hand's on approach, improvisation,

the script as sketch, actors not as professionals but as players of

themselves. But for Bertolucci, who came of age in the

era of free love, sexual experimentation, and social revolution, the

experience of creating, of building and sculpting characters, is

distinctly sensual. In his work, the human body is the canvas on which

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uses the camera to delve into the mystery of that person, "to uncover

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