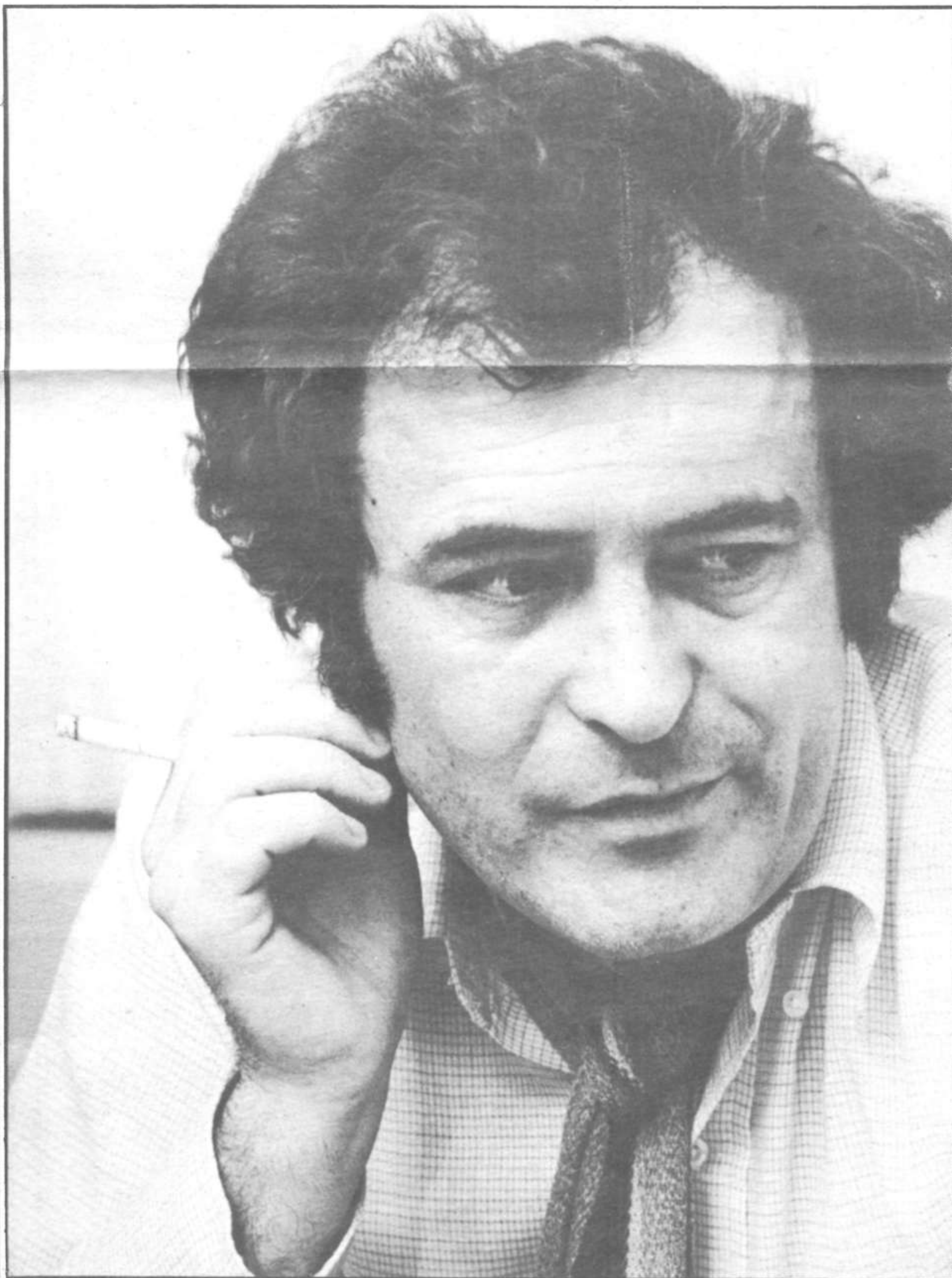


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SOHO ARTS

After the Revolution



Bertolucci on 1900: "I was going on with my physical relationship with the movie, also cutting, when I was here in New York. Before the screening at Lincoln Center, I cut one more minute. And Andrew Sarris was scandalized."

Rob Baker

It's one of those overlooking-Central-Park hotel interviews, and Bernardo Bertolucci looks tired. It's been a long, uphill fight to get his movie *1900* to the regular-run New York City moviescreen, and the problems aren't over yet. At the moment, he'd just as soon be home in Rome, where the half-finished screenplay to his next picture, *La Luna*, is waiting on the kitchen table. But the fight goes on.

After tremendous popular success in Europe, *1900* opened here at the New York Film Festival to some of the most brutally negative reviews ever accorded a picture which had already established its reputation elsewhere. Perhaps the reputation was the problem: New York critics don't much like surfboarding unless they can ride in on the first wave. Or maybe, Bertolucci thinks, they resented his commercial success here with his previous film, *Last Tango in Paris*: New York critics definitely have a reputation for that, too — shooting someone down the minute their reputation begins to catch on. Or maybe it was aesthetic preconceptions (which New York critics have a good deal too many of), or politics (which they have practically none of and resent passionately).

At any rate, the critics have hurt the movie's chances here, and Bertolucci is not pleased. "The thing that surprised me is that people wrote about this movie as if it was the worst movie they had ever seen. They are going to see movies every week, and they see a lot of shit. I don't think it's the worst movie — maybe it's not the best and maybe it's not a movie they love, but this reaction is so violent that something must be underneath. They can't be reactionary in a political sense because it's not chic to be reactionary politically. But they can be reactionary in cultural terms."

This Bertolucci relates specifically to the inability of most of the critics to accept what he calls the conventions of the movie: the fact that it was filmed in a mixture of Italian, English, French and German and that there's no "original" (undubbed) version available for release; the fact that "you have Hollywood money and a leftist ideology in the same movie;" the fact that "it puts together many elements" which, according to the critics' perceptions and preconceptions, don't mesh into a proper whole.

"I know that the movie is outrageous," he smiles. "When I say outrageous, I mean free in a way. Free to put together a really popular vulgar passage — something that is not to be used in movies because it is considered too popular — like the fact that the two characters in *1900* are born on the same day, in the beginning of the one century, when Verdi is dying. That is outrageous."

Bertolucci's words pour out fast, in rich cadences, and his English is clear and precise, though he apologizes for it. The temptation is to simply let him ramble on, to let the tape-recorder do all the work.

"I'm very pissed off by some critics who used to be very progressive, 15 or 20 years ago," he says, "and are now completely reactionary. Like, for example, what Andrew Sarris wrote about my movie." (Sarris had criticized Bertolucci for continuing to edit *1900* after a supposedly finished version had been presented to the public.) "It's not a question of whether he likes it or doesn't like it — of his own opinion of the movie. The problem is, I think, he's gotten reactionary. He said Bertolucci cut his movie, and a critic has the right to know when a movie is finished. What does that mean? I read it in the *Village Voice*. What does it mean? He doesn't understand what movie is. Movie is also a relationship between a man and a piece of film. So I was having the litigation, etc. I was going on my physical relationship with the movie, also cutting, when I was here in New York. Before the screening at Lincoln Center, I jumped in Dan Talbot's screening room and I cut one more minute. And Andrew Sarris was scandalized. I think he's

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Bertolucci: "Reality is full of passion, mystery, and politics. And emotions."

really reactionary. He doesn't know maybe that a lot of artists, writers, poets, used to work again and again and again? *The Wasteland* of Eliot was not only cut by him, but was cut by Ezra Pound, too. Also I would like to know if the editor of the *Village Voice* never cut one line of his articles."

Bertolucci was equally irritated by the sound rejection of the film by Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*: "When I saw the headline on Canby's first review — 'Four Hours of a Marxist Romance' — I was very suspicious that there was something hidden behind his title. I can't believe that a movie critic would just be so weak in front of brainwashing on communism that he would not accept the movie just for that fact. I can't believe it. It's too sad. If it is like that, I don't want to know."

The most sensitive review of the film, Bertolucci feels, came from Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker*: "In her article, there is a feeling of some sort of movie fever. Someone told me that Pauline loves cinema and that Canby hates cinema. And this is evident. This movie makes a sort of division between the person who loves cinema and the person who — well, you can love cinema and not accept my movie, of course, but in such a way that still shows you love cinema. But in general, bad reactions are so far from the movie, the things they say are so superficial. I mean, to reject it just because I refuse to accept some convention. And I think there is also the fact that I had a big success with *Tango*. It didn't help. It's strange in the country where everyone is so vulnerable in front of success, success makes people suspicious."

What upsets Bertolucci is that the people who might appreciate the movie now won't get the chance, because they're put off by the reviews. "I know it's a popular movie. I made the movie for the people. I didn't make the movie

for people like Andrew Sarris or Canby. I know 80 per cent of the audience loves this movie because I've seen them. And they are really surprised, because they read the reviews and they don't understand."

"But I think I never will make any more press screenings. Because if Canby or Sarris had seen the film with the audience, I think the audience would make people like them understand much better the movie. They are obliged to decide if a movie is an arty movie or not. They can't figure a movie where all is mixed up. Maybe Canby likes much more literature than movies. I know he wrote a book. For example, he said something very serious and dangerous, I think. He said, in that review, that movie is not a fine art. Being a critic of maybe the most important newspaper in the world — with *La Pravda*, of course — being a critic at this level and thinking that movie is not a fine art, I don't know, why does he write about it?"

There's a laugh after the *Pravda* reference, but most of this is dead serious. Later, listening to the tape and looking over the transcriptions, I'm fascinated by how the words and ideas spill over one another, bouncing off one another, but meshing, at last, into a kind of angrily determined whole.

Bertolucci's defensiveness about *1900* is further illuminated by the fact that the director has spent practically five years of his life on the project. He began developing the script before *Last Tango in Paris*, then "realized the movie was much more expansive than the money I could find, so I just put it aside and made *Last Tango* and *Last Tango* made possible *Novecento*." He collaborated on the screenplay with his brother Giuseppe and Franco Arcalli (the three are also working together on *La Luna*, which will be filmed "partly" in Brooklyn and for which Bertolucci hopes to snare Liv Ullman as its star), but Bertolucci himself "did most of the writing."

1900 was premiered at Cannes in 1976 and the first controversy was a purely commercial one: the film was five hours and twenty minutes long. The European version, with everything dubbed in Italian, was shown in two parts. The American producers didn't want to do it that way, so Bertolucci was asked to trim the English dubbed version considerably, down to its present length of just over four hours.

"I prefer the new version because the other one was really, like Pauline wrote, a rough cut. She's right. I finished the movie and I didn't even see the print before it was sent to Cannes. And at that moment, I felt I couldn't cut one frame. But two months later, I told the producer I wanted to cut at least a half-hour out of the English version. Then he said he wanted more."

Negotiations were hot and heavy for a while, and also involved Paramount, who finally agreed to release the film here. "The litigation wasn't with Paramount, though, it was with the producer," Bertolucci stresses. "Paramount, in a way, was very sincere from the beginning. They said, 'We don't want the movie.'" His negotiations with Paramount this time around primarily involved the advertising campaign for the film: The company had been placing fancy art deco ads that included a few quotes, but no listing of the international superstar cast. Bertolucci wanted the big names in, and he got his way.

Besides the stars, he also used real Italian peasants from a small village to play the workers in the film. Working with them was easy, he said, "Because they don't have to do anything except be themselves. And their faces! Incredible. But I have to say that I love working with professional actors, too. Just trying to understand their secrets. Because when I choose an actor, I usually do it in two or three minutes. If I have a good feeling, I immediately fall in

love. And afterwards, when I'm shooting I try to discover why I did choose them. And that's interesting. And also to understand what's hidden in them. And the characters are built on this dialectic between me, that I want to know more about them, and them, and they don't want to tell the truth about themselves."

Bertolucci started his career in film as assistant director to Pier Paolo Pasolini on *Accatone*, and his own first film, *The Grim Reaper*, was based on a story by Pasolini; the two remained close friends until Pasolini's murder two years ago shortly after the release of his last film, *Salò*.

"I saw the movie a few days after his death and it was a terrible experience because it was impossible to separate the movie from Pier Paolo. It was like having a *sur'impression* — a superimposition — of his face as a dead man on the screen. I felt very bad. Then the movie grew inside me and now I feel, this moment, I think that the movie is just superb and great. But I had some very bad reactions when I saw it. I think for the most part, really, I didn't understand the movie, but in this case it wasn't so easy to understand. I think that Pier Paolo wanted to follow the life of this movie, talking about it, because it's really a metaphor. I think this movie is what he felt before dying, the last year, two years before dying, about his relationship with the young people he used to love, the young proletarians. And they changed, they were changed, because of what he used to call the genocide of the consumer society. So this movie was about his despair of the changes of these young boys and of this world. Also, in the movie, there is a sort of hate for them — I think he has more sympathy for the four monsters than for the victims. And it's not a historical movie, of course. It's not history, in capital letters, about the Salò republic. The movie is about the present, not about the past. I think every movie is about the present."

"I think, too, there is a misunderstanding about the way he died. It is much easier to think that it was the death of a masochist, than to think that he was killed. Not killed by a sort of cabal, a conspiracy. But he was killed by the power, in a way, because for 20 years the power tried to lynch him in any way they could. Because he was homosexual, first, because he was leftist, because he was different. And the guy who was supposed to kill him, I don't think he killed him. I think that many persons killed him, because he was completely destroyed, and this guy didn't have one drop of blood on him, on his pants, on his body, and when he was arrested he wouldn't have had time to wash. So he was killed, I think, by many persons. The guy looked almost proud, like he was saying, I killed Pasolini because he was a homosexual. And the guy was a whore. And so even a whore, who used to organize his life when people pay, was proud. But he was killed by the power, indirectly."

There was some criticism of *1900* at the press conference during the film festival by gays who thought Bertolucci didn't present "positive" images of homosexuals in his film. "I don't think that's right," Bertolucci says. "I think the story between Olmo and Alfredo is homosexuality, and in a very natural way. It's what happens when you are ten years old in the country and you have a friend. Also the uncle is homosexual — and he is the only one, during the wedding, who says to Olmo, You are becoming worse than the fascists and I'll never put my foot here again. I think he's a positive character."

(Did Bertolucci have the real-life photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden in mind when he created the character of the uncle? "Yes, yes, the man who took beautiful pictures of the guys in Taormina, nude with leaves, as fauns and satyrs. You're the first person to recognize that.")

And Bertolucci's own politics, how does he define them? "I am not a politician. I am a filmmaker. And being a filmmaker, I try to open my eyes to everything that is in front of my camera. This reality is full of passion, mystery and politics. And emotions. Politics is one of the important things in our — maybe much more in Europe than in this country. But, take it easy, it is beginning to become important here too. I think so. It is becoming, actually."



Natural lovers: DeNiro and Depardieu



Bourgeois marriage: DeNiro and Sanda