

## Document Citation

Title	<b>The father, the son, and the holy revolution (I)</b>
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1982 Feb 23
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	45
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La tragedia di un uomo ridicolo (Tragedy of a ridiculous man), Bertolucci, Bernardo, 1981

# The Father, the Son, and the Holy Revolution (I)

Voice,  
Feb. 23, 1982

By Andrew Sarris

**TRAGEDY OF A RIDICULOUS MAN.** Directed and written by Bernardo Bertolucci. Produced by Giovanni Bertolucci for Fiction Cinematografica S.p.a. A Ladd Company Release through Warner Bros.

**MISSING.** Directed by Costa-Gavras. Screenplay by Costa-Gavras & Donald Stewart, based on the book by Thomas Hauser. Produced by Edward Lewis and Mildred Lewis. A Polygram Presentation released through Universal Pictures.

Bernardo Bertolucci, Costa-Gavras, and Volker Schlöndorff popped into town last week in connection with the promotion of their latest films, *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*, *Missing*, and *Circle of Deceit* respectively. In one way or another, each of these works has managed to open up old wounds in trouble spots around the world, the Bertolucci with the Red Brigades in Italy, the Costa-Gavras with the American presence in Latin America, and the Schlöndorff with the ongoing civil war in Lebanon. But if I were to adequately analyze all the political permutations of these three pictures I would require an entire issue of *The Village Voice* for my column, and since such a large amount of space is not likely to be granted, I shall have to content myself with a gut reaction to the three entertainments in question. Besides, the general impression that all three directors are men of the left does not provide much opportunity for polemics at a time when Ronald Reagan's being to the right of Genghis Khan has scrambled the conventional alignments. If I came upon Bertolucci, Costa-Gavras, and Schlöndorff together in a dark room, I could expect them to cry out in unison: "There's nobody here but us social democrats." On the surface, at least, theirs seems to be the politics of Mitterrand, Schmidt, Papandreou, and what moderate leftist legend has made of the late Allende. But can one be even moderately leftist in the European manner these days, and not be violently anti-American? This question applies with special force to Costa-Gavras who must bear somewhere very close to the surface of his unconscious an ancestral grudge against the Truman Doctrine.

Still, the three films are strikingly different in the treatment of their themes. Bertolucci's *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man* is the vaguest, the most mystical, and the least manipulative of the three, and I like it the best. Does that reveal as much about me as about Bertolucci? Possibly. Bertolucci is not nearly as splashy and as lurid as he has been in the past, but he is back close to home ground in Parma, and Ugo Tognazzi provides a marvelous rendering of a warmly obtuse father figure, a former partisan who has worked his way up to becoming a cheese tycoon, and who cannot understand either his son or the other members of his son's generation. The newspaper article that Claire Peploe discovered for Bertolucci as the source of the scenario was a more sordid affair involving the Mafia. What Bertolucci has retained from the *fait divers* is the father's stratagem of diverting ransom money for an already murdered son to prop up his own failing business. As Tognazzi plays the cheese-maker Primo, his materialism never becomes greedy and grubby. For one thing, the story is told entirely from Primo's point of view, and we thus come to understand Primo's materialism as a way of perceiving the universe. Bertolucci told me that he had restored Tognazzi's voice-over which he had discarded for the Cannes screenings. I suspect that this intensification of the subjectivity of the nar-

rative makes the film and the protagonist both warmer and more accessible. Also, he seems even more to be surrounded by people whose motives he cannot fathom, most notably his French bourgeois wife Barbara (Anouk Aimee), his son's enigmatic girl friend (Laura Morante), and the worker-priest (Victor Cavallo) with whom she is obscurely involved.

Bertolucci believes that the traumatic experience of the Red Brigades has changed the Italian character. People are no longer as open, as voluble, and as communicative as they once were. There is more skepticism and suspicion. It is not the familiar alienation effect illustrated by Antonioni 20 years ago in *L'Avventura*, but something more insidious, a sly, furtive, inscrutable, noncommittal glance slithering across the screen from one character to another. The ending is miraculous, something out of the Bible via Pasolini, but with a more controlled lyricism, and a surprisingly mellowed worldliness. *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man* is the best Bertolucci movie I have seen in a long time, and the best treatment of the generational barrier between father and son that I have seen yet.