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A Meditation on The Spider's Stratagem

"Simonides called painting silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks; for the actions which painters depict as they are being performed, words describe after they are done."

Bertelucci's "painterliness" has often been referred to, so noticeable is his awareness of the balance and exchange of form and color in each frame. I am often reminded of specific paintings when I look at Bertelucci's films, but more, I feel encouraged to imagine that a new order of painting takes place -- a kinetic painting which, in its course, envelops a poetry in its movement from image to image (frame to frame). There is, at any rate, a subtle reminder of painting and poetry throughout, and the existence of each in each other. Bertelucci's cinema becomes a place wherein forms are interchangeable; or a form wherein meaning is exchanged; or perhaps a space wherein form and meaning play. But it is a restless and interminable exchange and the players are many; and for them, meaning is soul and movement becomes metempsychosis. Athes tells us that "There is an expression . . . A man is made of all men."; we are further told (through implication) that many places are represented by a place. Each embodiment of meaning becomes a topos, reminding us of all of the other meanings it has had, and all of the other topos it has been. Each seems impaled with the other. They seem to spin 'round each other, to dance as two dancers articulating a rhythm within which they can both move (as the aunt and her nephew in Before the Revolution, Paul and Jeanne in Last Tango, Athes and the towns girl in the Spider's Stratagem, and Anna and Giuglia in The Conformist) to find the unforgettable images they combine to make. The space

between the dancers in one film asks us to fill it with all of the other dancers and the implications of their dance. The space swells with associations, memories . . . What is it that such spaces provide? They confront us like Pascalian vacuums that men refused existed for fear that they would, by that existence, deny their souls' space . . . And here I find myself fascinated by a space Bertelucci provides for us in the frame, in the heart of his film, in Costa's open-air theater: a movie screen. This particular scene calls to mind Courbet's homage to memory in his L'Atelier in which the artist, surrounded by his friends in his dark studio, does not paint the friends, nor the nude who may be there to model for him, but paints a landscape from memory. Bertelucci's homage to memory, paralleling Courbet's gesture, is in the movie-house, for we are in a movie-house wherein Costa lifts the movie screen revealing a wonderfully green wooded place, seen as if through the summer shower against which the screen . . . I want to call it a canvas . . . is protected. The canvas folds within itself the landscape which visually fills the space made possible by it; by the whiteness of it, folding. The suspicions Athes is about to articulate are also seemingly folded into the landscape, protected from exposure and dissipated by the gesture made by his friend -- to distract him from the empty screen to this green place. This green place recalls another: the green cornfield with which we become so familiar as the film moves on in its place; and serves to recall itself, recall itself as memory diffused, yet as a musical motif in an opera (Rigolette), remaining particular. The screen serves, too, as a possible metaphor for Athes who exists as a tabula rasa upon which will be projected the image of his father. Appropriate to the film's ambiguity, the father is played by the



son (almost a bizarre pun on the memory of the man in each of his  
 chromosomes, the cellular microcosm which fully remembers the  
 macrocosm, and can thereby reproduce itself). All moments from  
 the time we first see Athes are defined by his father's past. We  
 know nothing about Athes except that his picture appeared in a  
 newspaper and that he never knew his father. His father is some-  
 one he never knew and who everyone remembers. The sailor calling  
 "Tara" (the name of the town -- which translates as blemish, fault,  
 shortcoming, weakness) out to him at the beginning of the film  
 suggests the odyssey Athes is embarking on is one through an  
 internal geography -- his own -- to find the father, the fault, in  
 himself; while the townspeople see him as dyadic, equal, in appear-  
 ance, at least, to the father who they remember faultlessly as the  
 hero. Earlier in the film we see Athes face a wall, look up and  
 as he does so, the camera pans "Via Athes Magnani" backwards for us  
 . . . which is what we will do: move backwards in time, through  
 memory, through streets as old and encrusted as old men's arteries,  
 to find Athes and his murderer while Athes is in front of us all  
 along in the form of the son who bears his name "exactly". We,  
 as well as Athes, allow all present to be usurped by the past, a  
 past that is not particular to Athes, the son; and as we exist  
 with the movement of the film (thinking in place), we realize that  
 it is a different ordering of the father's past, also. The pre-  
 condition for all meditation in the film (Morazé defines meditation  
 as linked with unconscious wanderings within a conscious choice of  
 places to wander in) is that Draifa (a false mother, mistress to

his father) summons Athes to Tara (and with what perversity does this "place" fuse the image and the myth -- a life which the whole town recites from memory). The explanation is that she saw his picture in a newspaper and she had to be sure he is who he seems to be; and almost as if an afterthought, she adumbrates her desire that he stay to discover his father's assassin and possibly avenge his death. In an attempt to bring himself to the present by a clarification of the past, time for Athes becomes a collection of unshared remembrances; specifics become indistinct and full of mystery, full of ambiguity that calls not only time itself, but all forms existing within time, into question. For example, when Athes asks Draifa what his father was like, Draifa tells him that for his father, it was always daytime. We are given a remembrance of night with Athes successfully encouraging the cocks into crowing, harbingers for day. When Athes, the son, began this visit (within which the flashback takes place) with Draifa, it was daytime and although there is nothing to indicate that anything but a short time has passed, it is night when he leaves her house. One obfuscation presupposes another. There is not only the attention to confusing day with night, but to confusing masculine with feminine, as well. The omnipresent watermelon which Athes offers to the rabbit, saying, "half each" offers another dyadic homologue. This becomes clearer as the film progresses and Athes is walking with the consierge's son who is holding the rabbit. The boy considers the rabbit to be



feminine; Athes considers it masculine. The argument ends with Athes saying, "masculine, like you." Later, Athes watches Draifa's young servant painting her nails and asks, "What kind of boy are you?" The little girl takes her hat off (in a gesture which rhymes with the chauffeur's gesture in the Conformist) and shakes out a thick fall of hair, revealing to him what we knew all along . . . that he was a girl. The relationship of one to the other, the girl to the boy, in a film full of "old men, madmen, old madmen" is a heightened parallel and thus, when the girl's sexual identity is called into question, it causes us to recall the little boy with the rabbit. It asks us to think about the pronouncement "Masculine, like you.", since the mistake about the little girl calls Athes' ability to differentiate into question. And seen, we question Bertelucci's desire to differentiate. Athes is visiting Draifa once more. She is in the foreground; her boy-girl servant, scrubbing a floor, is seen through the doorway; and through a further doorway, we see Athes coming towards us. They would seem to define their spaces, yet here and there they all merge and we look into them congruently enfolding one another, as we see the doorways framing one another . . . (and we are sure, too, that we must be framed by another entrance -- the one the screen upon which the film is projected provides). Still later, we watch Athes' belt being loosened as he sits in the chair just outside the doorway. We are sure it is his

own hands' work, only to find Draifa's presence as the camera pans away. Indeed, it is Draifa: who is large-boned, raspy-voiced, a beautifully "masculine" woman throughout. She with great strength drags Athes, asleep in his chair, into the house, out of the sun. She then lights a green spiral. When Athes awakes, we look at the spiral which hasn't burned more than perhaps a half-inch, and yet it is night. It is possible that Draifa lit another one in our absence, nevertheless, cinematic time is condensed and ambiguity is created. This ambiguity which is finally the film itself, ensnares us, bringing us to a sense of frozen time; a sense of immobility out of place; a sense of the diffusion of light and information that is at once incredibly frustrating and sublimely erotic. The point at which one becomes aware that ambiguity verges on equivocation by Bertelucci is the remembrance that follows when Athes asks Draifa, "Tell me what he was like intimately." Within that retrospection, Athes, the father, is watching the re-capture of an escaped carnival lion; Draifa's back is to him as his is to her; she faces us saying, "It may have been because his back was turned to me. . . but I was afraid. It was the last time I ever saw him alive." It would seem inappropriate to address Athes, the father, her lover, in the third person about an unknowable future condition. It is possible that she transcends the film itself: that is, she addresses us directly. Most expected would be her saying those words to Athes, the son, in the present, outside of remembrance, but inside of memory. What Bertelucci gives us is Draifa in the present, visibly placing herself in a remembrance of the past and silently speaking through such a memory to Athes' son in the green place they share. The confusion of father and son is almost dreamlike in texture since in these



flashbacks, the characters all physically look as they do in the present. Athes must be well over twenty years old, yet in these moments back in time, Draifa's hair is even then grey. (In other flashbacks, the three friends, Costa, Rasori, Gaibazzi, are as old looking in their temporal relationship to Athes, the father, as to Athes, the son.) It would seem that we remember ourselves as we are, engaged in doing something in the past. And since this retrospection is interspersed with the present in which Athes and Draifa (in her wonderful white dress, sheltered by her white umbrella) walk through the green woods separately and meditatively, it seems that this landscape is an *impressa* for Draifa as well as Athes. That same afternoon Draifa's servant offers Athes a mint beverage and states that Draifa insists that he drink all of it. Bertolucci's camera then embraces her -- filling the screen with the face of this beautiful girl wearing her large straw hat. This image languidly moves to another image; the cornfields greener than ever in their newly watered state and crowned with a rainbow through this light mist . . . we realize it is what is seen through Athes' eyes, the first image in waking, the second image in a dream or in a dream-like *impressa* for a remembrance, for he is now barely awake and listening to Gaibazzi imitating the sound of a turtle dove. The three men are sitting around a table beyond Athes, on a terrace, and what has been fairly humorous talk is turned into a more serious harassment of Beccaccia by Costa. As Costa leans across the table looking straight into Beccaccia's eyes he tells him that unlike the three of them, Beccaccia has never eaten a lion. Beccaccia's back is to us, to Athes, and it would seem that Costa might have easily been



77

talking to Athes, and still more, to his father since, while the flashback shows the head of this peer carnival lion (who died of a fever) being served to the four anti-fascists, one look at the expression on Athes' face is assurance of doubt that Athes had eaten the lion. The implication is that Beccaccia is not as courageous as they are (if we are what we eat) but the fact that the lion dies of a fever <sup>artificially</sup> complicates the possibility of their being "courageous". That night, Athes defiles his father's grave and then is seen running through the cornfields in the moonlight, holding his own lunar-like light and looking slightly mad. The defilement of his father's grave seems the understandable gesture towards a recovery of himself and yet the destruction of his gravestone would also be a metaphoric erasure of the death itself, for the father only seems more and more alive in the son. We feel as he runs through these fields that the sun may rise soon . . . and it does, for we find him enter his room in the morning to find that the townspeople are gathered in the cemetery because there has been a "sacrilege"; and immediately after this information, he is told that Beccaccia wishes to see him in the opera house. He arrives and Beccaccia is found sitting in the Magnani box expressing to Athes his pleasure at being able to say that he can sit still alive in the place where Athes Magnani was killed. He tells Athes that although he did not kill his father, he wishes he could say he did. He hated the sight of him and couldn't even bear to see a photograph of him (unlike Dralfo who causes Athes' being there because of a photograph) and he takes no pleasure in having to see the same face (in the being of

the son) looking at him again. He wants him to leave town for this reason, but more so because since his coming, the hatred of the fascists has increased and the townspeople are blaming Peccaccia for the sacrilege. During this talk, the two of them move from box to box; almost as if they were playing a bizarre game of replacement, since Athes eventually winds up in the Magnani box himself. It is almost as if the two of them and the dead Athes are interchangeable. It is almost as if Bertolucci is telling us that fascism, cowardice, anti-fascism, heroism are convergent at more points than seem, at first, apparent. Looking for a "hero" in this film puts us in the same position as the townspeople who in their desperation (and cowardice) need and create one. This scene in the empty opera house is contrasted to one we see later in which Rigoletto is being performed for a full house. We see Athes in his father's box and the trio of friends in a box across from him. They disappear from their own box one at a time and reappear together at the door of Athes' box as "maledizione" is sung (the point at which Mussolini was to be assassinated and instead, Athes Magnani was). He then realized the certainty of their having killed his father (what he was about to articulate as the screen was to be folded in the moviehouse earlier). They then explain that it was his father's own desire to die and moreover, to die a hero, for he had betrayed the three of them to the fascists and knew he must die for it anyway. The secret of betrayal was kept by these three men as they continued the myth of the hero, and by association, of their own heroism. Not everything, therefore, being colder thought about the present-in-the-past or the past-in-the-present is objective. Information given is not undergirded by truth (ambiguous) by the teller (equally ambiguous) but with an attention to the effect of how what is told affects the present. That is, Athes is at first lied to by his father's friends because a town full of



cowards needs a hero. (To guarantee the security of the myth would mean the killing of the son, but that would require a man as heroic-cowardly as his father!) Athes reimagines his father almost as if he were resurrected (come to replace him). He is warned against staying from the very beginning (an unwitting warning by the sailor who calls out the "weakness" of the town). He is knocked unconscious on his first morning in town and wakes to find that on his door someone has chalked, "This is only the beginning" (to ward off the possibility of his discovering the truth about his father). This message seems a verification of reality, the beginning of a painful uncovering of a false history: his father's, his own. We are given evidence throughout that the "uguale" son will suffer as did his father the anxiety of concealment. In not revealing that it is he who defaces his father's grave, Athes is a (witting or unwitting) participant in his father's great plan: "I shall be murdered by a fascist . . . a cowardly act to catch the people's imagination . . . a great theatrical spectacle all the people will recite without knowing it. . . . Tara will be a great theater." By concealing his part in the sacrilege, the town is left free to blame the fascists for it and the apotheosis of his father continues.

Like a "catch" in a spider's web trying to free himself, Athes becomes caught in it more inextricably. Memories (albeit not his own) are the materials from which he unconsciously draws his pattern of imitation. He cannot betray his father's great lie to the crowd convened to honor his father/him with another statue. He in explaining that "a man is made of many men" seems to resign himself to an

involuntarily of his situation. He leaves to catch a train to Parma. The train is going to arrive late and then even later; and as we look at the track overgrown with weeds and littered with large rocks, one wonders if the train will ever come; and this causes us to remember Draifa's words to him (as she pulls off his own jacket and replaces it with his father's), "You can't go away anymore . . . You're back . . . You can't go away anymore."

"I will never get there,  
Oh, Lady, remember me  
who in your service grows older  
not wiser, no more than before."

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