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14—BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI

The poetry of class struggle

Prior to the American release of 1900, *Bernardo Bertolucci gave* Cineaste *permission to reprint an interview done by Fabio di Vico and Roberto Degni shortly after the 1976 Cannes Film Festival. Bertolucci speaks of the horrified reaction of his American distributors when they first saw the film and his own anticipation of how the American public might react. He responds to questions about the film which had been aired in the European press and relates this most overtly political of all his films to his other work and the work of Pasolini. The interview first appeared in* Roma Giovani, *the monthly of the Italian Communist Party's youth organization, a group to which the director had long given his political support.*

Cineaste: *What idea brought you from* Last Tango in Paris *to* 1900?

Bernardo Bertolucci: The idea had come before *Last Tango*. I'd already begun to work on a screenplay with Kim Arcalli and Giuseppe, my brother; but then I realized that it would be a very expensive, long difficult film, so I set it aside. I wasn't in a position to find the necessary financing at that time. In fact, it's because of the success of *Last Tango* that I had the opportunity to do *1900*.

The idea. It's hard to say after so much time . . . almost four years have gone by. Ideas for films come in the strangest ways: maybe the sun is covered by a cloud in a certain way at a certain time of the day and it reminds you of a similar light that you'd seen when you were a kid; all of that might give you an idea for a film. Or maybe you want to go back to the places you lived in when you were a kid. Ideas for films always come, to me, in the most coincidental, the strangest ways. First there's an intuition, it's like a seed, and what will eventually be the film starts to grow around it; it's a seed that later takes on ideological substance.

When I started working on my subject, Pasolini's desperate and tragic ideas about the situation of popular culture in Italy had just raised a lot of discussion. He said that popular culture had been completely bombarded and massacred by consumerism. That's certainly true but an exception must be made—Emilia Romagna. I wanted to see if a peasant world still existed in Emilia, with its own culture and things to say about the past, the present, the future.

When we went there, I expected to be shooting a film about the agony of a culture and instead, from the beginning, from the first location checks, when we were looking for the real faces of the people, I realized that it was going to be a film about something very much alive. I remember going into a stall, and seeing the electric cow milkers and thinking, "My god, this is no different than the assembly line," but instead of the faces of the "Bergamini"—that's what the cow herders are called in Emilia, because traditionally they've come from the city of Bergamo—were the faces that I'd remembered from my childhood, the faces that had always been.

Emilia seemed like a miracle within the context of Italy. How did this miracle happen? How come this island exists where the peasant world is still almost completely intact in its identity? I think there's only one explanation. Emilia is the region that's been socialist ever since socialism has existed and communist every since communism has existed. It's been through socialism and communism that the

Emilian peasants have become conscious of their culture and have understood that it's something to defend.

Something very paradoxical, or apparently paradoxical, but at the same time profoundly just and correct, has taken place: communism has served as an instrument of preservation and conservation. So the film which in the beginning was to be a film about the decadence, the death, the funeral of peasant culture, became instead a film about the vitality of the people and their culture.

Cineaste: *In an interview in* Nuova Generazione *you said that* 1900 *is meant to be a Gramscian* film since it deals with both the optimism of the will and the pessimism of reason. Would you explain a bit about the plot of the film in light of this statement?*

Bertolucci: It's kind of presumptuous to say a Gramscian film; I'd reject that definition now. But it is a film about popular culture, and it's meant to serve the interests of popular culture; in that sense, I think it's succeeded to a great extent.

The film is based on what I see as the immediate dialectic between Olmo and Alfredo, the two protagonists, born the same day, the same year, at the beginning of the century, one the son of landowners, the other the son of peasants. The dialectic between these two characters is an obvious, natural and elementary symbol of class dialectics, the dialectic between the peasant and the ruling classes.

After I got that far, I asked myself what the structure of a film about the countryside should be like, and I thought of the seasons of the year which provide the framework for agricultural work. So the first part is in summer, a grand summer that corresponds to the childhood of the two protagonists and also to pre-fascist Italy, when the peasants were still without class consciousness. In terms of narrative style, the first season of the film, this long summer, is lyric, epic, popular. The political movement at this time is still populist; there's no class consciousness, it hasn't been born yet but it's about to be.

Then the film goes on to the war and the return of Olmo, one of the two protagonists. Even though the war is just barely mentioned, it's clear that the people's enemies are more the Italian officers than the foreigners, and that's where the second part of the film begins, the film's second season. Autumn and winter correspond to the years of fascism; the characters are forced to shut themselves up

*Antonio Gramsci was one of the major figures among the founders and theoreticians of the Italian Communist Party. Many of his most significant writings were on culture, the concept of ideological hegemony, and the role of intellectuals.

in their houses. By 1919 the peasant class had acquired political consciousness and was inventing new ways of struggle; its response was very strong for a time but was to be crushed later by fascist repression. In terms of the narrative, the style of the film during this autumn-winter of fascism is transformed and becomes more psychological, almost as though fascism made it necessary to resort to psychology in order to represent it completely.

Spring, the last season of the film, corresponds to Liberation Day. April 25, 1945, Liberation Day: liberation not only from Nazi-fascism but above all from exploitation. That's how I tried to show the 25th of April, as a moment of victory and also a moment in the peasant's dream. On Liberation Day, the peasants enact the utopia of the revolution.

As I said in the beginning, the film is based on a dialectic, on class dialectics, but a dialectic exists at all levels—the dialectic between prose and poetry, for example, between lyricism and psychology, between documentary and fiction, between the means of production, that is, the cost of the film, and its ideology, which is completely aligned with the working class struggle.

Cineaste: *I'd like you to be clearer on that point. How could you make a film like this, a film where the real protagonist is the class struggle? You've already mentioned the various levels of dialectic in the film, but it's the class struggle that's always in the forefront. So how do you explain the film's revolutionary ideology and the finance from three American distribution companies that made it possible?*

Bertolucci: I've never had anything to do with American distribution companies for the film. It was produced by Alberto Grimaldi, who's an Italian. In theory I shouldn't even have to know that the film was made with dollars instead of lire. I worked my way—I don't even know how I did it—into the folds of this system's contradictions, and I managed to get a huge investment from the Americans, on faith, a rather blind faith that was based solely on the figures they had after *Last Tango*. I saw the American distributors' faces at Cannes, they'd never seen the film before. They were rather upset; it was really scandalous for them, all that unexpected waving of red flags.

"Popular" for me means talking about a system of ideas, about the class struggle, about communism, in order to give a face, many faces, to the word "communism," which has always been abstractly connected to monstrous images in America, due to all the anti-communist propaganda there. I wanted to make a film that would get everywhere, even to the places where communism is considered

to be the end of liberty, of humankind, of the individual. For the distributors, "popular" means tearing off a lot of tickets and taking in a lot of money; so there is a sort of convergence in our intentions in the sense that we both want a lot of people to see the film.

A lot of moralists on the left have made accusations against me; before seeing the film they already had a preconceived idea. They said, "A film made with a lot of money can't be politically correct." I'd really rather not respond to such moralistic statements, but there's a need to, and so what I have to say is that cinema is made with money. The political correctness of a film is not inversely proportional to its cost; low cost doesn't necessarily mean freedom, and high cost doesn't necessarily mean repression. It's all different every time.

Cineaste: *You've said that it's a popular film. Is that because it's directed to the people, that is, to the people who usually go to the movies, the average spectator?*

Bertolucci: Yes, I think it's popular because it's imbued with popular culture, beginning right with the novel and melodrama at the end of the nineteenth century, which had popular significance in the struggle for Italian independence and contains a very strong popular dynamic. The novel-like character of the film is evident in the first part, where two men are born on the same day and it's almost as though they're predestined, or condemned to be novel-like characters, just like characters of popular novels at the end of the nineteenth century.

Popular in that sense, and popular also because it's the first film I've made really thinking about utility. I've always been against the notion of utility, which was widely discussed in 1968. I hated it then and continue to hate it today because it's something that can't be measured, like some leftists tried to do in '68 by saying, for instance, that Rafaello was a lackey to the bosses. Poetry's utility isn't measurable; the usefulness of a work of art is very mysterious.

Once, in 1970, I was offended by a leader of the PCI. We were having dinner and I told him that I wanted to do a political film, a documentary. He replied, "Look, the people need a poet more than a politician." At the time, the idea really aggravated me, I got really pissed off. But I have to say that today I agree.

But I started out saying that I wanted to make a useful film, even though the word is kind of a drag, because the idea of usefulness is always owned by consumerism. Let's change it, because I don't like "usefulness." Let's say that I wanted to make a popular film, that's

the right word, I mean a film that could go even to the Midwest, the part of America most terrorized by the menace of communism, that barbaric destroyer of humankind, etc. I wanted to do that without being demagogic, but by talking on an elementary level about the struggle that the people have carried on in order to overcome the exploitation of man by man, talking in a simple, direct way; emotional and involving, too, because if there's no involvement on the emotional level, I don't think you can get very far.

Cineaste: *How do you think this film will be received in America where people have watched even* Nashville *on television, a film that in Italy is seen as being very critical of American society?*

Bertolucci: They show it on television, but they use the very fact that it is critical as a gimmick, a commercial device to sell it with. I think Altman is a great director, I admire him a lot, and *Nashville* is a very deep film, although in a way it is the other side of the same coin, the opposite extreme of the American film of earlier times, when the hero was tall, blonde, handsome and a good guy. Here, the American hero is an insufferable, disagreeable cynic, a hypocrite, a social climber. Altman mystifies in the same way the the old American cinema mystified—I mean the great stuff, the American films I adore. I mean, it's wrong to say that all Americans are monsters, like in that film, where there's not even one exception. But Altman is still one of the few directors who make a deep analysis of American society without being a Marxist.

Cineaste: *But what do you think the reaction to* 1900 *will be?*

Bertolucci: I don't know how the Americans will react. Maybe through the dialogue I should try to clear up some things that are obvious to us, some of the historical passages about the birth of fascism, and so on; but it seems to me that when Montanaro, the day laborer, cuts off his own ear in 1908, his gesture is clearly a very individual type of protest, pre-political. I think that a gesture like that is intelligible everywhere—in the U.S., in China, everywhere. I think that the film has thematic and emotional validity; emotion is inter national—when emotion exists, it exists everywhere.

Cineaste: *You chose Burt Lancaster—who was also in Visconti's* The Leopard*—for the role of the old landowner. Your film begins, basically, at just about the point where* The Leopard *ends. Does using exactly the same actor represent a continuum?*

Bertolucci: No, I never thought of *The Leopard*, even though it is a great film, because in the final analysis Visconti's film is always psychological. *1900* is more ideological. But I must say one thing:

1900, like all of my films, makes use of all the materials not only of the cinema but of literature, painting, and music as well, of everything that's come before. Basically, cinema is really a kind of reservoir of the collective memory of this century.

I don't mind thinking that my films are full of cinema. *1900* isn't only about the class struggle, it's also about the history of cinema, in the way that *The Conformist* was about cinema in the thirties, most of all French cinema. I believe there's got to be an enormous amount of freedom in the use of everything, because culture is a continuum, it's never interrupted.

I wasn't thinking of *The Leopard* when I cast Lancaster. I was thinking of a patriarchal figure just as I'd done for the peasant grandfather, Sterling Hayden, who's more than an actor, he's a poet. These two old men are seen through the eyes of the children, they're two mythological old men. Basically, I was using the mythology of the history of cinema because Lancaster and Hayden are two myths, they're two old oaks.

Cineaste: *What about the influence of American and Soviet spectacles?*

Bertolucci: It seems to me that a"spectacle" exists more in the mind of whoever says the word than it does in a film itself, whether you're talking about the American version or the Soviet one. The spectacle is another way of establishing communication with a vast public. The film is basically a small one; *1900* is a small film about a small piece of earth, dressed up like a big film, like a spectacle, but it's really a film about very simple, very elementary things.

Cineaste: *Tell us something about Attila the fascist—a monstrous figure, a cynic, a pervert. Does this character have any link to Pasolini's vision of fascism in* Salo?

Bertolucci: There is actually a link, even though Pasolini was shooting *Salo* while I was shooting *1900*, and so there wasn't any contact, no direct influence. But let me mention something that happened at Cannes. The President of the jury, Tennessee Williams, held a press conference to protest against the violence of the films presented at the festival and he made a specific allusion to *1900*. He said, "I don't want to see children murdered in horrible ways, like at the Colosseum 2,000 years ago," to which I replied, "Like at My Lai six years ago or in the Stalinist concentration camps—violence isn't just a private affair that pertains to the ancient Romans."

In France the bourgeoisie made the revolution at the end of the 1700s and then had some great, extraordinary moments in the

1800s, even culturally, and it's still a very strong class today. But in Italy there's never been a bourgeois class like that because, among other things, Italy was united as a nation very late. We've never had such a strong bourgeoisie because of many historical and geographical problems about the formation of the country. So as soon as the workers' and peasants' movements were born, the Italian bourgeoisie needed to invent a way to suffocate them; that was fascism.

In the film there's the sequence where the landowners are gathered in the church and they make contributions, just like on Sunday when the sacristan goes around with a basket to collect money. I mean, I think I showed, even though I left a lot out, how fascism is born. Immediately before the scene where the agricultural bosses finance the fascists, we see the one where a group of peasants protest against an eviction notice; the king's police load to fire at them, and the women stretch themselves out on the ground. We saw, in other words, that the struggle was organized. Corresponding to the organization of the people's struggle is the organization of the ruling class and the invention of fascism.

I tried to respect history as much as possible in the film, but in addition there's also a psychological level, which is represented by the characters of Attila and Regina who, in terms of psychology, I saw as being two small, petty, miserable creatures, a provincial version of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. I find that even those two monstrous personalities are victims in a certain sense, victims of the ruling class because they're completely blind, obtuse—victims, in other words, because they're completely instrumentalized. The ruling class delegates to Attila and Regina all of the aggression that it lacks the strength, the guts, to express directly itself. Attila and Regina are steeped in all of the aggression that surrounds them, that's part of the class they aspire to belong to, the ruling class.

What can you say about these two? I tried to give them a tragic dimension; basically, that was false because if there's one thing that fascism lacked it's tragedy. If anything, when compared to Nazism, fascism was an operetta. But anyway, that's how these two characters turned out in the film; they're tragic in an Elizabethan sense, they commit monstrous crimes, they kill a child, they pierce a woman through with the spikes of a gate, they do incredibly horrible things.

Some people have accused me of Stalinism. If the film had been Stalinist, I wouldn't have shown the fierceness of the peasants when

they get revenge from the two fascists. That's another very important thing. The moment people who have been sucked dry, exploited, amputated, thrown in jail, the moment they react and succeed in liberating themselves, they seek revenge. These peasants are fierce and I think it would have been Stalinist not to see their fierceness; it would have been Stalinist to see them as mild and edifying.

In films, even in communist films—this has got to be said—there's often a lack of courage about looking truth in the eyes, about telling how things really stand. I think the fierceness of the peasants against Attila and Regina is beautiful, I think it's justified and very natural. And I also think that at this point in the film you find a dialectic between the moment of fierceness in which the peasants retaliate and the one in which they forget about everything else as the big red flags are unfurled.

That's where the key to the whole film is, for me. What does this film mean? It means: the boss doesn't exist anymore, he's dead. That's what the peasants say at the end of the trial. They put the boss on trial just as though they were in China, in just the same way. I saw a few photographs of the Chinese trials and that's all I needed; I saw that they always had a table and that they pointed their fingers. The role of the boss is over, it's finished.

What some people haven't understood about the film, I think, is that at that point the action no longer takes place on April 25, 1945—it's in the present and in the future. As I said before, it's today and tomorrow. The proposal made in that episode steps out of any historic context and that moment represents, for me, the real thrust of the film, where it goes beyond the narrative level, beyond the moment. Utopia becomes reality for a flash, even though "the boss" still exists in Italy today.

If Utopia becomes reality for the peasant there, on the screen, then it does so also for the audiences as they watch. I believe that making the emotion of a Utopian situation come alive is one way of doing politics—and some day it won't be Utopia anymore.

Cineaste: *It's been said that the film has several endings: when the old landowner dies; when the red flag goes off into the distance, into the fields; when Alfredo says, "The boss is alive"; when the old men fight among themselves; and when Alfredo himself, in a totally and clearly poetic ending. . . .*

Bertolucci: Poetic license, I'd say. . . .

Cineaste: *. . . Alfredo lies down on the railroad tracks as the*

soccorso rosso* *train is about to arrive, but he doesn't just lie down like a boy, he puts himself in a position as though he were ready to die. Is it suicide, like his grandfather?*

Bertolucci: It's the suicide that Olmo has been dragging him toward all his life. When Olmo takes him out of the farmyard, we see that the two of them are haggling with each other. This is the class struggle that continues even when they're old, until the moment when the boss understands that there's nothing else he can do to change what's going on. The bourgeoisie is self-destructive—not in the sense that all bosses will commit suicide—but there's a self-destructiveness in the ruling class that is related to the awakening of a consciousness about the validity of the proletariat's ideas. Maybe that's a bit excessive, but why not?

What happens next? The train about to run over Alfredo is the children's train; the grown-up Alfredo becomes again the boy Alfredo, and Olmo is on the train that passes over him. There's a lot left out of the allegory, it's made with a sort of poetic license throughout. Then a mole comes up from a hole and peers out. The mole is blind. It's the symbol of the birth of something, because it comes out of the earth; we see the earth shaken and the mole comes out as though produced by the earth itself. Time is violently shaken by the mole, everything is reversed: the old become children; the child is the father of man; and the train with its red flags goes by.

I want to mention again that the last part, the April 25th peasant celebration, was in a certain sense the most criticized at Cannes, even by the Italian papers. Here's how I explain it. There's a convention in all films that is respected in *1900* as well, but it's broken at the end, exploded. That crucial moment is when the peasants take power on that famous April 25th. At that point I said to myself, "Let's show the peasants taking power," and I started to think about the idea and began to understand that the only way to really convey the sense of power being taken over by the peasants, the truly disinherited of the earth, was for them to take over power in the film itself, to chase away the protagonists and everyone who was not a real peasant.

That's what I think upset most people. Certain people rejected the film entirely. Others liked it a lot but only up until that point; from the moment that we enter the court room, they didn't like it anymore. Why not? Because they miss the protagonists, because they aren't

*The *soccorso rosso* was originally an emergency assistance unit organized spontaneously among workers to take care of strikers' children.

able to accept this violent exclusion. What's happening at that point? The revolution, for a second there's the scent of revolution. And there's a price to be paid for it. We don't see Ada anymore, we don't see Ottavio, we still see Olmo and Alfredo but they've practically become two symbols. The living material of that part are the faces, the songs of the people.

Cineaste: *The people become the protagonist.*

Bertolucci: Yes, the people become the protagonist. It's as though the chorus in an opera had come forward, forward and forward, and at the same time the tenor, the baritone, the contralto, had stepped back and fallen into the orchestra pit and the chorus had come up front into the limelight. This is very hard to accept. At that point even the concept of author explodes; the classic concept of author in bourgeois as well as socialist countries is pulverized because the peasants acquire a weight and a presence that upstages even me.

Cineaste: *The Italian press has remarked that there's a certain difference between the first and second parts. What do you think makes them feel this way?*

Bertolucci: The film is like an architectural structure, it's unified. It would be like saying that the baptistry in Parma is beautiful only from the ground up until the third floor, from the third floor to the sixth it's not beautiful anymore; or that in *Il Trovatore* the first act is more beautiful than the last. It doesn't make sense; you've got to judge the work in its entirety.

Cineaste: *When you first thought of* 1900, *did you immediately think of a film in which the masses, the people, the class struggle were the real protagonist, or had you first thought of a psychological film that had as a corollary the class struggle and the people?*

Bertolucci: I create a structure with the screenplay, and then fill it in as I shoot. Shooting lasted eleven months for this film, a long time, and so a lot of things were changed, a lot of things were transformed during the shooting. The presence of the proletariat, which becomes the protagonist, already existed in the screenplay, on an intuitive level, but it's when you put yourself in front of reality and film it that you start to understand what you'd wanted to say, what you intuited but maybe hadn't understood yet.

I find that a film really develops when the camera is in front of the world, in front of reality. That's when the confrontation between the camera and reality takes place, that's when a film is born.