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# A mind in conflict makes a movie

*Yes, there was a Bernardo Bertolucci before Last Tango in Paris*

by P. M. Minichiello

Those moviegoers who thought Bertolucci's *Last Tango In Paris* represented the last word in stylistic excessiveness are in for a surprise. That same filmmaker's 1968 film *Partner* is at last opening in New York and it will shock those who find his films "too much" but please those who are interested in the beginnings of one of the most renowned international filmmakers.

It's understandable why New Yorkers had to wait so long to see this film, the third feature of Bertolucci's career. Although technically brilliant, this movie is his least approachable in the ordinary ways we watch films. It's never less than involving, but that involvement often consists of our thinking what is happening?

And for all its resplendence, *Partner* seems distant, caught in another time. For Bertolucci, in 1968, this was a time of increasing political awareness, heightening (if not sharpening) his feelings first expressed in *Before The Revolution*. The raging war in Vietnam became present in countless European films of those years, and Bertolucci's treatment of this war seems most influenced by Godard's. For Godard, the war and specifically the struggle of the Vietnamese became a lesson, a challenge, a moral directive. But only a moral directive, which didn't constitute *action*. That gap between the two was central to Godard, as it is central to *Partner*.

Clementi plays Jacob, a young drama teacher in Rome. About to commit suicide, he is suddenly rescued by his alter ego, a revolutionary. They begin to reverse roles. Jacob finds that he is more interested in street theater, but his efforts at a large collective action fail. He soon realizes that the attempts he has made to destroy his double are now unnecessary, for his double has become part of him. Together, they move out on the ledge of his building to enact the "ultimate performance."

It's important to mention that, in this time of his life, Bertolucci was, in addition to wrestling with political ideas, also undergoing intensive psychoanalysis. The film is thus deeply reflective and personal, and very much the product of a mind in conflict. Bertolucci has stated that in *Partner* he was seeking the "destruction of structures" and attempting to do this with "avoidance of editing." Indeed, many of the scenes are lengthy, often serially unrelated, and finally inconclusive.

Yet the film's power is always drawn from this tension, unrelieved and complex. Jacob's double appears to contradict and challenge the assumptions he has made about his life and the theater. Jacob I has only contemplated the theater, but Jacob II shows its uses. That challenge provides all the conflict in the movie, and if it is all not resolved to our complete satisfaction (far from it), then that's only because Bertolucci could not (as he admits) resolve it for himself either.

Certainly, we might not accept that in other movies. But *Partner*, for all its disjunction, really is about the force of imagination — how far it can be taken, the relation of imagination to art, the possible violence of imagination. Concerned with filming "freely," he moves with minimal guiding of script and form. The discovery is that form is necessary, or will be in the future. *Partner* thus exists in a world of invention and failure, slogans and performing, sexuality and impotence. What informs all this, though, is the power of imagination. The question is whether or not the imagination will liberate Jacob and turn his theater into action. For Bertolucci, it's a question of whether or not his own imagination will make in movies a resolution to political/personal concerns. *Partner* testifies that this will happen.

The film is often ravishing to look at, with color and light very carefully controlled, and the wide screen process used to good effect; Pierre Clementi is inventive and absorbing. *Partner*, in short, is not to be missed.