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Jill Clayburgh and Matthew Barry, "Luna" 's unusually affectionate mother and son, opening night at the festival

The Festival: Films In and Out of Focus

By Andrew Sarris

Mama Mia, Mr. B!

LUNA. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Screenplay by Giuseppe and Bernardo Bertolucci and Clare Paploe, from a story by Franco Arcalli, Bernardo and Giovanni Bertolucci. Produced by Giuseppe Bertolucci. Distributed by 20th Century-Fox.

By the time Bernardo Bertolucci's *Luna* officially opened the 17th New York Film Festival, Vincent Canby's detailed pan in the *Times* hung over Avery Fisher Hall like a dark, rain-soaked cloud. I had missed *Luna* at the Venice Film Festival, but from conversations on the Lido the next morning I gathered that the assembled critical establishment had been decidedly underwhelmed by the experience. Knowing that *Luna* had already been selected as the opening-night attraction at Lincoln Center, I could look forward to another long evening of sour faces and formal garb. Sure enough, everywhere I went people glared at me as if I were still on the Program Committee. A few actually asked me point-blank to name the person responsible for the selection. A story had appeared in the *Times* that morning to the effect that Molly Haskell had "liked" the movie. I knew that Molly had not seen the movie before it was selected, and has not seen it yet. No matter. I do not feel that anyone has to apologize for slotting Bertolucci on opening night, even sight unseen.

When I was on the Program Committee I often argued with Richard Roud on this very point. Certain artists, I felt, had earned the right to be represented in the festival automatically. Fellini, Bergman, and Antonioni were examples I cited. Even their "off" pictures were worthy of inclusion. For this part, Roud has insisted that each film be chosen on its own merits, and that no film could ever be selected without at least one committee member having seen it. Most people, I think, would agree with Roud's position in principle even when they did not agree with his taste. Furthermore, the unusual excitement that distinguishes the New York Film Festival from most festivals around the world comes from the audience's knowledge that someone has put his or her neck on the line in choosing a particular film. And most of the time, of course, it is Roud.

By now, most people must be aware that *Luna* concerns an American opera singer (Jill Clayburgh) with a troubled 15-year-old son (Matthew Barry), and the incestuous relationship they enter into when she discovers that he has become a heroin addict. The dubiously therapeutic premise of the incest seems to have disturbed viewers (including Canby), but I suspect that many people (though perhaps not Canby) use the medical argument to mask their disappointment that incest is not the joyously sexy fun it was in Louis Malle's *Murmur of the Heart*. Bertolucci did not help matters at a press conference when he reportedly observed that he could not imagine an Italian mama performing

such an act with her *bambino*, the clear implication being that American mothers were something else entirely. Ironically, many French viewers accepted the incestuous premise of *Murmur of the Heart* with the rationale that one could understand such behavior from an Italian mother (Lea Massari), but certainly not from a French mother.

My first problem: I cannot relate to incest either with the glossy treatment in *Murmur* or the gritty treatment in *Luna*. A recent book on the subject indicates that 10 per cent of all families have experienced an incestuous episode. I more or less accept this estimation, but even Terence's "nothing human is alien to me" fails me in this taboo-shattering realm. It is not a question of my condemning anyone, but simply of my being unable to distinguish between "realism" and "fantasy" in the treatment of the subject. For all I know, the tortured relationship in *Luna* could just as easily be a clinical case history as a poetic conceit.

In any event, though audiences are obviously titillated by the idea of incest, they seem disenchanted with the execution. Bertolucci has miscalculated here on several levels of both casting and characterization. Jill Clayburgh has acquired some of the aura of the liberated woman since Paul Mazursky's *An Unmarried Woman*, but she seems miscast here as a tempestuous prima donna. Liberated women ask more questions than prima donnas, but prima donnas already know all the answers. Iconographically, Clayburgh is more a question-asker than an

answer-knower, which is another way of saying that she is more psychological than mythological.

Another problem is that contemporary audiences seem more susceptible to operatic performances from males than from females. One can cite Marlon Brando in *Last Tango in Paris*, Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter*, and Al Pacino in just about anything as exemplars of the compulsively hysterical routines once reserved for particularly neurotic actresses but now seemingly restricted to a certain breed of punk method actor. When people complain that Clayburgh's character doesn't make psychological sense, I ask them to explain what Brando's emotionally displaced person in *Last Tango* was all about. Ah, but that was Brando, they reply.

The one fatal flaw in *Luna*, however, is the casting and characterization of the son. Matthew Barry is so singularly lacking in charm and warmth that he almost devolves into a monstrous callowness. When his mother actually calls him a punk the audience nods its collective head in agreement. When Bertolucci tries to frame the "problem" within the contrivances of a Freudian mystery melodrama and exercise the pain through the spiritual grandeur of Verdi's music, the audience stirs restively at the flagrant movieness of the film.

It is precisely at this point I became sympathetic to Bertolucci's liveliness and audacity. For the longest time I had no idea where the movie was going, but at the end he dared to connect, and I give him

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special credit for closing his dramatic circuits in an age that overvalues even the most mindless open-endedness. He has shown once more that he is not afraid to take chances, and he deserves credit for that, too.

At a Columbia seminar Bertolucci confessed that he dreamed of camera movements in his childhood. This admission led me to deduce that his camera movements followed his own feelings more than those of his characters. As a creator of what Truffaut has described as "privileged moments" on the screen, Bertolucci seems unwilling to labor on the expositional and developmental foundations of these privileged moments. Hence, he has always had problems with structure. People put up with the *longueurs* involving the Jean-Pierre Leaud character in *Last Tango* for the sake of the payoff scenes with Brando and Maria Schneider. Unfortunately, there are few, if any, such payoffs in *Luna*, and the structural deficiencies make the movie sag and the audience squirm. The disconcertingly Godardian shift of tone from scene to scene, and even within scenes, only adds to the spectator's discomfiture. Bertolucci, like Godard, lacks an overriding faith in the power of dramatic narrative to sustain his cinematic sensibility without documentary and essayistic asides on the haphazard reality of daily life. And from the beginning, Bertolucci has invoked clinical material that he has been unwilling to explore or resolve in a straightforward manner. It is thus ultimately his evasiveness rather than his frankness that is most problematical in *Luna*.

Finally, there is the strange problem of language in the merchandizing of so-called art films. Ever since the coming of sound, films spoken in foreign languages have appealed to a small but influential coterie of cosmopolitan Americans. For one thing, foreign films always looked more "visual" to viewers who cannot "listen" to the dialogue. Cryptic subtitles enabled the viewer to imagine that there were untranslated profundities in the story. Then, in the '40s and '50s, the themes of the alien, the traveler, the displaced person, the clash of cultures became fashionable. There was something jarring to the American ear when English was used as the main language in these movies. Still, there was a steady stream of discontented Hollywood players eager to be molded by a maestro like Fellini, a firebrand like Godard, a wild romantic like Truffaut, or an emotional gusher like Bertolucci. Jane Fonda went through a Vadim period and was savaged by Godard; Jack Nicholson toiled in the desert sands for Antonioni; Burt Lancaster virtually became Visconti's alter ego on the screen. But once English becomes the dominant language in an "art film," audiences cease to think of it as an art film and insist on very professional line readings in English. A recent result of this abiding prejudice is the return, with subtitles, of Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu*, after it was deemed unplayable in America with its awkward English soundtrack.

Luna is but the latest example of the futile effort to crash the American market with only a fragmentary perception of the American experience and the American language. The fragments are not entirely inexpert in this instance, but they do remain fragments. Still, Bertolucci must be applauded for granting Art an equal role with Life, something Bergman chose not to do in *Autumn Sonata*. Of course, the nonartists in the audience, and they are legion, prefer to be told that Life is more important than Art.