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Author(s)	Irving R. Cohen
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Epic soap of Italian families

By Irving R. Cohen

A costumed man runs down a country road yelling "Verdi is dead! Verdi is dead!", thereby informing the audience that we and the film's characters are present at the death of one century and the birth of a new one, since Verdi died in 1900, which is also the title of the Bernardo Bertolucci film which has just opened in San Francisco.

Birth and death repeatedly occur in the film, literally and symbolically, as it treats Italy as a historical tapestry in front of which two Italian

families act out their relationships of friendship and hate, growth and decay, paralleling the great events of the century in that country: World War I, the coming of Fascism, and its overturn at the end of World War II. At the center of the film are two men, both born at the beginning of the century (and film), whose lives intertwine for the next 75 years.

Bertolucci looks at the two children as boys, and at the nature of an ambiguous friendship, but he is far more interested in their class relationships; one is the grandson of the owner of the estate, the other the son of a peasant who works for him in a state close to peonage. The grandfather (Burt Lancaster) and the peasant (Sterling Hayden, and welcome back) exist in a state of carefully defined antagonism, each understanding his class-defined role. When the two men finally die, it is not their sons but their grandsons who move to center stage.

The ultimate heir and landowner is Robert De Niro, and his opposite number is Gerard Depardieu, named "Olmo" for elm tree. Even without that piece of symbolism, it is made clear very early that the boy is going to break out of the strictures of the old relationships and move toward revolutionary doctrine. It is he who grows stronger as the film progresses, and it is De Niro who crumbles, as befits a representative of a decaying class.

Alongside the two men, standing outside of their lives but affecting them both, is the estate foreman named Attila (Donald Sutherland). Early on he veers toward Fascism as ardently as Olmo does towards Socialism. Each of the three are paired with women: Olmo with a revolutionary school teacher (Stefania Sandrelli), De Niro with a "futurist" of a young woman who has broken out of traditional molds, and Sutherland with Regina (Laura Betti), De Niro's cousin.

Bertolucci has carved out a large story and a huge expanse of time for his endeavors (he was one of the film's three scriptwriters), surrounded himself with an array of actors whose capabilities range from the adequate to the splendid, and involves himself in stirring and important events, but the film falls largely short of its promises.

A production note says of the film: "Were their story simply an enactment of the history of the 20th Century in Emilia [Bertolucci's native province] it would be ambitious enough, but it is far more, for it delves deeply into the emotions of its principals and the people who touch their lives." Were this were true, but between the intention and the act stands Bertolucci himself, so intent on making a political statement that he has produced something closer to a tract.

His peasants tend to strike noble poses and stand heroically against the enemy. There is a self-consciousness about the directing and staging which keeps the audience at a distance — not the Brechtian distance which involves on another level, but that which makes the viewer no more than voyeuristic spectator. There are indeed a number of striking scenes of engagements, the best of them reminiscent

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of a scene in Renoir's *Rules of the Game*, but they are largely tableaux.

Depardieu as Olmo comes closest to being a real person, especially when he injects irony into his role. But few of the others are given much to work with. De Niro is wasted in a role which is built on fuzziness marching as ambiguity, and Laura Betti plays her role as if she were Bette.

Perhaps the best examples of the weaknesses of the film are in the characters and characterizations of Sutherland and Sanda. He, as the film's leading Fascist, is blacker than his uniform: killing a cat with his head, drunkenly killing a boy by whirling him

against a wall and when not otherwise engaged, lurking threateningly in hallways. Outside the Grand Guignol aspect, Bertolucci diminishes his treatment of Fascism by limiting to the lower levels of bully-boys, as if it were all a question of petty brutality gone wild.

And Dominique Sanda is given a scene in a worker's cafe where she asks two begrimed workers where they are going. "To wash," one answers. "No," she says, touching their faces, "you are beautiful as you are." Reading minds is difficult, but by that time I had come to believe that Bertolucci did not mean that as humor, a commodity in rare supply in the film.

1900 is clearly a film which was important to Bertolucci; I can admire his intentions, his willingness to take risks and his range of skills; but what emerges is something very close to high level political soap opera.

