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Author(s)	Myron Meisel
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Richard Vuu in *The Last Emperor*

THE LAST EMPEROR *Film Journal* (PG-13) Nov/Dec 87

(COLUMBIA/HEMDALE)

Color/2.35/Dolby

163 Mins.

Cast: John Lone, Joan Chen, Peter O'Toole, Ying Ruocheng, Wu Jun Mei, Maggie Han, Victor Wong, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Dennis Dun, Jade Go, Cary Hiroyuki Tagawa, Richard Vuu, Tijger Tsou, Wu Tao, Ric Young, Fumihiko Ikeda, Lisa Lu, Hideo Takamatsu, Basil Pao, Jian Xireng, Huang Wenjie, Liang Dong, Soong Hualkuei.

Credits: Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Written by Mark Peploe (with Bertolucci and the initial collaboration of Enzo Ungari). Produced by Jeremy Thomas. Photographed by Vittorio Storaro. Production designed by Ferdinando Scarfioni. Edited by Gabriella Cristiani. Music by Ryuichi Sakamoto, David Byrne, Cong Su. Costumes by James Acheson. Associate producers: Joyce Herlihy, Franco Giovale.

Certainly the most mass appeal of any Bertolucci film to date. Breathtaking spectacle and a touching story augur solid grosses for this epic of 20th-century China, despite the softness of the central character. 87-186

The Last Emperor abounds with spectacular images. Shot on hitherto unfilmed locations in China, notably the Forbidden City in Peking, Bernardo Bertolucci's film populates these exotic vistas with the epic story of a flyspeck of history: Pu Yi, crowned emperor of the dying Manchu dynasty in 1908 at the age of three, shortly before the establishment of the Chinese republic. Confined to the grounds of the Forbidden City, Pu Yi grows up a pampered prisoner until, upon reaching adulthood, he is ejected after a warlord's coup and becomes a dissipated playboy cultivated by the Japanese. After the occupation of Manchuria in 1931, Pu Yi is installed as a puppet regent still being manipulated and imprisoned by the controlling political forces. Finally, he is captured by the Russians and turned over to the Chinese Communists for imprisonment and rehabilitation. Released after ten years, he lives out his days as a gardener, finally a free man.

Despite its length and relative lack of active narrative, *The Last Emperor* continually fascinates, every frame a visual feast. Cinema has always excelled at propelling the viewer into strange worlds, making the unusual feel ordinary without sacrificing its exotic appeal. Bertolucci creates several distinct worlds of sumptuous pageantry, anchoring our experience in the pathos of his ineffectual, trapped protagonist. The infant playing on the throne, the petulant boy fawned over by eunuchs, the ardent adolescent who symbolizes power but wields none, the political prisoner expressing moral self-disgust with great dignity: all these incarna-

tions of the emperor make memorable pieces of characterization buried in the avalanche of history.

Every physical aspect of the production is incalculably rich, and one shudders to imagine the prohibitive cost of the production without official Chinese cooperation. Despite being told from the perspective of one who was inevitably removed from every major act of China's turbulent saga in this century, the story nevertheless vividly creates a sense of that turmoil and revolutionary change. Indeed, only when the Red Guards dance in the streets and publicly humiliate the prison governor who had served as his mentor does Pu Yi become personally engaged in events in progress. (The scenes are shot as something of a parody of Bertolucci's own climax to *1900*, suggesting that the director himself has evolved to some degree of political irony.)

Despite the dangerous device of all Chinese characters speaking English, the overall impact is convincing and natural. All the actors are in fine form, with John Lone an eloquently impotent figurehead and Peter O'Toole making much out of a simple part. If there is a significant flaw to the film, it's inescapable from its subject: Pu Yi is a passive character with whom one may sympathize but never identify. Choosing such a protagonist gives the epic an all-too-human dimension and places the story in the mainstream of Bertolucci's work, but it also renders the movie more involving than moving. Still, it shows a delicacy and compassion new to Bertolucci, and such qualities help validate the spectacle by providing an extreme counterpoint, measuring the smallness of human frailties against the massive structures of society and the rampaging forces of history.

—Myron Meisel