

Italian filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci: the fate of a member of the artistic “generation of 1968”

The Dreamers, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci

By David Walsh
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Italian filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci’s latest film *The Dreamers* is really a terribly poor work—at times, almost embarrassing. More than mere individual weakness, it expresses the intellectual and moral hollowing out of a generation of once-leftist artists who have reached the point where they have nothing to say to contemporary audiences.

The Dreamers, based on a novel by Gilbert Adair, takes place in Paris in 1968, before and during the May-June upheavals, which culminated in a general strike of 10 million French workers.

At a protest outside the famed Cinémathèque Française in February 1968 over the ouster of its legendary director Henry Langlois, a college-age American, the cinephile Matthew (Michael Pitt), encounters Isabelle (Eva Green) and her twin brother Theo (Louis Garrel), also great film-lovers. The intense siblings sweep Matthew along with them, and before he knows it, he’s staying with them during their indulgent parents’ absence.

The three shut themselves away from the world in the family’s gloomy apartment. Isabelle and Theo introduce their guest to various games and rituals. In one such, one of the pair acts out a scene or repeats lines of dialogue; if the other is unable to name the appropriate actor and film, he or she has to pay a “forfeit.” For example, Isabelle, as punishment, obliges her brother to masturbate in front of a photo of Marlene Dietrich. “Now the stakes had been raised,” observes Matthew sagely. When Isabelle, in turn, fails to provide the correct answer to another “quiz,” Theo requires her to have sex with Matthew. She turns out to be a virgin.

And so it goes. With overtones of Jean Cocteau’s *Les Enfants Terribles* and similar works, the film labors hard at creating a hothouse atmosphere. Except that it’s all rather silly and implausible. Green and Garrel do their best to be daring, combative and precocious, but merely come off self-conscious and irritating. Pitt’s character doesn’t add up. He has the look of an esthete, a dandy—a rare enough breed in America in 1968—but neither the language nor the outlook to go with it.

Theo is apparently some sort of quasi-Maoist. His bedroom is adorned with Mao-related items, including, prominently, a poster for Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise* (the 1967 film that treated at times mockingly the activities of a Maoist “cell” in a Paris apartment and would not have been appreciated a year later by a genuine Maoist). Theo tells Matthew that the Cultural Revolution is a great film epic in which masses of people carry books, not guns. Matthew replies that the Red Guards Theo so admires are carrying *one book*, a little red one, that they are all extras in his friend’s imaginary film. The brief conversation has that contrived, invented-after-the-fact feel of much of the film.

Bertolucci’s use of popular music from the time and certain film clips

(from suitably fashionable directors—Samuel Fuller, Josef von Sternberg, Godard, Buster Keaton, Howard Hawks) has no discernible purpose. Since none of the interpolated material serves any critical or narrative function, it must be either an exercise in nostalgia or an effort to cash in with younger audiences on certain cultural reference points. In any event, as a reviewer at *Sight & Sound* reasonably pointed out, “In *The Dreamers*, to be a May ’68 revolutionary is a lifestyle issue.”

The nudity contributes little. The hints of bisexuality and incest, the smearing of various bodily fluids, hardly extend beyond the titillating. One cannot help but believe that Bertolucci (*Before the Revolution*, *The Conformist*, *Last Tango in Paris*), whether consciously or not, has attempted to create something of a sexual scandal with this film, making particular use of his youthful leading actress’s good looks, to revive a failing career. It’s quite distasteful and cynical.

One intimate, sympathetic moment cuts across the noisy and fairly banal goings-on: a lengthy shot of the three young people asleep in the bath-tub, looking rather innocent. It seems almost a criticism of the exploitative character of so much of the film.

Bertolucci asserts that Matthew, Theo and Isabelle enter the apartment that late winter as adolescents and emerge as grown-ups. It is not clear that this is so or why it should be so. Becoming an adult involves more than sexual experience, as significant as that may be. It also implies a coming to terms in some manner or other with aspects of one’s world, including unpleasant and burdensome aspects. Is it not telling that adulthood in the filmmaker’s eyes includes a great deal of sex, playing film games, drinking papa’s most expensive wine and hours of “meaningful” (overwrought and shallow) conversation about art and politics, all carried out in isolation from a growing social upheaval?

Bertolucci has said that he’s interested in three “revolutions”—cinematic, sexual and political, which were “synchronized” in 1968. *The Dreamers*, taken at face value, rests on certain assumptions about these revolutions, all of which would need to be challenged.

First, the film suggests that “modern cinema” began at the Cinémathèque Française, through the influence exercised by its varied screenings on the French New Wave directors. In fact, the efforts of the French film directors of the 1960s appear less substantial as time passes, and not simply the contemporary work of the surviving members of that trend (Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Agnès Varda, Chris Marker and others), but many of the original films themselves.

History operates that way. Events—or, in this case, art works—take on a

different aspect, even a qualitatively different aspect, in the light of subsequent developments. The traumas and tragedies of the past several decades have tended to underscore the inadequacies of much of New Wave and subsequent European art filmmaking. The film directors were not attuned to the immense contradictions lying beneath the surface of postwar life, and when those erupted in the events of 1968 and beyond, threatening the existing social order, their creative juices quickly dried up.

This was not a matter primarily of ill will or, in many cases, overt political hostility. The entrance of the working class into open struggle and the general crisis of society, refuting all the claims about postwar capitalism made by official and “left” spokesmen, posed a new set of complex and difficult questions the filmmakers, not entirely through their own fault, were hardly equipped to answer.

The left-wing directors in France and Italy in particular generally avoided the question of the character and role of the Stalinist Communist parties and the larger issue of the nature and fate of the Soviet Union, to their eventual cost. Bertolucci, a member of the Italian Communist Party at the time, was one of those for whom the questions either cut too close to the bone or proved to difficult to unravel, or both. Not accidentally, relatively little of enduring significance has emerged from the French or Italian cinemas since the mid-1970s.

Significantly, in *The Dreamers*, Bertolucci—who contributed to a cinematic “farewell” to former Italian Stalinist leader and father of “Eurocommunism” Enrico Berlinguer, following the latter’s death in 1984—chooses to have his marching students in 1968 carry only the “hammer and sickle” of the French CP, although many were in fact under the influence of anarchist or Trotskyist organizations.

As for the so-called “sexual revolution,” upon which Bertolucci in particular has leaned so heavily, its results should not be overstated. If the director is referring to the somewhat chilly hedonism he depicts in his film, its influence hardly extended beyond a rather thin layer of the middle class in the advanced capitalist countries.

The director defended the events of 1968 to a British audience in November 2003 against the claim that they were a “failure” on the grounds that “Everything in our life today, the way we live our relationships, in particular how we relate to women’s rights, was a consequence of ’68, was imagined and, in a way, planned in ’68.” So the titanic struggle to put an end to the profit system may have failed—in fact, been betrayed—but it did, after all, give rise to the modern feminist movement.

In any event, women’s rights and all other democratic rights are under ever-more fierce assault in every part of the globe from right-wing, religious fundamentalist and other reactionary social forces stirred up by the social and economic crisis.

Bertolucci’s film and comments reveal a specific conception, shared by many others, of the radicalized 1960s and early 1970s, that they were “revolutionary” because they provided outlets for certain social layers to free themselves from traditional constraints.

The filmmaker told that same British crowd: “Yes, there wasn’t the revolution that these kids...wanted, maybe thank God. But almost everything related to the way we now live, at least in Italy...derives from ’68.” To be blunt, this speaks to the reality that following the end of the political radicalization in the mid-1970s, wide layers of the intelligentsia allowed themselves to be corrupted and made peace, in one way or another, with the existing social order.

The “sexual revolution” had a further consequence in art and cinema. In the aftermath of the ebbing of the radicalized tide, a general disappointment with the working class and the prospects for socialism, and beyond that, with history and social life in general, set in. Individuals, including artists, who had put in a good two or three years of protest activity—in some select cases, even more!—threw up their hands in despair or disgust.

Increasingly convinced of the omnipotence of the bourgeoisie and the hopelessness of the task of building a mass movement on socialist principles, indeed quite distant from any coherent conception of what that latter task might entail, a section of artists and intellectuals set their sights considerably lower, although they of course did not see it that way. “The personal is political, the political is personal” became a slogan of the day. Relatively loose chatter about “emotional exploitation” and “emotional fascism” was heard in many quarters. Not an examination of the social system per se, but how this system manifested itself in “everyday life,” in “gender relations” and so on, appeared as a recurring theme. This was no doubt bound up with the emergence of the so-called “post-modern” mood.

The situation is made somewhat more complex by the fact that the artists were often responding sincerely to a real problem, the failure of what were perceived as the main trends of left-wing art—i.e., Stalinized art, whether the Brecht school in the theater or various forms of neorealism or populism in the cinema—to deal adequately with the complexities, including the psychological and sexual complexities, of modern life. The solution to this historical problem, however, did not lie in another, equally harmful form of artistic narrowing, either formalism or psychologism, but in the poetically rich and objectively truthful treatment of social life as a whole, free from any taint of ideological schematism or self-censorship.

Bertolucci (born in 1940) can be seen struggling with these issues in *Before the Revolution* (1964) and *The Conformist* (1970) in particular, with some degree of honesty.

A commentator describes the former film: “In this reworking of Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma*, the leading character is a well-to-do boy who fancies himself a Marxist but ultimately learns he is nothing of the sort. Forced to decide between radical political commitment and an irreproachably bourgeois marriage, he opts for the latter, conducting an incestuous affair with an apolitical aunt along the way and renouncing his communist mentor (and totemic father figure).”

The Conformist is perhaps Bertolucci’s most enduring work for its portrayal of a certain social and emotional type susceptible to authoritarianism. The leading character, Marcello, becomes obsessed with conformism, after a traumatic sexual encounter as a youth, to the point of participating in the attempted murder of his former professor. The scene in which Marcello’s fascist colleagues murder his professor’s wife, a crime that he is powerless to stop, stands out in one’s memory after 30 years.

Bertolucci’s most celebrated, or notorious, film, *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), on the other hand, seems an almost complete and tedious dead-end. The “sexual revolution” has already triumphed, so to speak, in this self-important, overblown, empty work (Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider have repeated and anonymous sex in a Paris apartment), and the results are fairly dire.

Although Bertolucci returned to examining social life in *1900* (1976), an attempt to dramatize 45 years of the Italian class struggle, he never recaptured the intensity of the earlier films. And after *1900* there is virtually nothing worth commenting upon.

As for the third “revolution” in *The Dreamers*, the political one, it receives remarkably short shrift, especially if one considers that the French workers’ revolt of 1968 led to the most massive general strike since the Russian Revolution of 1905 and shook European capitalism to its foundations.

The representation of the events is reduced to a handful of references or fleeting glimpses: noises of street-fighting, a television clip of Prime Minister Georges Pompidou promising to negotiate with the strikers, a brief sequence at the Sorbonne, Theo’s half-hearted Maoist politics. The eventual scenes of marching students and fighting at the barricades toward the end of the film are so stilted and unreal they seem to be drawn

from comic-books.

What can one say? Bertolucci has the right to his memory or version of events. But one also has the right to argue for its essential trivial and trivializing character, what Trotsky called the “self-satisfied seeking for psychological nits.”

Why does an artist’s work lose force under changed historical circumstances? Marxists insist there is a connection between content (not a single lump of a theme, but a complex of moods and ideas) and artistic form, a connection in which the former is primary. In *Before the Revolution*, Bertolucci has his fictional stand-in declare, “A dolly shot [a film camera movement] is a style and a moral fact.” It’s not actually, although an entire generation of filmmakers and critics made similar claims.

Naturally, a sensitivity to beauty, a deep feeling for the structures and relationships of objects, may betoken a seriousness about the world, but lyricism in art, to take André Breton at his word, is *only the beginning* of a protest, not its essential substance.

In *Art and Social Life*, Plekhanov approvingly cites the comment of nineteenth century art critic John Ruskin that the merit of a work is determined, “other conditions being equal,” by “the loftiness of the sentiments it expresses.” This entirely legitimate, classical notion is widely and contemptuously rejected in present-day artistic and intellectual circles. Plekhanov notes that not “every idea can be expressed in a literary work,” for instance, a miser appealing for sympathy about his lost money (without other mitigating circumstances) “would not move anybody, that is, could not serve as a means of communication between himself and other people.”

The considerations in Bertolucci’s early films, made at a time of great social turmoil, of the problems of social revolution, fascism, the pressures of bourgeois society on intellectuals and artists, sexual and psychic oppression, served “as a means of communication” between the filmmaker and large numbers of people. With the emergence of a new mood in the European intelligentsia in the latter half of the 1970s, “consumed,” according to one commentator, “with cynicism, lechery and suicide,” Bertolucci also lost his way. All that was weak, insincere, unresolved in his aesthetic and social world-view came to the fore.

Does that mean the filmmaker suddenly lost his ability as an artist, that he no longer knew where to place a camera or how to direct an actor? The process is more complex. In his study of the Romantic poets, E.P. Thompson, writing about poet William Wordsworth’s later, thoroughly conformist work, argues “it is not that he became a poorer poet because he changed his political views, but that his new ‘good views’ were not held with the same intensity and authenticity.”

What Bertolucci found himself left with by the end of the 1970s, a flaccid mix of Freudianism, voyeurism and social indifference or skepticism, simply could not find artistic expression with the same intensity and authenticity as his previous ideas and moods. No doubt his own sharp falling off, which has a tragic element, bewilders him. *The Dreamers* is a further confirmation of this decline.

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