

## BERTOLUCCI AND ITALIAN CINEMA

Margaret Tarratt

To most people, Bernardo Bertolucci is best known as the director of *Last Tango in Paris*, much publicised for its explicit sex scenes involving Marlon Brando, although seen by Bertolucci himself as a political film involving the male/female power struggle. He is also the director of such dazzling and controversial films as the *The Conformist*, *1900* and

*La Luna* and his films have been financed from international sources. His latest film, *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*, is the first he has made in Italian for a decade. In the opening sequence Bertolucci's hero, decked out in fancy dress of yachting cap and binoculars, surveys his surroundings from his factory roof — a ship's captain on dry



From 1900

From *The Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*



land — and in a much admired scene, witnesses the kidnapping of his only son by supposedly left wing guerillas. The sailing motif is no coincidence for, as Bertolucci commented: 'A movie is the adventure really of jumping on a boat and going with a wind that takes you nowhere.' It is this journey 'nowhere' that has baffled and irritated the British critics.

*Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man* is the story of a middle-aged former peasant from the Po Valley, now the owner of a prosperous cheese factory, whose life is disrupted when he is faced with having to sell his goods to pay his son's ransom. The son, soon identified as a left wing activist himself, may or may not have been party to his own kidnapping, which is something the father has to come to terms with. Rebelling against the payoff, he finds a substitute for the son he now believes to be dead in an ambitious programme of surreptitiously investing the ransom money he has raised in his factory. As Bertolucci has said himself: 'The only value is buying and selling'. His sympathy with his peasant hero, so unresponsive to political seduction, has led him to make a film which for all its sensitivity to landscape, has an exceptionally rambling and confused narrative meaningful only in its specifically Italian context. Inevitably, critics of all complexions have ruefully agreed that this film is a failure, showing either the decay of a once vital talent or, more optimistically, the transition to the era of 'late Bertolucci'.

In a sense, the critics' uneven response to Bertolucci's films throughout his career has reflected expectation both raised and dashed about Italian cinema in general since the end of World War Two. From the late forties to the sixties, Italian cinema seemed to have qualities both innately 'Italian' but also generally relevant, for many, the neo-realism of such famous films as *Bicycle Thieves*, *Rome Open City* and *La Terra Trema*, which were shot on the streets, away from the studio, with non-professional actors, seemed particularly appropriate to the post-war years. In most cases, such films, in contrast to the 'white telephone' productions of the Mussolini era looked at aspects of working class life. To international audiences involved in attempts to rebuild and perhaps restructure their societies, neo-realist cinema had an extraordinary immediacy. When the authorities clamped down on the movement as detrimental to Italy's international image, directors such as Fellini with his scandalous look at decadent cosmopolitan life in Rome, *La Dolce Vita*, and Michelangelo Antonioni with his much discussed trilogy starring Monica Vitti — *L'Aventurra*, *La Notte* and

*The Eclipse* — successfully diverted attention to the wealthy upper classes as they witnessed the emotionally painful but inevitable moral and social change accompanying technological advance — a theme dear to the sixties. Yet, significantly, when Antonioni made films outside Italy, examining aspects of British society in *Blow Up* or the dilemma of the American revolutionary in *Zabriskie Point*, his reputation diminished. His observation became more stereotyped and less exact than in his Italian films.

Bertolucci's appearance on the scene with *Before the Revolution* (1964) and *Partner* (1968) caused him to be hailed as the Italian Jean-Luc Godard, establishing him at once as an 'international' director with a political awareness but also as a true Italian. Bertolucci did recognise Godard (the foremost director of the Left to emerge for the French New Wave movement) as one of his 'many father' with the hostility as well as the admiration that this relationship entails (In *The Conformist*, where the hero goes to Paris to kill a professor, the address and phone number were those of Godard: 'It was as if I were killing Jean-Luc'), but if Bertolucci's early films delved into his country's recent history and appeared to draw political conclusions, he was also indentifiably, and rather like Pasolini, an artist, a poet who at the age of 21 won Italy's highest award for poetry, a film maker who made free use of the works of classic authors as the basis for his films (Stendhal in *Before the Revolution*, Moravia in *The Conformist*, Dostoevsky in *The Spider's Stratagem*). Like Roland Barthes, he believed a film should seduce its audience from the outset. Bertolucci's characteristic undulating camera-work disorient the audience while his stylised compositions mask their content rather than reveal it. At times, his visual inspiration lay in paintings (Magritte for *The Spider's Stratagem* or Francis Bacon for *Last Tango in Paris*). But the political climate of 1968 had a profound effect on Bertolucci's attitude to his work. A communist 'since the age of seven' he now officially joined the party and also came to the conclusion that his films must reach a wider audience, he assumed total responsibility for his scripts, rejected ideas of dramatic 'alienation' as being, for him, a barrier to emotional communication with his audience and began to make 'international' films in which the political content was not readily perceived.

After the astonishing success of *Last Tango*, Bertolucci found a ready audience for his international films *1900* and *La Luna* but, as in the case of Antonioni, suffered a decline in reputation and became a rather

suspect figure, considered by some to have been bought off by success. To be notorious, however, is preferable to having no international reputation at all which is the fate of many Italian film makers whose films travel no further than their country of origin. Italian cinema in the seventies received scant attention in Britain. The dearth of Italian films imported, or books on the subject means that at present it is virtually a lost era for English language audiences. The achievement of Italian film makers in keeping their films in the international eye without sacrificing Italian flavour has not been maintained. Distributors currently complain of the 'hermetic' nature of modern Italian cinema, or, alternatively, of the greed of Italian producers who prevent foreign distribution because of the inordinately high prices they ask. Established names from the sixties such as Francesco Rosi or Ermanno Olmi have been, to some extent, represented on British screens with films like *Three Brothers* and *Tree of Wooden clogs* (though we have still to

see Rosi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* over here). A director such as Marco Bellochio however has been one of the biggest casualties of this indifference to Italian achievement in the cinema. Bellochio's *Victory March* (1976) by all accounts is a major omission; his *Salto nel Vuoto* was shown at the 1980 London Film Festival and more recently on television but did not gain distribution. // *Gabiano* has not been seen here at all. Of the unknown younger generation of film directors, Nano Moretti got British distribution for his much admired film *Ecce Bombo* but there seem to be no current plans for exhibition and it is thought to be 'too parochial' for British audiences.

With *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*, Bertolucci looks squarely at a contemporary Italian subject. Its weaknesses (mainly Bertolucci's self-indulgent script) are manifest. Nevertheless, it could be a good sign for the renewal of foreign interest in Italian cinema that one of its major, bankable names is now looking homeward again.