

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Characters in Bertolucci's Films

ISABELLE (in "Dreamers") Emotional

Character Isabelle is both playful and sultry, sweet-natured and cold-hearted. At her core, she is only part herself, the other half being her brother, Théo. After losing her virginity to Mathew, she enters a new dynamic, loving both Mathew and her brother. She is enigmatic, switching from affectionate lover to sharp-tongued sister of a friend. She is wilful and free-spirited, but not as free as we think.

Performer Isabelle is the consummate performer, enacting scenes from Garbo's films or dressing up to imitate women in classical paintings. As usual, we get a good idea of this quality from her first appearance, at the protest outside the *Cinémathèque Française*. We see her through Mathew's eyes as he joins the demonstration and then stares at the young attractive woman standing in a cliqued pose of the revolutionary student, beret cocked to one side, cigarette hanging from her lips, face fixed in grim determination. And she's chained herself to the gates of the building. In a brilliant scene, the pretence is comically exposed when she asks Mathew to 'remove this,' and he assumes (as do we) that she means the chains. Instead, she wants him to take away the cigarette stuck to her lips. When he asks why she's chained herself to the gate, she wriggles free and throws her hands in the air. Now we see that the chains are fixed to the gate, not her hands. It is both funny and revealing. Isabelle is an actress, a make-believe artist.

Frightened As the story progresses, Isabelle enacts scenes of sexual bravery and expresses disdain toward conventional ideas. But she is not so free as she would like to believe. In particular, she is afraid of the future, when the cocoon in which she lives with her brother will disappear and she will face the world. That fear is dramatized in the closing sequence, when she brings the two boys into her tent (a symbolic womb or cocoon). Like a mother, she closes both their eyes with her fingers and wishes them goodnight. Serene and content, the dreamers fall asleep. Later, Isabelle opens her eyes and speaks to a half-asleep Théo. 'Listen,' she says, with a note of anxiety. 'I love you. It's forever. The two of us. I just want you to tell me that it's forever.' Isabelle, the sleeping beauty, knows that that they must wake up and face a future. She isn't sure how her bond with her brother will co-exist with her love with Mathew. She wants to be reassured.