

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE DREAMERS 2003

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

The Dreamers is Bertolucci's playful postcard sent from Paris '68 to film lovers all over the world. While the world outside is turned upside down by revolution, three young people play games of sex and cinema in an apartment while the parents are on vacation. The screenplay was written by Gilbert Adair, who adapted his own novel *The Holy Innocents* (1988), which was itself inspired by Jean Cocteau's novel *Les Enfants Terribles* and Jean-Pierre Melville's film with that title. Bertolucci cut the homosexual thread from Adair's first draft, leaving just a hint in one scene. The film uses historical footage to capture the zeitgeist of the late 1960s as well as clips from classic old films to parallel the events in the film itself. The full-on frontal nudity and genital exposure in some scenes were shocking then and still are today.

SYNOPSIS

During the Paris student riots of 1968, American student Mathew meets French twins Théo and Isabelle, all in their late teens. Drawn together by their shared love for film, the three of them spend weeks in the twins' apartment while their parents are away. After Mathew falls in love with Isabelle and is told that she and Théo are Siamese twins, he tries to separate her from her brother, suspecting them of incest. The three youths engage in games of film trivia, debates about revolutionary politics and arguments about love. As the story comes to an end, the twins renew their unbreakable bond, leaving Mathew on the outside.

PEOPLE

Mathew	Mathew is a young American student in Paris.
Théo	Théo is a French student in Paris.
Isabelle	Isabelle, his exact twin, is also a student in Paris.

SCENES

Paris 1968. Revolution is in the air. At a gathering to protest the firing of the head of the Cinémathèque Française, young American Mathew meets equally young French twins Isabelle and Théo. As an exchange student, Mathew is studying French but spends most of his time watching films at the cinemathèque, where the twins have noticed him. After the police violently disperse the protest, the three cinema aficionados strike up a friendship.

Mathew The next morning, Théo invites Mathew to have dinner at their parents' flat. Théo argues with his father over the merits of political activism, but Mathew impresses everyone with his vision of universal harmony. Spending the night in the flat, Mathew is surprised when he sees brother and sister sleeping nude on the same bed. After the parents leave for a vacation early in the morning, Isabelle wakes him up with a passionate kiss. Théo then invites their new friend to move in with them for the month that their parents are away.

Challenge Mathew and the twins grow closer as they discuss actors, films and scenes from cinema history. Then Isabelle challenges them all to beat the world record for running through the Louvre (repeating a scene in Godard's *Bandé a Part*). After three of them pull it off, dodging the ineffective arms of a museum guard, Mathew is accepted as an equal member. The duo has become a trio.

Masturbation The competitive spirit gets bolder when Isabelle mimics the famous chorus line scene in *Blonde Venus*, in which Marlene Dietrich is dressed in a gorilla suit, and challenges Théo to name

the film. He can't and she demands as a forfeit that he do in front of them what he has done in front of a poster of Dietrich. Forced to comply, Théo drops his pants and masturbates.

Lovers Théo issues a similar challenge to Mathew when he enacts a death scene from a famous crime film (*Scarface*). Mathew loses and is told to make love with Isabelle in front of Théo. Although at first reluctant and perhaps scared, Mathew follows orders. When they are finished, Mathew discovers blood between Isabelle's legs. She was a virgin, and so was he. Fully initiated, they now make love all the time in the flat. Mathew is still suspicious that she and her brother have been incestuous. 'He's never been inside you?' he asks. 'He's always inside me,' she replies.

Mathew rebuffed Entering a room where Théo lies fully clothed next to a naked Isabelle, Mathew says he realises that the twins are two halves of the same person and that he feels a part of them. Théo tells him coldly that they are not a threesome because he and Isabelle are inseparable. Later, Mathew feels humiliated when Isabelle and Théo shave his pubic hair. Mathew tries to pull Isabelle out of Théo's orbit by taking her on an American-style date: they sip sodas through straws in a dinner and 'neck' in the cinema.

Isabelle reacts Théo brings a girlfriend into the flat, which sends Isabelle into a frenzy of jealous anger. She is further shocked to find Théo and Mathew in semi-erotic play on a bed. Théo asks her to join them but she declines, saying, 'No. It smells like a whorehouse.' She then leads them into another room, where she has set up a tent-bed as a surprise. As the three of them sleep peacefully, Isabelle wakes Théo and begs him to reassure her that their love is forever.

Dreaming The parents arrive home and see the three naked bodies asleep in the tent. Rather than wake the dreamers, they leave a cheque and leave. When Isabelle, the first to wake, finds the cheque, she attempts to kill them all by letting gas escape from a hose into their tent. Instead, they are awakened by rioting in the streets, which they join. Seeing Théo about to throw a Molotov cocktail, Mathew tries to stop him, condemning it as useless violence. Théo shoves him aside and leads Isabelle toward the riot police, where he hurls the explosive. A disgusted Mathew turns and walks away. The police charge forward.

THEMES

Siblings

sibling love One of the driving forces of this film is the intimacy between brother and sister, which Mathew interprets as incest and about which the viewer must speculate. From the opening scenes, we see that Théo and Isabelle are psychologically close. Close observers will also notice the matching birthmarks on their shoulders, which confirm Théo's claim that they are Siamese twins (even though Siamese twins cannot be different sexes). Throughout the film, we see the innate understanding between them, and their possessiveness of one another. The deep caring of Isabelle for her brother is illustrated in the closing sequence, when the three dreamers are asleep in the tent. She wakes him and demands that he tell her their bond is 'forever.' She speaks in French, not English, which suggests she is drawing on a deeper physiological layer. When he wants to know 'what's forever,' she simply says, 'The two of us.' Overwhelmed by her love for her brother, she can barely hold back the tear.

sharing political ideas Théo, the avowed revolutionary, spends more time drinking wine and watching movies than protesting on the streets. But he, too, has a dream, an idea that combines his love of film with his political sympathies. As he drinks one of his father's finest wines, he takes Mathew into his confidence. "Listen," he says. "Think of [Andre] Malraux making a film with a cast of millions. All those millions of Red Guards marching together into the future, with the little Red Book in their hands. Books, not guns. Culture, not violence. Don't you see what a beautiful epic movie it would make." As he speaks, his eager eyes are wide with intoxication at his vision of the future. The key element is, of course, that he is speaking of a movie and not political activity on the ground. Théo is caught in the cross-fire of the revolutionary spirit of 1968 and his own deeply-rooted love of cinema.

sharing friends They become very intimate as a result of the various escapades of the trio, ranging from sexual forfeits in the cinema trivia game to serious political debates. They both say that they 'love' each other, and their mutual affection is evident. The most intimate scene comes near the

end. The two young men get into a deep discussion about film and politics. At one point, while they are lying face down on a bed, Mathew challenges Théo's revolutionary commitment, saying that he (Théo) prefers being inside the flat with him to being out on the streets with protestors. Théo is hurt by this truth and grabs Mathew's throat in mock strangulation. Suddenly, Isabelle enters and cries, 'Boys! Boys!' in simulated horror.

sharing old films The three dreamers also share their love of old films, which is how they met in the first place. They refer to their favourite films (clips of which are shown on screen), discuss directors and enact scenes from famous films. All this sharing transports the threesome out of the apartment and into the world of screen fantasy.

sharing sexual games Another example of how sex and cinema combine involves all three young people. Isabelle mimics the famous chorus line scene in which Marlene Dietrich is dressed in a gorilla suit and challenges Théo to name the film (*Blonde Venus*). When he is unable to remember, she demands that he masturbate in front of them. Forced to comply, Théo drops his pants and pleasures himself, with the other two watching. It would be voyeuristic, except that neither Isabelle nor Mathew show any emotion; she is determined that he pay his forfeit, and he is dumbfounded by the whole thing. After both males leave the room, she kneels down and wipes the ejaculated sperm from the poster image of Dietrich. The scene is less a sexual experience and more a demonstration of the twins' contempt for conventional attitudes regarding sex. 'There's no shame in masturbation,' they seem to say. 'Do it in the open!'

sharing love with others The second time they play 'name the film,' Mathew loses and is told by Théo to make love with Isabelle. When she strips off and dances for them, shy Mathew flees and hides in a closet. As if to emphasise the game-playing element of this escapade, Théo hunts for him in 'hide-and-seek' mode. When Théo grabs him, Mathew imitates an arrested protestor and shouts, 'I'm not violent. I'm not going to resist.' A fully-nude Isabelle chastises him, 'You know, Mathew, you're not being very gallant.' While Théo pins back his arms, she strips off his pants and finds that he has kept a photo of her in his underpants. Reconciled to the inevitable, and beginning to relish it, Mathew takes off his shirt and makes love to Isabelle. 'You have to help me,' he says, and she cries out in pain, but they move toward a climax. Afterwards, he finds blood between her legs and realises she had been a virgin, like him. She is about to cry until he smears both their faces with her blood and they kiss. They have enacted a blood initiation rite.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mathew With his wide-eyed American eagerness and innocence, Mathew could be a character out of a Henry James novel. Certainly, he begins as his mother's son, writing home nice letters about his experiences in Paris, but as the film develops, we see that he has hidden depths. At various times, he behaves like a thumb-sucking baby, an immature teenager, an imaginative student and a perceptive adult. Overall, he is sweet, vulnerable and probably the most likeable of the threesome.

Grateful Naïve but perceptive Mathew is never less than kind in his interaction with the twins. He is generous to a fault, as is demonstrated in a scene that follows his first full-blown sexual experience with Isabelle. He finds the twins lying asleep on a bed, next to which he sits on the floor, holding a pot of honey and sucking the sticky luff from his fingers. This little-boy image of Mathew suits that he says next. After offering Théo some honey and having his offer summarily rejected, Mathew sucks again and says, 'I want you to know that I'm grateful.' Théo is taken aback by his unexpected choice of words. Mathew explains that now he accepts as true what he was told about Théo and Isabelle being exact twins. 'For me, you two are like two halves of the same person,' he says. 'And now you've made me feel like I'm a part of you.' This is Mathew at his sweetest, showing appreciation for a new friendship.

Humiliated Having shown his vulnerability, Mathew is bound to be hurt and this is what happens not long after the scene described above. Again, Mathew is talking about his love for the twins, when Isabelle challenges him to show his love, his 'proof' of love. She tells him to get out of the bathtub and stand up so that they can shave off his pubic hair. This is too much even for the compliant Mathew, who screams, 'You're both fucking crazy. This is what you call "proof of love," shaving off my pubic hair?' When Isabelle protests that 'it's just a game,' Mathew gets angrier. 'It's just a game? Think about it. Is this something you do to each other? You want to shave my pubic hair? You want me to be a little boy for you? So you can play games with me?' He feels hurt, used by them, infantilised and manipulated, like a toy. His anger is an indication of the depth of his humiliation.

Perceptive As implied in the scene described above, Mathew possesses insight into his friends' motivations. This quality is illustrated even more vividly in the conversation with Théo that leads up to the homoerotic scene (also noted above). When Théo describes his vision of a 'beautiful epic film' promoting a Maoist revolution, Mathew points out (using classical Marxist terminology) that there is a 'contradiction.' Mathew then spells it out to a confused Théo. 'If you really believed in what you're saying, you'd be out there, on the street,' he tells him. 'But you're not out there. You're inside with me, drinking fine wine, talking about film, talking about Maoism... You put up the posters, but I don't think you really believe in it.' Mathew has exposed the tension not only in Théo but in the film as a whole. Naïve American Mathew turns out to be more perceptive than his sophisticated French friends.

Isabelle 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 dramatised 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.

Théo Dark-haired and frowning, Théo is a serious-minded student, a film buff and a proponent of Maoist politics. He is amiable toward Mathew, and the two young men share a certain camaraderie, until Mathew begins to claim ownership of Isabelle. Then, the cold, even cruel, side of his character is revealed.

Angry and argumentative Théo argues with his father and with Mathew, largely about films but also about politics. As a young and intelligent person, he has confidence in his convictions and does not hesitate to criticise others. Théo displays this confrontational side of his character in the dinner scene in his parents' apartment, with Mathew as a guest. When his father mocks his ideas of 'happenings' that transform society, Théo asks acidly, 'What are you saying. When Langlois [head of the Cinémathèque Française] is dismissed, we shouldn't do anything? If students are beaten up?' His father asks for a little lucidity, which provokes Théo to quip, 'So everyone's wrong but you? In France, Germany, America?' When the argument grows more personal, Théo finally insults his father. 'Yes,' he says, 'a "poem is a petition." The most famous line you ever wrote. And now look at you.' Théo is angry and argumentative.

Cold In addition to his fiery anger, Théo also has a cold and distant side to his character. This is demonstrated in a poignant scene, when Mathew tells him that he is 'grateful' for allowing him to become a part of his bond with his sister. Hearing these words, Théo speaks in a flat tone. 'Let's get some things straight,' he says. 'You're a nice boy and I like you a lot. But, no. It was never meant to be the three of us.' He then reminds Mathew that he and his sister are Siamese twins. It is a cruel rejection of a friend who has just opened up his heart to him. At first, it appears incongruous with what we know of Théo, but on reflection, we understand that his relationship with his sister is more

important than anything else in life.