

## Themes in Bertolucci's Films

### Love

*Before the Revolution* The young protagonist of this autobiographical film, a radical student named Fabrizio, falls in love with and carries on a sexual affair with Gina, his aunt. Their transgressive relationship hits the rocks when naïve Fabrizio is hurt by Gina's 'betrayal' of him with a stranger. Confused, Fabrizio is eventually led back to his fiancé, an innocent-looking girl from a 'nice' family. The end of his experimental love affair is matched by his withdrawal from radical politics.

*The Conformist* Like Fabrizio, Marcello (the protagonist of *The Conformist*), opts for conformity when he marries sweet-faced Giulia. But along the way, Marcello has fallen in love with sexy Anna, the wife of a man he has been sent to assassinate in Paris. Also like Fabrizio, Marcello is unable to disentangle his emotional life from his political mission and ends up complicit in Anna's murder. Killing that illicit love, though, is just what he wants, in order that he can resume his conformist life.

*The Dreamers* Bertolucci's fascination with Freudian themes is also evident in *The Dreamers*, where the intimacy between brother and sister teeters on the edge of sexuality. Throughout the film, we see that Théo and Isabelle are psychologically and physically close, as confirmed by the matching birthmarks on their shoulders. Their suffocating sibling love is precisely what prevents Mathew, their American friend, from forming a lasting relationship with either one, although he becomes Isabelle's lover. The story ends with Isabelle wanting reassurance from Théo that their love is 'forever.'

*Stealing Beauty* A young woman's search for love is the central theme of this late Bertolucci film set in the beautiful Tuscany hills. Lucy is hoping to hook up with Niccolo, an Italian boy she met on an earlier visit, but she finds that he is involved with another girl. She is subjected to some heavy flirting by an older man before finally having a sexual experience with Osvaldo, the younger brother of the first Italian boy. Everything is fine because it turns out that Osvaldo (not Niccolo) wrote the love letter to her that she cherishes so much. Lucy also finds another kind of love with her biological father, the sculptor Ian.

*The Sheltering Sky* Port and Kit, the two main characters in this film, are married but find ways not to love each other. Their ten-year relationship is under strain as they explore an alternative life-style in the Saharan desert. Loosened from their New York moorings, both engage in extra-marital sex, but it is casual in both cases. The deep, somewhat hidden, bond between them is revealed during Port's slow death, when Kit cares for him with intense affection.

*The Last Emperor* There is only one fully-developed relationship of love in the film, that between Pu Yi and Wan Jung, his wife. Although she is slightly older and wiser than he, and although it is an arranged marriage, they grow up together, establish a rapport and enjoy mutual respect. Pu Yi also takes a second wife, Wen Hsiu, who plays second fiddle and eventually leaves the arrangement.