

CHARACTERS in BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI'S FILMS

Contents

Open or closed to New Experiences
Agreeable and Disagreeable in Social Relations
Conscientious or Unconscientious
Rational or Emotional

1. Open

Isabelle (*The Dreamers*) 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 quite as free as she thinks.

Wan Jung (*The Last Emperor*) is seventeen when she is chosen as the right bride for Pu Yi. From the beginning, she shows more maturity and self-control than her husband, whom she grows to respect. Wan Jung is fiercely loyal to China, despite its treatment of Pu Yi, which causes a rift between her and her husband. Her growing isolation from him leads her into a lesbian relationship with Eastern Jewel and opium smoking. In the end, though, she proves her loyalty to Pu Yi.

Jeanne (*Last Tango in Paris*) is young, perhaps nineteen or twenty years old. She is an unremarkable but spirited person born into a bourgeois family. She has a blasé attitude to life, something of a reflection of the 'pop' culture of the 1970s. She is mostly dominated by Paul, but asserts herself with Thomas, her fiancé. She could be viewed as the middle-class victim of the social-rebel Paul, but that characterisation ignores her agency in the sex scenes.

Kit (*The Sheltering Sky*) is an American playwright, seeking to experience a different kind of life. She is sharp-tongued, mostly with Port, but also considerate to him and others. She appears edgy and restless from the beginning, trying to accommodate her husband's vague plans with her own vague desires. Although she has a one-night fling with George, her bond with Port is deep, perhaps too deep.

Lucy (*Stealing Beauty*) is a young American woman on the cusp of womanhood. She is attractive, even sexy, but also childlike and physically awkward at the same time. She is candid yet shy, afraid of who she might be. She's also curious, seeking not only her father but also her identity. And she is sensitive, captivated by a four-year-old love letter, and responsive to beauty in poetry, art and the landscape.

Ian (*Stealing Beauty*) has a chiselled face, much like one of his wood images, which makes him look older than he is. Often, he stares with cold concentration at his model or his sculpture. But he is also a warm and affectionate man, with no apparent agenda, sexual or otherwise, except for his work. And he works long and hard in his studio, never allowing his model to see the image until it is finished.

The unnamed prostitute (*The Grim Reaper*) is a congenial woman in her thirties or forties. Rather than being a sexualised character, she is shown as an ordinary person—just doing her job in order to make ends meet. In her only appearance, in the second vignette of Natalino, she shows her vulnerability. She is professional but also personable, telling Natalino that he has a 'lovely accent from the North' and that she 'likes him.'

Luciano Although nineteen-year-old Luciano (*The Grim Reaper*) is poor and fatherless, he is a positive and light-hearted person. When his friends in the purse-snatching gang get angry and frustrated, he maintains his cheerfulness.

Theodore (*The Grim Reaper*) the demobbed soldier from the south is also a carefree character. In his episode, he wanders around Rome making passes at young women. He is idle and lonely, but essentially free of worries.

Francolicchio is yet another open character in *The Grim Reaper*. He is a young boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen, who has close friendships with other boys and girls his age. Although he comes from a poor family, he has a sunny disposition.

2. Closed

Marcello (*The Conformist*) is the epitome of a closed character. Desperate to conform, he is a dull man, a bureaucrat who rarely smiles and who is afraid to stand out from the crowd. He seeks anonymity in following social conventions and the prevailing political ideology. He lacks both courage and conviction, in all aspects of life, including his love life. His sexual desire for his wife is voyeuristic and his interest in Anna is momentary.

Lorenzo (*Me and You*) is a very different kind of closed person. He is young loner and slightly autistic. He shuns people and delves into the natural world of reptiles and insects. Shy and fragile, he is also kind and affectionate, though that does not prevent him from throwing a teenage tantrum. He has a keen imagination and would like nothing more than to live in isolation from the messy world outside his private self.

Joe (*Luna*) is similar to Joe. He, too, is a moody teenage boy, whose busy mother does not have enough time for him. He can be sweet but also rude, self-centred and yet generous. In short, he is as contradictory and erratic as his mother. But being only fifteen, the adult worlds of love and sex are confusing and hurtful for him.

Port (*The Sheltering Sky*) is an enigma, who talks a lot but shows little self-awareness. An American man in his thirties, and a composer from New York, he is self-assured, smug and pretentious. Not unkind, he is reflective but also seems paralyzed by a deep dissatisfaction with himself and with society in general.

The unnamed gay man in *The Grim Reaper* is the dark shadow in the film. He meets the two boys Pipito and Francolicchio in the dark park and tries to lure one (or both) of them into a sexual encounter. Next, he is the silent witness to the murder of the prostitute. And, finally, he leads the police to Natalino, the murderer, who is dancing with other couples on a barge. The key feature of this gay man is his silence—he is the only character in the film who never speaks. He is, as some critics have suggested, the Grim Reaper itself, the silent figure in western mythologies who comes to collect your soul and take it to the land of the dead.

3. Disagreeable

Miranda (*Stealing Beauty*) is very easy to dislike. Shallow, catty and stuck-up, she thinks she is a wonderful jewellery designer, who has bestowed her presence on the others at the villa. Bringing her hunky boyfriend with her, she enjoys nude sunbathing and heavy-duty sex. When Lucy arrives, she is jealous and loses her sangfroid.

Paul (*Last Tango in Paris*) is a bully, who manipulates and rapes Jeanne. Although he has travelled the world before settling in Paris, we know little about his recent past. He had an unhappy upbringing, with irresponsible parents, although he has pleasant memories of the countryside. Paul is a moody and withdrawn person, psychically crippled by his wife's suicide. He can be both violent and tender, angry and playful, and his mood swings are unpredictable and sudden.

Bustelli (*The Grim Reaper*) is a man of appearances only. He wears expensive clothes and drives a shiny car. All his assets, we later learn, are funded by his fiancé's income from running a network of prostitutes. He is her 'associate,' but he is under her control. Empty inside, he shows disdain toward others on the outside.

Esperia (*The Grim Reaper*) is Bustelli's fiancé and partner in crime. She is a shallow, domineering and spiteful woman, who threatens to kill her own mother, bullies her prostitutes and only smiles when she is counting money.

Natalino (*The Grim Reaper*) is a deceptively nice-looking blonde man who is also a loner. He stands out from the crowd by virtue of his accent and his dress. This soulless man shows no compunction in murdering a prostitute for her handbag.

4. *Conscientious*

Pu Yi Given his upbringing, Pu Yi (*The Last Emperor*) has flaws, but he is essentially an admirable man. Aided by his western tutor, he develops his own sense of what is right for China and Manchuria. Although he makes mistakes, he is guided by what he thinks is best for his people. In the end, he also shows compassion toward the man who held him in prison for ten long years.

Prison commander Pu Yi is matched in virtue by his prison commander (*The Last Emperor*). The prison commander is a dour man, a person of firm conviction that people are basically good and can be re-educated to bring out their innate nature. For a commander of a prison in China in the 1950s, he is extremely kind toward his wards, never showing anger or violence. At the end, we also witness his iron-hard determination not to compromise himself and confess to crimes.

Alex (*Stealing Beauty*) is a frail man, whose pale face displays his slow decline to death. Despite that condition, he is a proud person who does not want to be fussed over. And he is deeply sympathetic, especially toward Lucy, whose youth infuses him with a burst of life. In this relationship with her, he displays empathy, vulnerability and the capacity for love.

Mathew With his wide-eyed American eagerness and innocence, Mathew (*The Dreamers*) 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.

5. *Rational*

Cesare (*Before the Revolution*) is the iconic ideologue, who is completely committed to the cause. He is a teacher, who has a large influence on Fabrizio and others. Although he is dedicated to his revolutionary ideology, he is also gentle and thoughtful. His character reflects the contradictions that the film-maker perceived in the leftist movement of his own youth.

Qadri (*The Conformist*) is similar to Cesare in his political commitment, rational outlook and general demeanour. He, too, is a teacher, who wins the admiration of his student/followers. And, he is also congenial and polite, if a little naïve.

Théo Dark-haired and frowning, Théo (*The Dreamers*) is another serious-minded political thinker. Unlike the others, though, he is young and more interested in cinema than activism on the streets. 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

Mr Johnston (*The Last Emperor*) is the personification of western rationalism. As Pu Yi's tutor, he guides the young ruler away from 'irrational Asian' culture toward a modern outlook on the world. He carries himself ramrod straight and plays a 'straight bat' with his young charge, while also not fearing to stand up for his beliefs when they clash with palace tradition. Slowly, he develops a deep friendship with Pu Yi and defends him whenever possible.

6. *Emotional*

Fabrizio (*Before the Revolution*) is a thinly-disguised version of the film-maker, who, like his protagonist, had an unsuccessful relationship with an older woman and supported the Communist cause. Fabrizio is a rebel, ranting against the Church, Fascism and the state, but underneath his shouting, he takes more pleasure in watching films than in political activism. As the film unfolds, we understand that Fabrizio has channelled his revolutionary urge into his daring love affair with his aunt. In all the political and romantic turmoil, he is naïve but always considerate.

Caterina (*Luna*) is a popular and dedicated opera singer. She is as self-absorbed, vain and

melodramatic as the roles she plays on the lavish sets. One might (somewhat unkindly) call her a 'drama queen.' She is also neglectful and then remorseful as a mother of a wayward son. Once she becomes aware of his desperate condition, she clings to him as she would to a lover.

Gina (*Before the Revolution*) is something of an older female version of Fabrizio, her nephew. An attractive woman, perhaps in her thirties, she does 'nothing' in Milan, except 'take a bath three times a day.' She is deeply disturbed and prone to bouts of hysteria, apparently stemming from the early death of her father. She is mercurial, oscillating between happiness and depression within minutes. Louche, lost and adrift, and mentally unstable, she does show wisdom in the end when she guides Fabrizio back to his fiancé.

Guilia (*The Conformist*) is a young, middle-class woman of little intellect, just the normal sort of wife that Marcello wants. She is likable and lively but somewhat shallow, naïve and spoiled. She wants to get married and enjoy life, in that order. Unlike the other characters in the story, she is guided more by her heart than her head.

Olivia (*Me and You*) is Lorenzo's older half-sister. At twenty-five, she is already a failure. She is aggressive, jittery and unreliable, but she is also playful, intelligent and supportive of her naïve step-brother. Her early promise as an art photographer was destroyed by a heroin addiction that still haunts her. Although she shows some flashes of good sense, she is ruled by emotions.