

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Themes in Bertolucci's Films

Sexuality

overview One of the prominent themes in Bertolucci's *oeuvre* is sexuality, in its full spectrum of experiences. As Bertolucci himself made clear in an interview our early sexual experiences are the most important to our later character formation: 'I think that sexuality is perhaps the most important thing in a person's life...It's fundamentally important and completely natural.' He was also clear that early sexual experiences are the most formative, and that is why sexual initiation features strongly in three of his later films.

Luna In this film, fifteen-year-old Joe is driven into the arms of a young Italian girl by his loneliness. As they watch a Marilyn Monroe film in a cinema, his (and the girl's) loss of virginity is depicted as a human, somewhat humorous, experience. Joe also has to deal with his own mother's sexualised advances to him. How an adult Joe will process that incestuous experience is left to the viewers to consider.

The Dreamers This film, set almost entirely in an apartment in Paris, explores the sexual education of three teenagers: Mathew (an American exchange student), Theo (a French student) and Isabelle (his twin sister). Mixing their shared love of cinema with politics, the threesome dare themselves to be open about their sexuality. Mathew and Isabelle lose their virginity to each other and before passionate lovers, for a while. Although incest is hinted at in the film, it does not occur.

Stealing Beauty The issue of virginity also appears in this film, in which another young American, Lucy, goes to Europe (Tuscany) to find both her old boyfriend and her father. Lucy's attitudes toward sex and virginity help to define her character. Her encounters with a pair of brothers conclude in a glorious scene when she and the young boy both have their first sexual experience.

The Conformist Another kind of adolescent sexual experience also defines the main character in Bertolucci's masterpiece. When he was a young boy, Marcello is seduced by an older man, and though no sex occurs, he thinks that he shot the man dead. That traumatic experience haunts Marcello for the rest of his life, shrouding him in shame. It is one reason why he wants to 'conform' and marry a middle-class girl in the end.

Last Tango in Paris Jeanne, the young woman in *Last Tango in Paris*, is also subjected to transgressive sexual acts. Although she appears to have a guilt-free attitude toward sex, she is raped and manipulated by the dominant Paul. She also describes her earliest experience of having an orgasm by masturbation, which plays a role in forming her later attitudes.

The Grim Reaper The young people in Bertolucci's debut film are a far cry from those in his later films. The characters in *The Grim Reaper* are gay and innocent, laughing and singing about love and possible futures. Shy and inexperienced, the girls giggle about marriage and the boys dismiss it out of nervousness. 'What do you mean problems?' one of the boys says to the girls. 'You just go to church and get married.'

The Last Emperor When the young Pu Yi gets married, to two wives, he is experienced in any kind of love-making. Slowly, he is taught, in part by Wan Jung, his first wife, and in part by palace courtiers. In one scene, the young man enjoys a frolic under the sheets with both his wives. His sexual education progresses alongside his political education.