

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Bertolucci's Films

Politics

overview A strong theme in Bertolucci's film is politics. He was himself a member of the Communist Party of Italy (like his compatriot Visconti) and some of his films are semi-autobiographical in that they reflect an intellectual's dilemma of having to choose art or political action. Bertolucci acknowledged this tension in an interview when he said, '*I was a Marxist with all the love, all the passion, and all the despair of a bourgeois who chooses Marxism...For every Marxist, there is always the fear of being sucked back into the milieu he came out of, because he's born into it and the roots are so deep.*'

Before the Revolution The personal fear of compromising one's political ideals is depicted in *Before the Revolution* (1964), Bertolucci's second film, in which the protagonist, Fabrizio, is a middle-class young man torn (like the director) between his revolutionary ideals and his comfortable life-style. He opts for respectability by abandoning radical politics and marrying his innocent fiancé. There is also a conflict between his bourgeois upbringing and his radical politics, which is resolved when he abandons politics and marries a middle-class girl.

The Conformist Political compromise, is explored in a much more subtle manner in *The Conformist* (1970). Here, the conflicted character is not leftist but fascist by inclination. Like Fabrizio, however, Marcello seeks conventionality by marrying a middle-class woman. Rejecting any trace of unconventional behaviour, he desperately wants to fit in to the prevailing ideology of Mussolini's regime. In fact, Marcello does not actually compromise his political beliefs because he has none; instead, he simply conforms.

The Last Emperor The compromises that accompany political power are writ large in *The Last Emperor* (1987). Pu Yi survives the chaotic changes that convulsed China during the first half of the twentieth century only by adapting himself and adopting different guises as he passes from sovereign of China, to puppet-ruler of Japanese-controlled Manchuria, to prisoner of war held by the Russians and, finally, to a re-educated peasant in Mao's paradise. The film also contains political idealism, for example, the revolution of Sun Yat-sen's nationalists in 1911, the seizure of power by Chiang Kai-shek in 1925 and Mao's Cultural Revolution. All these revolutions are led by political idealism, but there is also another type of idealism in the film: Pu Yi's own romantic idea that he is the ruler of the Manchurian people.

The Dreamers Political idealism is also central to a much later film, *The Dreamers* (2003). Set in the context of the radical politics of 1968 Paris, it features Theo, a student in a middle-class family, who is bursting with Maoist ideology (and cinephilia, too). For most of the film, however, he prefers to stay indoors rather than fight on the streets. In the final scene, his visions of experimental cinema and radical politics merge when he joins the protestors and throws a Molotov cocktail at the police.