

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **BEFORE THE REVOLUTION (Prima della rivoluzione)** 1964 Bernardo Bertolucci

### OVERVIEW

Bertolucci made this film, a barely-concealed autobiographical portrait set in his native Parma, when he was only twenty-two years old. As a searing exploration of a young man torn between revolutionary politics and bourgeois conformity, the film is affecting and informative, if a little cerebral at times. Still, it is energetic and experimental, introducing the theme of romanticism vs revolution, and the mixture of cinephilia with politics, that would reappear in other films. As a biographical note, Bertolucci was always on the hard left, but he didn't join the Italian Communist Party until 1968. For this film, he borrowed narrative elements (including the names of the leading characters) from Stendhal's famous 19<sup>th</sup> century novel (*The Charterhouse of Parma*). The film was not well received in Italy on its release, in part because, at a 1961 press conference, Bertolucci had instructed Italian critics to speak in French, 'the true language of cinema.'

### PEOPLE

Fabrizio	Fabrizio is a young man in Parma.
Clelia	Clelia is his fiancé.
Agostino	Agostino is his friend.
Cesare	Cesare is his teacher.
Gina	Gina is his aunt.
Puck	Puck is Gina's old friend and lover.

### SYNOPSIS

Fabrizio is a rebellious young man on the cusp of adulthood, unsure where his life is headed and swept up in the idealism of Marxism. He joins the Communist Party, under the guidance of his teacher Cesare, but is not fully committed and is distraught when his friend Agostino dies in a drowning accident that might be a suicide. His revolutionary desires find another outlet when he starts a passionate love affair with his young aunt, who is even more unstable than he is. Soon, she betrays him, he succumbs to social pressure and marries a woman of his own class.

### SCENES

#### Part One

**Commitment** The film opens in Parma in 1962, as young Fabrizio denounces the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and sneers at himself as a member of the bourgeois, 'the people of the midday mass.' Guided by Cesare, his teacher, he has become a fervent supporter of the Communist Party.

**Cowardice** Next, Fabrizio scours the city looking for his fiancé (a bourgeois girl named Clelia), intending to break off their engagement as a symbol of his radical politics. He finds her in a church, where the camera shows images of the hammer and sickle on religious statues, but he lacks the courage to speak with her.

**Dilemma** Fabrizio has a heated argument with Agostino, his friend, about the need to reject their families and join the cause. Both men love the cinema, and Fabrizio is torn between going to see *Red Desert* and meeting with Cesare. Agostino urges him to keep his appointment with his teacher. Before going out to meet his 'comrade,' as his father puts it sarcastically, Fabrizio greets his mother's younger sister, Gina, who has just arrived from Milan.

**Death** Fabrizio is overcome with anguish when Agostino's dead body is dragged out the river. Talking to eye-witnesses, he is convinced that he committed suicide. He goes to the funeral but stays in the car, where he has a long talk with Gina, who is obviously attracted to her handsome young nephew. After listening to her morbid thoughts about death, he becomes more morose about his friend's demise.

*Romance* Aunt and nephew realise that they are both lonely and need each other. After shopping like a married couple, Fabrizio keeps a meeting with Cesare while Gina waits for him outside. As she waits, she is pestered by a young girl, who sings a song that torments her. When Fabrizio comes out and sees Gina in tears, he comforts her. At home, in a back room, they become lovers.

## Part Two

*Meeting* When Fabrizio introduces Gina to Cesare, the three of them talk about politics, especially fascism, and the possibility of changing society. Cesare says it is necessary, but Gina contradicts him, saying that people remain the same. They also talk about Agostino's death, which Fabrizio is convinced was suicide and which upsets Gina.

*Betrayal* At home, Gina calls her psychoanalyst on the phone and becomes hysterical, saying she can't stand to be all alone in Parma and asking to come back to Milan. The next day, a man helps her at a newsstand and follows her. When they emerge from a hotel after making love, she runs into Fabrizio, who sizes up the situation and spurns her.

*Fabrizio confused* Fabrizio goes to the cinema with a friend, who speaks about films, camera angles and how they change a person. Fabrizio also loves film but is too preoccupied with Gina's betrayal to respond. At home, Fabrizio tries to be angry but cannot resist her. She makes a string of incoherent comments about the stranger she met, about all men and her own guilt. 'I like you because you're not a man, yet,' she says and ends with a mock impersonation of a conventional love letter. Fabrizio laughs with her, but her instability is severe.

*Puck* The setting shifts to a private estate outside Parma on the River Po, where Gina talks with Puck, an old friend and lover. Fabrizio and Cesare show up, unannounced, and Fabrizio again suspects her of cheating on him. Puck, who is much older, seems to have an innate understanding of Gina's troubled love affair. Puck himself is sad because all his land is mortgaged and he hasn't the money to repay the bank loan. A representative of the pre-war landed elite, he is now redundant in a changing Italy. Jealous Fabrizio accuses him of 'false sincerity' and points out that he has enjoyed inherited wealth. 'One inherits attitudes,' Puck says in his defence.

*Arguments* That comment enrages Fabrizio, who cries, 'I see! Habit justifies everything—Fascism, Franco, racism, we get used to them all.' Gina calls him smug and pretentious and slaps him hard three times. In a nostalgic mood, Puck laments the machines that will soon destroy the river, along with the boatmen and birds who live on it.

*Resignation* Fabrizio admits that Puck is right and realises that he will become like Puck in his old age. 'There is no escape for the children of the bourgeoisie,' he says with regret. His affair with Gina is over, and it is Cesare who takes Gina to the station, where she catches a train back to Milan.

*Disillusionment* At the annual celebration of Liberation Day, Fabrizio tells Cesare he disapproves of the 'entertainment' and is disillusioned about politics in general. He no longer supports the Communist party because revolution requires 'a new kind of man.' He is disillusioned with himself for his inability to change, and with the working class who want to imitate the bourgeoisie. As the bands play on, Fabrizio recites quotations from Communist texts, but his voice is desperate rather than convinced.

*Opera* After a passage of time, the setting shifts to the Opera House, where Fabrizio joins his mother and his fiancé, Clelia, in the family's private box. Cesare is also there, sitting in less expensive seats with a large group of associates. Fabrizio sees Gina enter with an older man. When the people with Gina discuss the upcoming marriage, she asks what Fabrizio thinks of such an early wedding. 'Fabrizio's changed a lot recently,' she is told. 'He accepts everything.'

*Final chance* After exchanging looks, Fabrizio and Gina leave their seats in the middle of the performance and meet in an empty foyer. Gina praises Clelia's beauty, and Fabrizio says she's simple but just what he wants. When he asks if they could renew their love affair, Gina leads Fabrizio back to his fiancé.

*Wedding* Outside the church, after the ceremony, a tearful Gina embraces Fabrizio with affection and the smiling couple leave in a fancy car. Nothing has changed.

## THEMES

### 1. Politics

*overview* The main theme in the film is the importance of politics, especially radical revolutionary ideology, in forming the character of Fabrizio. It is through Marxist books on political theory that the young man tries to sort out his inner conflict between an urge for liberation and the natural urge to conform. The film is filled with references to key dates and figures in Italy's political history, primarily the annual Liberation Day celebration. Famous quotations from Marxist writings are also sprinkled through the dialogue.

*idealism vs anarchy* One scene in particular dramatises Fabrizio's conflict between two strong influences in his life: the political idealism represented by Cesare and the anarchy represented by Gina. The clash takes place when, midday through the story, Fabrizio takes Gina to meet Cesare. The difference between Fabrizio's teacher and his lover is expressed in the opening exchange. Gina mentions the little girl who tormented her with a song, and Cesare adds that she is from a 'peasant family, very poor.' When Cesare leaves the lovers to get them a drink, Fabrizio's face lights up as he says, 'You know, Gina. When I'm here I'm in my element. Soon, they are sampling the books in Cesare's ample library. Fabrizio reads aloud that 'the word freedom means justice and democracy. On 25<sup>th</sup> April last year [1945], Fascism ended and peace began.' Cesare stands in the doorway, listens as if to a church sermon and straightens a portrait of a Communist leader hanging on the wall. When Gina comments that life isn't orderly, Fabrizio says that we must change it and gives her a mini-lecture about the Marxist theory of history. Cesare says that he can only talk with people who share his ideas, which leaves out Gina, who has already challenged him. Cesare then remarks that Fabrizio talks as if he's reading from a book, and Fabrizio says, 'Yes, that's the only way I can sound convincing.' The scene is a microcosm of the film. Fabrizio has learned his politics from Cesare, but when Gina enters his life with a streak of anarchy, Fabrizio begins to doubt his ideals.

*bourgeois values* While leftist values are expressed all through the film (in quotations, parades and posters), the bourgeois culture that it attacks is prominent in one key scene. Toward the end of the film, Gina visits Puck, an older man, and her former lover, who is the son of a wealthy landowner. It is a tranquil setting, in a grove of trees by a river. Soon, Fabrizio (accompanied by Cesare) appears and immediately takes against the patrician Puck, who talks about his dire financial situation. His father mortgaged the estate and now he has no money to buy it back. Soon, the land will be bulldozed into a housing development, the river will be polluted and the boatmen and the birds who live on the water will disappear. When Fabrizio jeers at him as a rich man who complains about suffering, Puck is conciliatory. 'You are right, Fabrizio. I'm your social equal now...But one inherits attitudes. That's why I'm not ashamed.' This excuse enrages Fabrizio, who attacks him for justifying everything (Fascism and racism) as a 'habit.' Here, again, is the nub of the story's drama. Puck represents the pre-war landed aristocracy, who passed on their wealthy estates to the sons. He embodies the privileged society that Fabrizio and Cesare (who sits silently and listens to the other two men argue) are hoping to replace with an egalitarian society. Fabrizio does not want to accept that an unequal society is perpetuated by force of habit, but it eventually subdues him and leads him back to the bourgeois life he thought he despised.

*rejection of ideals* The narrative arc of Fabrizio's loss of faith reaches its conclusion in the scene where he watches preparations for the annual celebration of Liberation Day, when the fascists were defeated in 1945. He notices contradictions between the party members' ideals and their mentality: while they put up posters of Castro, they chat about Marilyn Monroe's suicide (August 1962). He tells Cesare that he is disillusioned about the failure of the Communists to create 'a spark of conscience' among the working class. 'They'll believe anything,' he says bitterly. 'One-day revolutions [such as the annual celebration] won't do,' he declares. Listening to his criticisms, Cesare diagnoses his problem as Gina, which he lacks the courage to face. Fabrizio admits his failure to change. 'I'm a stone,' he says, sadly. 'I'll never change.' As they talk, groups children carrying flags join a parade with bright banners and loud singing. Fabrizio begins to quote from the Communist Manifesto, but falters as if suffering from an illness. Cesare picks up where he left off and quotes the next line, which prompts Fabrizio to recite the text like a schoolboy. It is a brilliant ending to the scene. Fabrizio no longer believes in the revolution, but, in the heady atmosphere of the celebration and with the encouragement of his teacher, he manages to perform one last time.

## 2. Love

*overview* When Cesare said that Fabrizio's problem was 'Gina,' he was correct. His love for his aunt, and their sexual coupling, is the only revolution that he enacts. These two narrative strands—radical politics and radical love—are subtly intertwined in the story, one feeding the other and both failing at the end. The lovers share moments of genuine tenderness and erotic charge, but they are too self-absorbed to transform their temporary affair into anything more permanent. People don't change.

*attraction* The illicit love affair develops slowly, from an early conversation about loneliness, but their first physical contact is also key. After Fabrizio comforts her during one of her breakdowns, they go home and into a large, dark, empty foyer, where Gina's necklace falls and the pearls scatter on the floor. She kneels down to collect them, and Fabrizio joins her. When she asks if it signals bad luck, he says quickly that he'll buy her another necklace. As he hands some of the pearls to her, she leans in toward him and they kiss. Without exchanging a single word, they walk down the hallway and into a room, where they make love. This scene, which leads to their passionate love-making, is tender and quiet, with the two of them alone in the echoing foyer. They are brought together by a simple act of kindness, done without thought or explanation. Such is the nature of their attraction: it is unaffected, without pretence or regret.

*betrayal* Young Fabrizio's love for his aunt (perhaps his first real love affair) is exciting and confusing. For a while, they make love, they laugh and are extremely happy together; they are emotional revolutionaries, experiencing both a genuine love and the thrill of the forbidden. But Fabrizio is naïve, and his romantic ideals, like his political ones, are headed for disillusionment. The betrayal is dramatized with brutal, wordless clarity. He sees her come out of a hotel room with a stranger and calls out, 'Gina! About time.' He runs up to her and explains that he has been searching all over town for her. Hiding behind her sunglasses, Gina tries to introduce him to the stranger, whose name she barely remembers. In that moment, he realises what has happened with the man and he leaves her without a word. The camera tracks his movement along the streets and through narrow alleyways, keeping him in the shadows. It is the darkest moment in the film.

*ending* Although Fabrizio and Gina make up because he is unable to suppress his desire for her, the love affair soon heads toward extinction. Following the arguments with Puck, when Gina slaps Fabrizio, things are never the same, and they come to an end in the spectacular scene at the opera. Sitting with his fiancé, Fabrizio looks around the audience and sees Gina, who also notices him. As if by telepathy, they both leave their seats during the performance and meet in the empty foyer. He tries to pretend that he is happy with the marriage to a woman who is less sophisticated than Gina. She merely smiles and says, 'It's almost over. We should return.' She means the opera, but the double meaning is obvious. When they reach the door to his private box, she says, 'You've arrived' and begins to walk away. He says that it's better for them to separate, but his words carry no conviction; we know he is simply expressing platitudes, just like he did when speaking politics. 'Gina!' he finally bursts out. 'Could you love me again?' Without answering, she leads him back to his fiancé. Their love affair, which broke with tradition, has ended, and he rejoins the bourgeois life that he never really abandoned. Defeated, he has withdrawn from the cause.

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Fabrizio** Fabrizio 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 (a conflict that also animates Theo in *The Dreamers*, some four decades later). 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.

**Rebellious** A central element of Fabrizio's character is his rejection of conventional values, or at least his verbal expression of that rejection. This rebelliousness is thrust upon us in the opening scene of the film when Fabrizio walks toward the camera, explaining his transformation from a pious believer, with prayer book in hand, to a radical atheist. The Christian faith is 'bourgeois,' he declares, using the favourite word of the Communists, a bastion of privilege, a surrender to social norms and a subjugation of common people. 'The Church,' he declares, 'is the pitiless heart of the state.' As the camera hovers above Parma in a wide aerial shot, he describes the city as divided by the River Po

into rich and poor halves. This is Fabrizio the rebel, a young man ready to attack the Catholic Church, the most powerful symbol of conventional society in Italy. It is significant, also, that he is running as he spouts these dangerous ideas. He is a restless man, full of energy.

*Doubts* Before long, however, we see that Fabrizio is plagued by doubts about his revolutionary ideals. He can recite Marx chapter and verse, but he seems to get more pleasure from watching films. The key scene that illustrates his crisis of conscience occurs when he takes Gina (a symbol of anarchy rather than orderly political ideology) to meet Cesare, the Communist leader. While Gina and Cesare enjoy sharing a story about a wise old man, Fabrizio cuts in with a platitude about the 'peasants always starve.' Cesare criticises his old student, saying, 'Fabrizio, you're talking like a book again.' Downcast, Fabrizio says, 'You're right. I do talk like a book. I have to speak like a book to sound convincing.' Here, Fabrizio shows an awareness of the conflict that is troubling him. He knows that he lacks genuine conviction in the revolutionary ideals he has learned from his teacher. He can repeat written words, but he can no longer convince himself that they are his true beliefs. The scales have fallen from his eyes, and he is tormented by doubt.

*Regret* Toward the end of the film, Fabrizio finds the words with which to articulate his inability to marry his beliefs to his actions. As he and Cesare watch preparations for the annual Liberation Day celebration, he says that he wanted to change himself but failed. Then he tries to explain his outlook on life, invoking the phrase that is the film's title. 'I have a nostalgia for the present,' he says. 'Each moment seems remote as I live it. I don't want to change the present...I thought I was living the revolution. Instead, I lived the years before the revolution. Because for people like me, it's always before the revolution.' This is Fabrizio's (and Bertolucci's) understanding of the reason why radical political change is so difficult. Middle-class intellectuals do not really want change. For them, radical political ideas are indulgences, and the anticipation of revolution is more important than its implementation. 'Before the revolution' also suggests that Fabrizio's love affair with Gina was best when it had not yet reached its sad conclusion. Love, like politics, is most thrilling when it's on the verge of completion. Fabrizio explains this complex idea with regret. He wishes it weren't true, but it is.

*Gina* Gina is an attractive woman, perhaps in her thirties. By her own admission, 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.

*Unstable* The most prominent aspect of Gina's character is her unstable mental health, which manifests itself in panic, hysteria and depression. One particular scene that illustrates her instability, and self-hatred, occurs after Fabrizio has shown her a home-made movie of him performing Chaplin-like clownish antics. When it's over, she says, 'You're happy. But it won't last...You'll remember me as if I were dead. Then, after a little time, you'll forget me completely. Finally, you'll hate me. It's not my fault. I promised nothing. I'm fond of you. I love you, even if I don't say so. You're ten thousand times better than me. I'm worth nothing. Nothing.' Looking back at the film, she says, 'We're different. I want nothing to move. Everything still.' It is noteworthy that Gina's mental ill-health is likened to a still photograph in contrast with the movement of film.

*Fear of death* Another element of her mental condition is a deep fear of death, which is why she wants everything to remain still. This attitude is revealed during the funeral of Agostino, Fabrizio's friend who ended up dead in a river. Sitting in a car with Fabrizio, she recalls when they first met, at her own father's funeral. 'One prepares oneself, but then when it comes, one can't stand it,' she reflects. 'You can't take that kind of grief...I was so close to him...terrible to think how near to death the living are.' Here, is one source of her anxiety, the trauma caused by the loss of her father at an early age. Bertolucci was fond of Freudian psychology, which he hints at here, in only his second film.

*Lonely* Still another dimension of her mental fragility is her fear of being alone. This strand of her character is articulated in a conversation she has with her psychiatrist in the early morning, before daybreak. She is in a large bed, in a spacious room, when she calls her doctor in Milan. We hear only her side of the conversation, which makes the exchange sound all the more fractured. Her eyes dance wildly and her voice becomes more and more hysterical. 'I'm here in a room that's not mine,' she says. 'I can't stay in such a small room [in fact, the room is large], and this one is so empty. It frightens me, nothing but four white walls.' As she grows incoherent, we understand that she is fundamentally afraid of being alone, in an empty room, in the early morning, in a strange city. She

needs company, which she finds in Fabrizio, but that relationship, too, is doomed to end and leave her by herself, once again. Gina's loneliness is also compounded by her feeling that she cannot change or improve. She is depressed and sees no way out.

**Cesare** Cesare is a middle-aged, single man. A teacher and proponent of Communist ideals, he has a large influence on Fabrizio. Although he is deeply committed 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.

*Committed* Cesare is deeply committed to the goals of the Communist Party of Italy. He has taught them to Fabrizio, and to others, and he tries to live them in his personal and professional life. As an example, every year he sets an essay for his students on the glorious Liberation Day, hoping to instil the ideals of justice and egalitarianism in their young minds. His deep-rooted commitment is displayed in the final section of the film, when he and Fabrizio watch preparations for the parade on that Liberation Day. He and his former student have just had a difficult discussion about the younger man's loss of faith in the cause. As they walk away, Fabrizio tries to rekindle his belief by reciting part of the Communist Manifesto, but he falters. Without missing a beat, Cesare is right there with him, supplying the next line: 'Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution.' Even at the very end, when his star pupil has doubts, Cesare does not waver in his own dedication to the ideals that they once shared.

*Congenial* Despite his ideological rigidity, Cesare is an affable person, well-mannered and easy-going. We see this side of his character in the first scene in which he appears, when Fabrizio brings Gina to his house, unannounced. Cesare greets his guests warmly and offers wine, which Gina politely declines, but he convinces her that it's just a light wine, which she will like. While they talk, Gina plays with the buttons on Cesare's shirt, making a joke about his ideas of social change. Although he hardly knows her, and although she is teasing him, Cesare smiles. When the conversation turns to Agostino, the young man who drowned in the river, Cesare tries to convince Fabrizio that it was an accident and not suicide. Throughout this scene, Cesare is kind and considerate, never speaking a harsh word. He may be fierce in his opposition to 'class enemies,' but he is congenial to everyone.



(Gina and Fabrizio)



(Fabrizio and Cesare at the Liberation Day celebrations)