

THE FIFTH ANNUAL FILM AND ANALYSIS PROGRAM

WHAT IS DESIRE, WHAT IS PASSION?

“The ruling passion conquers reason”
- Alexander Pope

“The Dreamers” (2004)

Director: Bernardo Bertolucci

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Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* takes me back to the sixties. *Just like that...* as a dream should do. His recipe of cinema, politics, and sex and even timelessness bubbles up into a heady potion that instantly recalls the sixties – our young bodies and minds and how we handled them in a world we fought against joining. We, too, might have covered our apartment walls with posters of Mao, Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à Part* and a reproduction of Delacroix's *Liberty Guides the People*, with Marilyn Monroe's face replacing that of Liberty. We were *all* the dreamers who dreamt that dream. We were *all* Matthew and Isabelle and Theo.

Matthew arrives in Paris, that exotic outpost that drew many of us like magnets either during our university years or just afterward. City of art. City of love. Matthew, the American, comes to Paris to learn about life and love and heads straight toward the Palais de Chaillot and the Cinémathèque Française housed within it. That moment took me back to McGill University in the mid-sixties where my awed discovery of its Film Society opened to my own eyes world vistas, foreign customs and philosophical questions I had never before contemplated. Even before university, I remember going with my parents (because at age sixteen the film's cinema rating required parental accompaniment), to the Jean Seberg film *In the French Style* at the now-defunct Snowdon Cinema. I remember squirming throughout the sex scenes which

seemed far too graphic and, well, French, to view in the same room as my parents. Yet I also remember feeling secretly exhilarated by the scenes of adult sexuality that awaited me in the future. And when I later discovered that Jean Seberg was American (which I then considered to be just one small step removed from being Canadian), I felt that I, too, could access the mystery of uninhibited sex which I had always thought belonged exclusively to the French! We all wanted to live as the cinema showed us how to live because we did not yet know how to live on our own. And we could not accept the world of our fathers, a world of distant war and of social protest on our own shores. We wanted equality of privilege for all, regardless of race or sex. Hence the civil riots we incited and the sexual revolution that naturally followed the invention and wholesale adoption of the birth control pill. And remember: this was *before* AIDS made us cautious! We wanted the freedom to love – without boundaries, after several generations of societal repression and scapegoating. We hoped to discover a new world beyond the stifling boundaries of the preceding generation.

As the outsider, Matthew eases himself into the brother-sister duality of French student life which is represented by Isabelle and Theo. I refer to them as the oxymoron of a single duality because I see them as two projected parts of Matthew's conflicted self in a dream – the angry and rejecting masculine part and the dependent and receptive feminine part, with both rebelling against the

world they were born into by hiding from it in an incestuous sexual cocoon with each other which threatens to implode through endogamy and death. When Matthew joins the cocoon in the dreamy apartment that serves as a boundary between the socio-political revolution outside and the sexual revolution within, the resulting autoerotic, heteroerotic and homoerotic explorations destroy the boundaries between innocence and experience as well as between conventionally accepted sexuality and in-your-face transgression. And Matthew could be you or I. We are all dreaming Matthew's dream of how one came of age in the sixties.

The Sixties. Baby boomers – that massive adolescent gang rebelling against its father's values by shoving its middle finger up the asshole of the world. We were a nasty gang, our anger and loneliness and fear erupting into a colossal societal protest just because of our peculiar demographic power by numbers. How did we get to be that big and powerful? World War II created a collective hole of dead people and the first ambition of the young survivors was to refill it to overflowing so as to forget all of that death and emptiness and celebrate life and renewed economic health instead. Our enormous generation was the result all over the world and an unprecedented number of us attended university and exploded to celebrate our own ideals.

And celebrate we did, making love and not war. We tried to leave the war firmly to our fathers and couldn't stop blaming them for it. After all –

didn't World War II teach them anything? We felt, of course, that Vietnam wasn't worth it. And in Quebec, we developed our own slogan: "*Le Vietnam aux Vietnamiens--le Québec aux Québécois!*" There was even a brief scuffle in 1969 when québécois radicals wanted a McGill Français and demanded the release of their revolutionary brethren who had been imprisoned. After Mayor Jean Drapeau passed an anti-demonstration law, things quieted down for a while. But we Canadians at McGill all had American friends who first came to study in Montreal so as to avoid the draft (just as Matthew does in moving to Paris) and who later developed the desperate hope that the war would end before their draft number forced them to either go overseas or become draft dodgers. We all tried desperately to look away from a world we did not create nor want in order to absorb ourselves in the most inspiring artistic images that the cinema could offer us of the world we would have preferred. And we used our budding sexualities to hide within. It was a time of multiple orgasm, music, film, and drugs as a compound defense against the alienation and deadness that our parents' values seemed to represent.

I use this personal digression to emphasize my feeling that Bertolucci has got it right. Many of the negative reviews I've read were unable to reconcile his intensive use of classic film clips with the hollow deadness of the main characters, especially the twins. These reviewers felt that Bertolucci had somehow missed out on the essence of the sixties. I do not agree. I feel,

rather, that he has precisely captured the psychology of a social revolution that lost control and left many adolescent casualties in its wake. Not everyone was directly involved in the riotous protests, yet we were all affected, at least tangentially if not in our inner lives, just as the crucial paving stone crashing through the window serves as a random revolutionary act that absurdly leads our protagonists toward life rather than death, toward joining the world outside rather than drowning in an internal solipsism. Many of us lived in a dreamlike bubble from which we viewed the passage of the world until we became ready to join it ourselves. And we all know some who failed to make it.

Back to our three film protagonists. They are beautiful examples of young adulthood from top to toe, and Bertolucci allows us to verify this for ourselves by having them be naked for a large portion of the film. Indeed, all three actors were instructed by Bertolucci to spend as much time as they needed, before filming began, to be naked with one another in the apartment in order to become comfortable with the experience. As Matthew, Michael Pitt displays the subterranean blue eyes and impossibly full lips that made him famous as one of the Emporio Armani faces of advertising. Bertolucci has a history in his films of choosing effeminate-looking men for crucial roles as well as of combining themes of twinning and homoeroticism. And Eva Green shows off a fullness of lip and breast as Isabelle that almost mirrors Michael Pitt's femininity; indeed, in one scene she wants to apply lipstick to *his* beautiful lips,

in an act of identification reflected by the mirror behind them. There are many mirrored reflections in the apartment, representing in one way or another the many-layered identifications among the protagonists. For his part, Louis Garrel plays Theo with a smoldering masculine intensity that seems to envelop and overwhelm both Isabelle and Matthew at times.

Matthew is the outsider, as I said earlier, because he is the pure and innocent American who enters into what he sees as Parisian sophistication through his involvement with the twins. He narrates his adventure in the voiceover which seems to be reflected in his letters home to his mother – at least at the beginning. The letters to mother seem to represent his innocence and adolescent attachment, before all the sexual transgressions overtake him. The voiceover seems to represent the observing self which is commonly present but outside the action in a typical dream.

Isabelle and Theo claim to be Siamese twins, once joined at the shoulder; indeed, mirror-image birthmarks on their shoulders seem to “prove” that fact. Yet we know that it is impossible for fraternal twins to be conjoined: only identical twins unsuccessfully separated at the earliest stages of embryonic development are born conjoined. What we come to realize is that the twins are *emotionally* conjoined. Even when Matthew asks Isabelle flat out whether her brother has ever been inside her, she replies “He is always inside me.” And he is rational enough at the end (indeed, the only one of the three who seems to

have learned from his experiences) to try and convince the twins that their relationship is sick and that they need to disentangle themselves from each other if they are to grow. But their emotionally enmeshed twinship remains a metaphor for the failure to thrive, as well as for the suspension of time and space in the dream and in a reality that does not affect the individual within it. Possibly the film twins became who they are because the self-preoccupation of their parents has left them too much in only each other's company while growing up. (I say "possibly" because we do not actually know this, but there are symbolic hints about how the parents have not been available to help them grow up and, indeed, how they seem to be oblivious to the intensity of the twins' attachment to each other. For instance, Isabelle insists that if her parents knew of their incestuous behaviour, she would kill herself (which she later tries to do when she realizes that her parents have visited the apartment while all three were entangled, naked and sleeping, in the living room). The cheque her father leaves to supply their needs suggests that he enables their helplessness and continuing dependency as well as that he is someone much more comfortable with his poems and his books than with his children's confrontations or needs; the mother is no less helpless as she urges her husband to leave before they wake up because the younger generation in their present state would not exactly be thrilled to ask their parents to stay for dinner. The contrast between the orderly parents with cheque-book in hand

and the naked adolescents in their childlike blanket-tent surrounded by the trashed apartment, burnt food, and empty wine bottles from the father's vintage cellar nicely highlights the developmental gap of light-years between adolescence and adulthood. The cheque also represents adult responsibility and wakefulness which these young people are not yet ready to face while they indulge themselves in their dreamlike moratorium on adulthood with its dream-symbols of uninhibited sex, idealized cinematic gestures, and utopian notions for a future society.

Despite Matthew's impression of Isabelle's sophistication and maturity, emphasized when we first encounter her virtually tied up in chains at the Cinémathèque Française, with red beret and cigarette hanging out of her mouth making her appear like a jaded French masochist about to indulge herself sexually, we quickly discover that she is playacting. Indeed, she and her brother *playact at life* throughout the film by copycatting characters from famous film clips. They use the child's game of 'Truth or Dare' to challenge each other's knowledge of film and force the ignorant loser to enact a sexual forfeit. The game is not that different from that of *Spin the Bottle* that we played as early adolescents so as to ritualize our early sexual experimentations and avoid our fear of the sexual unknown. The twins seem to be clueless about the *loving* aspect of sexuality; as example, Isabelle seems to desire remaining in the incestuous ménage à trois rather than – as Matthew wishes - being able to say

to him “I love you”, when all she can muster is “We both love you”. At the same time, the “we” of her statement alludes to her developmental lack of a separate identity and the bisexual underpinning of the twins’ erotic attachment to Matthew.

The hiding of gay sexuality in the context of twinning has been a theme running through much of Bertolucci’s work. It makes its appearance here with various hints that, considering all the other transgressive explorations of sexuality, Matthew and Theo have a strong homoerotic bond. In fact, this bond was openly expressed in Gilbert Adair’s book, *The Holy Innocents*, on which *The Dreamers* was based and also recalls Jean Cocteau’s *Les Enfants Terribles*. Bertolucci has made some unconvincing public statements about the “too-muchness” - *for the spectator* - of the expressed sexuality in the film, had he explicitly included the theme of homosexuality as well. Without indulging in a wild analysis of Bertolucci’s conflicts about sexuality, let me just say that, as far as I am concerned, he is being truthful to the spirit of the sixties by not including any *overt* homoerotism because, in that time period, gay liberation had not yet erupted into social consciousness. So it is appropriate that the overarching dream metaphor of the film would disguise the homoerotism and just give derivative hints of it for those who are able to recognize it.

I want to point out a few elements of the implicit homosexuality mixed in with the incest in this film. It is often Isabelle who acts as a sexual surrogate

in the act of arousing the two males; for instance, when she brushes over Theo's buttocks with a feather duster while he masturbates to a photo of Marlene Dietrich and Matthew watches. Another example which mirrors the previous one is Isabelle exposing Matthew's erect penis along with a photo of herself that he has hidden in his underpants in an almost iconic depiction of his stated heterosexuality... yet Theo is also there to enjoy the sight. And when Theo demands the forfeit of Isabelle having sexual intercourse with Matthew, there is an implied conflict in Theo's watching his sister's defloration in a state of surrogate pleasure because of defending against both his incestuous and homosexual wishes. Again, when the two males are in the bath together and arguing about revolution, war, and violence, the distance that the arguing creates is counterpointed by the marijuana that Theo breathes into Matthew's lungs in the form of a shared kiss while the mirror behind them conflates their faces by showing one face while the other speaks. Finally, there is the scene just after Matthew has had sex multiple times with Isabelle, yet she is on a bed sleeping off her surfeit of sex and smiling with her arm around her *brother*; Matthew approaches and more than once offers Theo a spoonful of honey, which is an obvious stand-in for Isabelle's sexual sweetness – or his own, but Theo refuses.

The film clips that Bertolucci has chosen serve not only as the subjects for the twins' trivia game but also as dream-symbols of emotional memory that

either predict or summarize the themes of this dreamlike film. They also take us back forty years or more in an instant replay of the past, just the way our dreams can condense past and present, or characters at different ages into the same scene, or communications with people who have been long dead. A wonderful example of this dream phenomenon has Bertolucci intercutting original newsreel footage of the New Wave actor, Jean-Pierre Léaud, reading a political statement by the director Godard to the demonstrators in 1968, with a much older Léaud in the present, enacting the same scene. This is how Bertolucci acknowledges the theme of aging and the inexorable passage of time, all the while enjoying his re-visiting of the social revolution of his youth or even, revisiting his youth by proxy through the sensuality, sexuality, and hopelessly impossible idealizations of his star trio. Of course, the reality of the passage of time is also contrasted with the ageless film or sound clips of actors, directors, and singers who are now much older or long dead.

Rather than indulge in the trivia game for which Bertolucci supplies endless examples, an indulgence which would place us experientially in the same place as the protagonists' dream, I'll only mention four film clips - the first and last ones and two in the middle (although some sharp-eyed cinephiles may challenge me on the accuracy of my numeric labeling). The opening clip is of Sam Fuller's *Shock Corridor*, in which a reporter gets himself admitted to a mental hospital in order to write a story about a murder committed by one of

the inmates but who ultimately regresses into insanity himself. It is a fitting symbol warning us of the transgressions of the conventional boundaries of reality that follow in *The Dreamers*, and represents the mad dream-hole into which Matthew falls, like Alice into Wonderland. A clip in the middle alternates the Louvre race scene from *Bande à Part* with our trio's recreation of it so as to break the record of the original film. This image underlines Bertolucci's lifelong dilemma – indeed, everyone's psychological dilemma - in trying to reconcile the outsider individual with the social mass. Ironically, at the end of their run, the twins say to Matthew: “You're one of us”, echoing the famous line from Todd Browning's film, *Freaks*, with the clip shown here, which upends the notion of the abnormal outsider and the normal group and hints at the abnormality of the twins' relationship. The last clip is from Robert Bresson's *Mouchette*, in which the eponymous heroine decides randomly to commit suicide by rolling downhill into a river, and it is of course added at the point where Isabelle decides unilaterally to end all their lives by gas asphyxiation. Her ego strength is so weak that she cannot tolerate her guilt in relation to her parents knowing the nature of her sexual transgressions. More than that, she simultaneously recognizes her inability to function as an independent adult in a frighteningly revolutionary reality. But the paving stone acts as the shock which interrupts the dream and wakes everyone up at the precise moment needed to rescue them all from a certain death. And we all

know that a dream of death interrupted by awakening portends a healthier ego than one in which the process toward death is completed. The healthy ego saved is that of Matthew, who seems to understand by the end of the film the principles of developmental growth, learning from experience, and favouring life over group violence regardless of the ideological change that violence represents.

Matthew's choice of non-violence is a conscious adult action based on a moral ideal. This contrasts starkly with the empty idealistic blather of Theo who taunted Matthew earlier for not fighting in Vietnam yet who is unable to act himself, unless it is to blindly go along with the romantic force of the group rioters in the street. The twins' adolescent non-action is an expression of their empty ideals which are based more on intellectualized dream than reality.

One final point about the dream structure of this film. It is full of music which, as we know, is an instant emotional shortcut to connect with the past. But, because this is a dream, the American music of the sixties (including Hendrix, Joplin, Dylan, The Doors, and The Grateful Dead) and soundtracks from the films of Truffaut and Godard are interspersed with the much earlier, though timeless, French classics of Jean Trenet and Edith Piaf. It is Trenet singing *La Mer* that puts Isabelle in the mood for love with Matthew, as she sways to the music. She seems to not know her own feelings and borrows them from music or cinema. At the film's end, when Matthew turns his back

on the twins and violence and thus makes an individualistic stand, the twins blindly follow the rioters, and the irreconcilable difference between the two youthful attitudes is signatored by Edith Piaf's familiar voiceover: "Je ne regrette rien." Although Piaf came from a much earlier era, her well-known sexual and rebellious exploits offer a fitting comment on what the sixties represented for all of us.