

China is Near

...or is it?

Dennis Raymond

1969

A new and exciting group of directors has appeared in the Italian cinema over the past four or five years. Its two most promising members are Marco Bellocchio and Bernardo Bertolucci.

So far Bellocchio seems to be the most outstanding, and with only two feature films to his credit he is already one of the more important talents in the young European cinema.

Bellocchio's "China is Near" is everything a new and exciting work of art should be: startling, irritating, alive to itself and its subject. Bellocchio's direction is brilliant to the point of brilliantine. Everything counts and everything matters in this Standhalian comedy of mores.

Not a shot or hair is out of place, nor a cut or camera movement. And yet I write this review posthumously, for "China is Near," exceptional as it is, breezed in and out of Detroit in a mere seven days at the Studio 1 with only a whisper of publicity.

The title of the film is a slogan for Maoist-oriented Italian marxists. For Bellocchio it is a sign of hope. Paradoxically it may be said that China is very far away for those who consider China to be near, while China is just around the corner for those who think of it as far away.

To the main protagonist of Bellocchio's film, China is near. Vittorio is shown to be most vulnerable in his dependence on private property and the bourgeois way of life. It is a way of life that is already in retreat—and Bellocchio shows us the beginnings of its ruin.

After successive flirtations with the parties of the Center and Left, Vittorio settles down with the stain Socialists when they present him with a place on their ticket as councilman. The candidate's younger brother, Camillo, leads a three-man Maoist cell in the municipality and refuses to tolerate his brother's disgraceful dissertation.

The candidate's sister, Elena, confounds her brothers with her political conservatism and sexual radicalism. Even when the world is going to pieces, Vittorio reminds her, an Italian expects his sister to retain her honor.

Into all this Bellocchio introduces Carlo and Giovanna, two impoverished lovers, representatives of the proletarian class society, each trying to escape their common destiny.

Passed over for the Socialist nomination so that wealthy Vittorio can attract the bourgeois votes, Carlo appoints himself as Vittorio's campaign manager, seeing this as an opportunity to penetrate the upper class by taking on Elena as his mistress. Discarded by Carlo, Giovanna retaliates by permitting Vittorio to take her at long last from her secretarial type writer to his bed.

"China is Near" is primarily a film with a national meaning. What Bellocchio has given us is a provocative analysis and criticism of the Italian petit-bourgeois family.

Carlo and Giovanna take on the same ideals as their employers: they concentrate on money and on attaining a certain position in society, and so are unable to change anything.

The film ends with Elena and Giovanna practicing their maternal exercises together. Elena will marry Carlo, Giovanna will marry Vittorio. Unknown to Vittorio both women have been impregnated by Carlo. It doesn't matter.

The accommodations have been made. Carlo and Giovanna have impregnated the upper class. And life must go on. China must wait a bit longer like any hope too long deferred.

Bellocchio's vision of the world may appear too naively neurotic for some tastes, though it is a much more perfect vision than that of Joseph Losey's "The Servant" in which the characters are basically wicked and stand only as symbols.

For Bellocchio, his characters are his main concern. Never do they degenerate into flat symbols: Bellocchio leaves the generalizations up to each viewer. And neither do they evolve into Pietro Germi caricatures at whom we can laugh so complacently.

Truffaut maintains in the introduction to his Hitchcock book that clarity is the supreme virtue of a director. The opening of "China is Near" is anything but clear.

Not only does Bellocchio confront the audience with unexplained shifts of locale for the unheralded entrances and exits of unidentified characters on unmotivated missions; he also makes jokes about the characters before they have been properly introduced to us, and hence throws away his punch-lines. For example, Glauco Mauri as Vittorio makes the most spectacularly farcical entrance of a character in all film history.

Our first glimpse of Vittorio is a medium shot of a man in the throes of masturbation begging God's forgiveness. Bellocchio then cuts discreetly but devastatingly to a long shot of Vittorio virtually lurching out of a watercloset to confront the guilt of a new day. It all happens so fast that even the most discerning spectator lacks the build-up to give this gag the laugh its sheer audacity deserves.

Bellocchio has pruned and pruned, cutting away all the excess waste and fat from his film. The editing is very fast, perhaps too fast for most viewers. Transitions are very abrupt and appear without warning. Bellocchio's economy of expression is more impressive on first viewing than second, and yet it takes two viewings to appreciate the initial brush strokes of his genius.

"China is Near" marks the emergence of a sophisticated, tight, brutal new film style, not unlike Godard or Lester. To the current film generation, raised and bred on television since childhood, Bellocchio's style should come as second nature, although there is no denying that "China is Near" places heavy demands on the viewer. But why shouldn't a director assume that his audience is naturally intelligent, alert, and informed?

Guiding his superb cast through the workings of an extraordinarily intricate plot (scripted by Bellocchio and Elda Tattoli, who also plays Elena in the film) like some master choreographer, Bellocchio never loses control.

A few scenes are marked with the naive self-consciousness of the intelligent young—like the obvious reference to Bertolucci's "Before the Revolution" at a performance of Verdi's "MacBeth" but what young artist isn't self-conscious?

In contrast, Bellocchio has achieved some scenes of great subtlety, delicacy, and understatement, the most elegant example being the scene in which Carlo and Giovanna simultaneously slip out from two different bedrooms and two different bed partners.

In this and many other sequences, Bellocchio's social criticism recalls Bunuel, with much the same diabolically sly and artful satire. It is this tough irony, this mordant humor, that especially separates Bellocchio from the older generation of Marxist filmmakers in Italy.

Will "China is Near" survive the critical drubbing and public apathy that it has faced upon its initial release? I think so, Bellocchio's exciting direction, the timelessness and universality of his main theme will be remembered and keep this film in constant release by cinema societies and revival houses.

Only after time has mellowed us all and Bellocchio has achieved further renown will "China is Near" be recognized as the major work and masterwork it is.

After all, Bosley Crowther panned "Citizen Kane" when it first appeared back in 1941, and both Crowther and Thomas Haroldson are still bitching about "Bonnie & Clyde." But then who really takes either one of them seriously? True art can survive anything, even the wrath of professional critics.

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