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An Analysis of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* from a Symbolist Perspective

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Abstract: Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*, adapted from the novel *The Holy Innocents* by Gilbert Adair, is set against the backdrop of Events of May 1968 in Paris, though without making much visible effort to reconstruct the look of the period. This paper attempts to analyze the character behavior of *The Dreamers* from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis and explore the ideology and culture represented by Isabella, Theo, and Matthew from the perspective of symbolism, with the interperation of the story background and metaphor of the whole film.

1. Introduction

Bernardo Bertolucci, one of the world's most influential directors, who is called the Italian national treasure, has worked extensively throughout his life, with particular expertise in using romance and embedded psychological criticism as the core of his expressions, combined with political and social connotations, which have led to his unique style of work. [1] *The Dreamers* is a romantic ethical film directed by Bernardo Bertolucci and starring Michael Pitt, Louis Garrel, and Eva Green, based on the novel of the same name by Gilbert Adair. It focuses on Matthew, an American teenager who meets bohemian twin siblings Isabella and Theo at a French cinema art gallery on the eve of The Events of May 1968 in Paris. The three teenagers fall deep into sexual, forbidden, and incestuous lust by way of indulging in the world of cinema, unable to extricate themselves until the revolutionary violence of the Events of May 1968 forces its way in and their sweet and confusing dreams of youthful desire have to give way to idealistic revolutionary passion.[2]

1.1. Related Work

The previous study of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* mainly focuses on the following aspects.

1.1.1 Research on the social context of the film

Some scholars believe that *The Dreamers* is a brutal and realistic re-creation of the Events of May 1968, which did not directly depict the political stakes associated with the period, but it does so through direct and metaphorical allusions to early Hollywood films and French cinema classics. As Michael Leonard argues in his essay

"Cinema/History: Philippe Garrel, Bernardo Bertolucci and May 1968", Bernardo Bertolucci's approach is essentially conservative, even reactive. The film emphasizes the 'pastness' of 'the Events of May 1968' and its significance as a 'legacy' rather than as part of an ongoing historical process or dialectic." [3] Bertolucci's films have always been politically engaged. Undergoing psychoanalysis in the 1960s left him fascinated by dreams and their resemblance to cinematic sequences.

1.1.2 Studies of temporal realism

At present, there is no clear definition of temporal realism in the academy, as expressed in Sutanya Singkhra's article "Dreams of Lost Time: a Study of Cinephilia and Time Realism in Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*" as time itself is a violent force, and the intermittent pattern of time is a protective configuration of the mind itself. However, in our contemporary media context, the project of time lost to a timely recovery in the film has gone beyond the mere recording and representation of time (in the sense of fact and fiction). [4] *The Dreamers* is considered a film about "temporal realism" (as opposed to action or representational realism), and it clearly shows that the birth of cinema is true of great historical significance because it constitutes a resource for a constantly changing configuration of time, one that defies simple linear relations centrottemporal form to the past, and most importantly, it leads the revolution in how time is experienced by the history of cinema and cinema as a medium for reconstructing the real, while demonstrating the importance of cinema itself, as well as other more immediate technical or political factors.

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1.1.3 Neo-realist studies

The term “neorealism” is often used to refer to the formal features of the movement that emerged in the 1940s (non-professional actors, location shooting, long takes, etc.), and the famous Italian director Roberto Rossellini argues that the “new Realism” is above all a moral stance on the world, then it became an aesthetic position, but at first, it was moral.[5] Michael Leonard’s “Cinema/History: Philippe Garrel, Bernardo Bertolucci and May 1968” argues that the platitudes and fantasies of *The Dreamers* are the results of the work of Bernardo Bertolucci and fantasy was Bernardo Bertolucci’s lifelong criticism of bourgeois desire, particularly in the second generation of Italian neorealism (Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini). As in *The Dreamers*, the search for unconventional, non-platitude love is associated with an episodic space that manifests itself as a hidden and sultry realm from which reality is excluded. [3].

2. Discussion

The film’s NC-17 rating at the time of its release and its controversial political context has led to a number of factors that have prevented the film from being released on a wide scale. The current research on the film in China is still lacking in the direction of using Freudian psychoanalysis to analyze the film. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the character behavior of *The Dreamers* from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis and explore the ideology and culture represented by Isabella, Theo, and Matthew from the perspective of symbolism, with the interperation of the story background and metaphor of the whole film.

2.1. Film Structure and Historical Context

Bertolucci always wanted to make cinema new and strange to eye, ear and mind. After *Il Conformista* (1970), he strove to make his films innovatory to the degree that they should attract close attention from his audiences, yet not be inaccessible. *The Dreamers*, no exception to this principle, opens on a travelling close shot of steel girders through which we are descending. This structure cannot be identified until the duration of the descent reveals it must be the Eiffel Tower. We get an angle on it quite other than what tourists enjoy when taking the view across Paris: it is made all the stranger by Jimi Hendrix’s roaring music, spatially and emotionally huge, accompanying the descent.

The storyline of *The Dreamers* is composed of two lines: the overt line is the relationship between Matthew, Isabella, and Theo from the time they meet to the time they fall apart. The covert line is the trend of the student movement in France in the 1960s, the desire for a violent response to a troubled world, and the social renewal that was ushered in. After the end of the Second World War, the industrialized countries of Europe were almost entirely devoted to political and economic development. After three decades of golden years of development, a

series of social problems arose throughout Europe as a result of the slow pace of economic growth. This was manifested in France during the latter part of President Charles de Gaulle’s reign, when the French economy was in disarray and the social crisis was severe, with divisions within the ruling party. De Gaulle came to power in 1958 and, despite his high moral standing, his relationship with student organizations was always strained. In 1963, Jacques Narbonne, a technical adviser to the president, wrote to de Gaulle predicting a storm that might erupt in the future, but it was not taken seriously. As a matter of fact, *The Dreamers* is a recreation of that idealistic era, a constant tribute to the French New Wave. [6]

In *The Dreamers*, Bernardo Bertolucci seeks a narrator for his own memories of being 28 years old, and Matthew, from California, is his choice. Always sitting in the first row, he is unable to see the real people and events of the city. Matthew’s encounter with Theo and Isabella was a result of the film, and it was then that the Events of May 1968, which would have a profound impact in later years, quietly began to operate. France, the birthplace of cinema, has a supreme place in people’s hearts, and it is only in Paris that people can demonstrate in favor of cinema, and it is only in Paris that it makes sense. At this time, French cinema was in the midst of a “New Wave”, born out of the collapse of historical traditions, a lack of basic understanding, and a sense of uncertainty about an uncertain future. This context was linked to the uncertainty and anguish of the post-World War II period, and so a large part of the New Wave’s work was a reflection on the Second World War. Postmodernism is a deconstruction of modernism, a questioning of modernism, a venting of confusion, and in a sense liberation. It also echoes the protagonists’ search for themselves and their desire for freedom and liberation. [7]

2.2. Characterization and the ideology behind

Isabella and Theo are twins who look alike and have a mysterious and noble aura. Although they fight and attack each other mercilessly, they are deeply attached to each other psychologically and have a silent understanding without words. Their relationship does not require a physical union to prove it; as the film suggests, they are two parts of the same person, like the two sides of European philosophy - Existentialism and Marxism. And Matthew is presented as an intruder, a figure of pure negativity. And as a representative of American culture, he brings to France, which was still relatively feudal and conservative at the time, ideas that espoused the values of freedom and individuality, of reason and practicality. The different ideologies represented by the three men can be seen in their characterization.

Matthew is more sensible and realistic than the radical Theo and is somewhat more critical. Isabella is largely unconcerned with their arguments. In the film, over dinner with his parents, Matthew refers to the lighter’s ability to measure everything, the size of which can be used as a unit of length for almost any tablecloth, wall, or even Isabella’s finger. Theo’s ideas are more

naïve and idealistic, revering enthusiasm for itself and lacking in more nuanced thinking, often at a distance from reality. His room is littered with portraits of Mao Zedong and he uses the Red Book as his bible. It is clear that Theo is the personification of Godard in this film, a Maoist with an empty agenda and no by-laws.

Theo is realistic with Isabella. He encourages his sister to integrate with Matthew, the outsider. He is sober enough to realize that even the seemingly more harmonious relationship between the three is temporary, created only briefly by the school strike and the departure of his parents who have left their living expenses behind. Isabella does not have this clarity; before the end, the three lie in a symbolic tent, Isabella asks Theo to say he loves her and will always love her, and when Isabella discovers that her parents have returned, she does not hesitate to turn on the gas, wanting the three to remain in their little world forever. In her mind, death is also eternal existence.

2.2.1. *Matthew and American Culture*

Matthew is a foreign student from the United States who comes to France to further his studies because he is obsessed with cinema. Matthew is a representative of American culture, which celebrates freedom, individual values, rationality, and practicality. American cultural symbols are often present in the film: coke, rock and jazz, and Hollywood movies. When talking to Theo about the existence of God, he bluntly states that if God exists, then he is a left-handed black guitarist.

Enthusiasm for American culture coexisted with resentment directed at US economic dominance (the market cause of the very cultural invasion French young people were enjoying). Anger was sharpened by American involvement in Vietnam and found outlet in passionate approval of the Latin American revolutionaries Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and endorsement of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution. Matthew's sudden appearance is like a figurative representation of the invasion of European culture by American culture. American cheap culture and plebeian art were like a heavy bomb thrown at European civilisation and the art that had been glorious in Europe since the Renaissance looked much thinner under the impact of this commercial culture.

But Art Nouveau's assimilation of traditional European art was often unwitting: like the Delacroix masterpiece, *Liberty Guiding the People* in Theo's room, where the face of Lady Liberty was plastered with the mesmerizing face of Marilyn Monroe. And so the film comes to a head with Matthew and Theo arguing about who is greater, Chaplin or Keaton. Rather than an argument about two cinematic greats, this is a disagreement between American and European cultures.

Matthew is obsessed with Isabella and maintains a friendship with Theo. He is in love with both of them, but Isabella is always emphasizing Theo's presence, and the relationship between Isabella and Theo keeps Matthew as an outsider, Matthew wants love in return, but the controlling nature of his sibling keeps him at a

loss, he cannot give him the "proof of love" that his sibling wants.

2.2.2. *Theo and Marxism*

Rather than being the embodiment of Marxism, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that Theo is an ardent Maoist. This admiration was even somewhat blind; he was full of affirmation and yearning for the Cultural Revolution. At that time, the distortion of the message made Theo convinced that the Cultural Revolution was a possible way forward for France, and he felt that it was a great film; at the beginning of the film, he was still just a fanatic of revolutionary theory. Rather than being the embodiment of Marxism, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that Theo is a fanatical Maoist. This dialogue is the first positive discussion of Mao and the Red Book to appear in the film; there have been a number of previous occurrences of Mao's symbolism, but they are all ambiguous allusions, pointing to parts of the film's murky, dimly lit spiritual corners, whereas only this one makes a direct, focused discussion of Mao's ideas and image, and even becomes the fulcrum that drives the plot.

Theo: Then why don't you think of Mao as a great director...making a movie with a cast of millions. All those millions of Red Guards...marching together into the future...with the little red book in their hands. Books, not guns. Culture, not violence. Can't you see what a beautiful, epic movie that would make?

After Theo's hallucinatory dream is punctured by Matthew, Theo angrily chokes him to stop Matthew from continuing. The lines are quite interesting and the angles available for interpretation are rich. For example.

Matthew: No, no, no, listen to me. The Red Guard that you admire...they all carry the same book...they all sing the same songs...they all parrot the same slogans. So in this big, epic movie...everybody...is an extra.

In the context, an extra means something closer to "mass actor", an irrelevant remainder, a part that is not valued, and what Bernardo Bertolucci wants to express through Matthew's mouth is a reflection and a questioning of the stifling of individuality by the so-called revolution. Out there, on the street, there may be a reference to Theo's unrealistic dream of revolution. In fact, Theo's admiration for Mao had a historical context, and the world's theme in 1968 was precise 'revolution': in Saigon, the "Spring Festival Offensive" defeated the American soldiers; in Port Louis, the people declared national independence; in London, the Great In Berlin, students surrounded Springer; in New York, students took over Columbia Park; in Paris, students built the "Night of the Barricades"; in Havana, Che Guevara's diary was published; in Prague, citizens took to the streets to protest against the Soviet Union; in Mexico City, black American athletes raised their fists in salute. In Beijing, Mao Zedong called for "going to the mountains and going to the countryside".

Theo's house is filled with Mao objects that suggest Theo's false sense of revolutionary involvement, a kind of self-identification with ideals and consecrated values: Theo places Mao's statue with candles, and Mao becomes

a religious icon at this point, providing Theo with spiritual solace; he conceives of Mao as a mega-rich film financier who would finance an epic, imperial masterpiece to vicariously satisfy his love and pursuit of cinema; Mao even becomes the possibility of change again, in the form of a book rather than a gun, with culture rather than violence. In this revolutionary current, it is only logical that the image of Mao, a key symbol of the world revolution, is cited by Theo as a symbol of idealism.

Therefore, Theo's act of angrily grabbing Matthew by the throat can be interpreted as his exasperation at having his fantasy punctured by Matthew.

Above all, the 1960s were in France no less than in the Anglo-Saxon world the decade of the (commercially backed) emergence of a pervasive new youth culture, to the dismay of the parental generation. In the rich ambience of this cultural explosion, the old cinema of France was scornfully dubbed *le cinéma de papa*. Meanwhile films of the New Wave produced a rough-cut aesthetic counter to the seamless American style with eye-catching editing, handheld camera work and direct sound. Associated with the younger generation, it became known as *cinéma jeune*.

2.2.3. *Isabella and Existentialism*

Isabella resembles Simone Beauvoir, a representative of existentialist philosophy (Beauvoir supported the student in the Events of May 1968), in terms of her image: intellectual and full of loneliness. Before Matthew came along, her world consisted only of her parents and Theo. Isabella has no fear of death; she lives by feeling. Her love for cinema is not because it makes sense, but because she has strong feelings. This is reflected in Isabella's tendency to imitate film images "on the spur of the moment". Isabella, the real protagonist of the film, is always at the center of the composition and always drives the story forward. Her protagonism is not only reflected in the arch-like structure, but also in the symbolism of Frida Kahlo's painting: she is shown holding her husband Digeo like a mother holding a baby, with the mountains and the earth behind her, while Digeo has three eyes, a symbol of wisdom, and a fire, a symbol of hope and creativity. The symbolism is obvious: Frida nourishes Digeo, and Digeo is the Prometheus who brings hope and wisdom. But in the end, the source of the glory is Frida's. [8] Isabella in this film is likewise such a character. One or both of the male protagonists always lean on her shoulders throughout the film. As mentioned above, she says to Matthew: My little Matthew, My first Love. Both Matthew and Theo are sheltered by Isabella. She is the embodiment of the Goddess of Liberty. At the end of the story, the parents return to the house, see them asleep, and without saying anything, leave the cheque and go away. It seems that this also indicates Bernardo Bertolucci's attitude of not giving moral judgment and hints at the retreat of classical European philosophy.

2.3. The embodiment of political Pop

Born in the 1960s, "Pop" was initially synonymous with design style. In the 1980s and 1990s, political pop appeared in several socialist countries. From a semantic point of view, the origin of the word "pop" is mainly "populace", "popular", and other words with the prefix "pop". The term "pop" is prefixed with the word "pop". [9] The predecessor of pop art is "integrated art", which is the creation of art through collage, listing, and other integrated means. Unlike modernism, realism, and other genres, "pop art" has a strong nationalism, which has contributed to its rapid and unexpected success. On the other hand, Political Pop uses the linguistic and artistic forms of Pop Art while incorporating familiar commercial symbols and political imagery to express certain humor, absurdity, and irony. The Dreamers extensive use of video footage and collage of filmed scenes is a reflection of political pop. A typical example of this is the sequence in which the trio crosses the Louvre: Isabella and Theo want to imitate Godard's film "The Outlaw" by dashing through the Louvre and breaking the record of 9 minutes and 45 seconds in the film. Before embarking on this crazy plan, Matthew told his siblings in all seriousness that "[this] would get me kicked out of Paris", as it was forbidden to do so. Reality's impermissibility does not stop the siblings, who live in the Tower of Babel, from running freely and uninhibitedly through the Louvre, their young footsteps accompanied by the roar of the security guards, interspersed with clips from outlawed, showing the ideal guiding reality as the youngsters follow in their footsteps, intent on breaking the shackles of reality. After running a record 9 minutes 28 seconds, they chanted "We accept him. One of us." and immediately cut to footage from the original Freaks film with Bob Dylan's "Queen Jane Approximately". Freaks is a controversial American film released in 1932, featuring a group of "freaks" who are discriminated against because of their physical defects. They are united by the fact that they are not understood by the world and are treated unequally by ordinary people, just like the young people in The Dreamers, who are out of touch with the real world and live only in their pure utopia, while the world's radical and revolutionary currents seem to have nothing to do with them. As sexual liberation, rock music, pop culture, and existentialism unquestionably reorganize people's minds and blow away at an already stormy aesthetic and moral consciousness, Bob Dylan's songs come on and the protagonists laugh and run wild with his songs. As the French Minister of Culture, Aurélie Filippetti, put it, "Bob Dylan gave the music a subversive power that could change mankind and the world." [10] The rise and popularity of rock and roll, which represented rebellion, was in a sense also a shock and revolution against the old order.

2.4. The different treatment of the ending

The film differs in many ways from Gilbert Adair's original novel: while the original novel sets up Isabella and Theo as incestuous brothers and sisters, the film downplays this and skips over Matthew's homosexuality

in the novel.

The biggest difference between the two is the ending of the story, in which Matthew is accidentally shot in the midst of the movement's frenzy, leaving Isabella and Theo to mourn their irreversible upbringing and remember the love they shared to the sound of Truffaut's *Baisers volés* and Charles Trenet's songs. [11] At the end of the film, the naked entanglement of the three is witnessed by their silent departing parents and Isabella decides to turn on the gas and commit suicide, however, the revolutionary stones break through the window, breaking them from waking up unexpectedly and plunging into the revolution in full swing outside. With Edith Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien", Theo and Isabella walk into the torrent of the May Revolution, while Matthew turns away in silence. This memory of youth and dreams is framed in a black and white image of police rushing toward the marching crowd. For Bernardo Bertolucci, remembering his sweet and gritty youth in his old age is not cruel enough to acknowledge its meaninglessness, even if he knows that it was the last glimmer of light before the end of the golden age of dreams and passion, he will ignore its transience and futility because of its beauty. Just as Isabella wanted to end the lives of three young people with gas, so she was drawn into the whirlwind of history by the world outside her window, despite her attachment to such a "life of absolute freedom". Personal destinies, joys, or sorrows are but bubbles in the face of history. Perhaps Paris is just a big cinema, Matthew is the audience who comes to Paris to see the film, while Isabella and Theo are the people who are part of the new wave. They meet briefly in Paris and are separated at the end of the film by the revolutionary tide. When everything returns to silence, all that remains is an unknown film and a charming dream, in addition to the glamour and passion of Paris, the frenzy of the revolution, the thinking of the youth, or the helplessness of growing up in the background.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, *The Dreamers* has been approached from various perspectives, including the structure and historical background of the film, the characters and the ideology and culture they represent, the embodiment of political pop in the film, and the differences between the film and the original novel. *The Dreamers* is a very fascinating film and one of Bernardo Bertolucci's masterpieces. The film not only shows the revolutionary new ideas that were in vogue in the changing 1960s but also the intersection and fusion of cultures. At the same time, it is an ideological inheritance of Godard's revolutionary ideas, with Bernardo Bertolucci's own communist ideology, i.e. the director's own perception of the communist revolution. *The Dreamers* is edited with bold use of original footage from old Hollywood films interspersed throughout the film, a pop-influenced editing style that is rare in the history of cinema and highlights the impact of American culture on European culture.

This study of *The Dreamers* will help to interpret the origins and subsequent impact of *The Events of May 1968*, and will also provide a deeper understanding of Bernardo Bertolucci's filmmaking style and the character of his work. This paper focuses on the interplay of ideas and cultures represented by the three protagonists, but does not provide an exhaustive interpretation of the film's editing and soundtrack, nor does it analyse the idea of "resistance" that pervades the entire film. Future research on *The Dreamers* could be carried out in the areas of editing, score and scheduling, as well as in the social context in which Bernardo Bertolucci made the film (2003) and the conditions under which it was shot.

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