

Cultural Daily

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Remembering Bernardo Bertolucci

Elisa Leonelli · Monday, November 26th, 2018

When I read in the *New York Times* that Bernardo Bertolucci died today, at age 77, I remembered fondly how much I admired his work and the many times I interviewed him as a film journalist.

He stands among the great directors of Italian cinema: Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni. His most well-known movies are *The Conformist* (1970) with Jean-Luis Trintignant, *The Last Tango in Paris* (1972) with Marlon Brando, *1900* (1976) with Robert De Niro, Gerard Depardieu, Donald Sutherland, Burt Lancaster, *The Last Emperor* (1987) with John Lone, *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) with Debra Winger.

The first time I met Bernardo in person was in 1979, when we spoke about his movie *Luna* with Jill Clayburg. Sadly the recording of that interview could not be found in the extensive audio and visual archives of the Hollywood Foreign Press that I have been assembling and digitizing since 2011. We did find the photos, however, and I had the B&W negatives scanned so you can see me here grinning next to him.



Bernardo Bertolucci, Elisa Leonelli © HFPA 1979

Another memorable interview was a one-on-one we had in 1994 about *Little Buddha* with Keanu Reeves, when I was Film Editor of *VENICE*, Los Angeles Arts and Entertainment Magazine. Here are some excerpts.



What are some of the common elements of your Oriental trilogy: *The Last Emperor*, *The Sheltering Sky*, *Little Buddha*?

For the last ten years I've succumbed to the fascination of the Orient—the Far East of Peking's Forbidden City, the Middle East of the Sahara desert, and now ancient India. While I was making *The Last Emperor*, my philosophy was already Buddhism, I realized how in the West we're not happy unless we can emerge from the masses and put our own enlarged image on a pedestal, while in the East I've seen people feeling totally happy, alive and fulfilled, because they were in harmony within the masses.

Is there a political as well as a spiritual message in *Little Buddha*?

Yes. Some people wonder why, after being known as a political filmmaker, I've turned spiritual. But I believe that in a world that imposes, almost violently through television, the diffusion of a single culture, to remind audiences that there are other cultures, more rich and fascinating than our own, can be a political act. In our times, when people who are different are burnt at the stake, it's important to remind people that the world doesn't have a monoculture, but a multicultural, that diversity is beautiful.

In the 60s, you were influenced by the cinema revolution of Jean-Luc Godard and Pier Paolo Pasolini. What has remained in your work from that beginning?

That spirit will always remain with me, even if I make films that can be considered mainstream, I will always have inside, thank God, the demon of experimentalism, I will never get tired of believing that the cinema is still evolving, will continue to change. It would be too sad to think that cinema is dead. Today's children still love it because it's bigger than life.

Top photo: Bernardo Bertolucci © HFPA 1979

For selected quotes by the director about his movies, [read here](#).

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