ENDYMION'S WAKE: Oneiric Projection and Protection in Bertolucci's Cinema

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Early on in Bertolucci's Luna, Joe Silveri (Matthew Barry) is standing with his (presumed) father, Douglas (Fred Gwynne), on a Brooklyn Heights balcony overlooking the East River. After Joe's challenge to his father to hit a tennis ball across the river, Bertolucci's camera follows the ball's trajectory over the nearby dockyards and catches the word "Pier 14" as the ball fades out of sight far from its goal. Pasolini's first name on a Brooklyn warehouse marks the first of many allusions to Bertolucci's earlier films and influences. The scene concludes with Douglas' discovery of a piece of chewing gum stuck to the underside of the balcony railing. "Jesus Christ," he mutters, "he leaves his gum all over the place." "He" is of course both Joe and Marlon Brando, who ended Last Tango by sticking his gum in an identical place as he assumed a foetal position to die. In this single scene, then, two adoptive fathers are demythified: Douglas, whose claim to be able to hit the city is as empty as his promise to stay with Joe, and Pier Paolo Pasolini whose name linked with Last Tango reminds us that Bertolucci had felt that Tango provided him with a "sense of liberation" from this "paternal figure."! Moments later Douglas' death in his car (recalling Pasolini's automotive death) concretizes this sense of liberation. Both cinematic and contextual "Fathers" are removed, thus linking the film intimately with the reflections on the absence of and need for authority that are central to Partner, The Conformist and The Spider's Stratagem.

The inner complexity of such an otherwise obvious scene should alert us to the intricacy of a film lambasted by the critics for its inauthenticity and overly simplistic symbolism. At the anecdotal level the film opens with a prologue in which Jill Clayburgh is seen licking honey from her infant on the sun-drenched porch of a Mediterranean villa. After a chaotic dance with a fisherman, the scene shifts to Clayburgh on a bicycle fleeing the house one night as her child sits before her transfixed by the full moon overhead.

Another shift places the action in New York where Clayburgh, as Caterina Silveri, an American opera singer at the zenith of her career, prepares to leave for a musical tour in Italy. When her husband dies suddenly, Caterina takes Joe out of school and flies to Italy where her operatic successes are spectacular. On Joe's 15th birthday, she discovers he has developed a drug habit. Her solution is beloved mother love which she prefers, distractedly, in the form of a hand job, heroin fixes
when he's in need, and ultimately an invitation to incest in a dingy hotel room. But Joe doesn't want her body and he leaves her bedroom to shoot up once more. At this point, the diva reveals to her son the existence of his real father, an Italian schoolteacher (Tomas Milian). Joe confronts his father and accuses him of causing his son's "death." Finally the three are reunited at a rehearsal of Verdi's Un Ballo in Maschera. As they exchange looks, Joe smiles, the father smiles and Caterina regains her lost voice and sings a finale of reconciliation.

The film is more operatic than melodramatic yet, when Bertolucci's insistence on the term melodrama was questioned, he invented a "new dramaticity," whose "ambition... is to be loved and to be rejected at the same time." If the new term explains little, it reveals a great deal for it is only within a complex of contradictions and ambivalences that we may fully understand this work.

Although Bertolucci noted "the opening scene derived from one of my earliest memories," elsewhere he denies vigorously that the film is autobiographical. This "attempt to discover something about the mother and the son" is also "a search for the present and the past, a therapy which, like psychoanalysis, allows me to be in harmony with myself, to accept myself and to communicate with others... a type of very wide mass communication." Yet this work of mass communication is so interlaced by a personal mythology that it requires more effort of analysis than most are willing to give it. If the film fails where Bertolucci claimed it would succeed—as melodrama, it may succeed precisely where Bertolucci may have secretly hoped (and feared) it would—as a deeper revelation of its author and of his entire cinematic project.

Like many of his earlier films, especially Spider's Stratagem, Luna projects a situation of paternal absence. Joe loses not only the father of his paradoxical Italian infancy, he loses the presumed father of his Brooklyn adolescence. In each case there is a strong (and obvious) Oedipal rivalry and "triumph." If the father figure temporarily seduces the mother away from him on the sun-drenched porch, Joe inexplicably regains her one moonlit night—winning her away from a father who we later learn was too much in love with his own mother. The Brooklyn "father" accommodates his "son's" explicit wishes by dying a few moments after Joe has said to his mother, "I want to go to Italy with you... I can do all the things Dad does... I can do it better." But the desired trip to Italy does not lead to a happy mother-son relationship; only to Caterina's egomaniacal obsession with her role as diva and to Joe's narcissistic addiction to heroin. The original "Oedipal" desire seems to be consistently thwarted by another need.

Bertolucci's astute montage elucidates the direction of this other desire. When his father dies entombed—hermetically sealed—in his white Mercedes, Joe peers into this space, moaning "Dead, dead, dead." In the next scene, Joe and his mother appear as if entombed together in a large black limousine, while others oneirically press their faces to the windows. This remarkable juxtaposition of entombments visually places Joe in his father's position—both as dead and as companion of the mother. A sudden cut to another large black limousine threading its way through the monuments of Rome completes Joe's voyage into a place of death (since "Rome... was like the far borders of the empire," and of myth (because of the omnipresence of Verdi). Cars function in Luna as they did in Cocteau's Orpheus (a film of immense importance to Bertolucci), as links to the realm of dream or myth—the place where what is dead may be recovered symbolically. As if in reminiscence of Cocteau, Bertolucci seems to have conflated several ancient myths in an oniric superabundance of the symbolic. Joe's search
for his father casts him as a modern-day Telemachus, but in his descent through this symbolic tomb to the realm of myth, he also imitates the Orpheus figure of Bertolucci’s Tango. Like the figures of Jeanne and Paul in Last Tango, both Caterina and Joe are involved in rescue fantasies, which can ultimately be read as voyages of self-rescue.”

Once in Italy, Joe is met by Ariane, who like her Greek namesake appears to be needed, but is quickly neglected by her “lover” in favor of her heroin “trip.” As an infant, Joe is seen tangled in a ball of twine, which is connected to yet leads him away from his mother. As an adolescent, he traverses a maze of Roman streets, marking his “progress” by a chalk line drawn along the walls of the street, another symbol of his nostalgia for the Ariadne/mother-imago, yet leading away from her into a labyrinth of narcissism.

When Joe ultimately finds the man who is supposed to be his real father, he, too, is engaged in drawing a fictive universe; and Joe obliges by drawing a moon for this system. In so doing he enters the orbit of his father’s illusionistic system, rather than attempting to pull his father out. Their initial exchange is an exchange of shoes, symbol of movement. Joe’s only communication with his father centers around the false news of his own death, i.e., rather than awakening his father to his role, he portrays himself as dead, linking up with myth, dream and the unreal.

Caterina, too, seems obsessed by both movement and mythology. For the most part she is portrayed on the sets of various Verdi operas. Even her apartment is a thoroughly unreal space: Bertolucci explained that, “The house of Caterina [is] seen through the eyes of Joe... lost in the far borders of the empire.”

She seems unable to leave these unreal decor except to enter the sets of Bertolucci’s earlier films! When she sets out (in a white Mercedes again) to show Joe her origins, she loses her way and succeeds only in traversing Parma of Prima della rivoluzione, the Emilian farmhouse of Novecento, and ends up at Verdi’s birthplace she exclaims, “...This is my family, it’s like me, it’s like my father, Verdi!” As an artist (a figurative double of Bertolucci himself), she seems unable to locate her ontology in the real. Ultimately, the film becomes a hyperbole of Bertolucci’s other work since, like Don Quixote in the second half of Cervantes’s novel, it encounters its own mythology.

Finally, the “reunification” of the family takes place in an ancient theater, literally an archeological remnant, and is consecrated by a triumphant finale from A Masked Ball while mother, father, and son remain isolated physically from each other. Like Bertolucci’s other films, there is carefully no resolution, only sustained ambivalence, illusion, and ambiguity.

Caterina’s seductive narcissism encourages Joe to play out another myth which is central to all of Bertolucci’s films. As the Moon-Goddess Joe projects her to be, Caterina seduces her Endymion,

a beautiful youth who, as he slept on Mount Latmus, so moved the heart of the moon goddess that she came down and kissed him and lay at his side. He woke to find her gone, but the charms that she gave him were so strong and entralling that he begged Zeus to give him immortality and allow him to sleep perpetually...

Caterina’s gift of heroin when he needs a fix and her absence when he awakes suggests her complicity in a habit that invites a perpetual sleep.

To sleep perforce to dream. For dreaming seems at every level of this film to be the primary object. Dreaming, for the sake of dreaming. All of the movements of this film move back to the unreal.
Bertolucci recently said, "If I don’t see movies, I don’t have any desire to make movies. Before making a movie, really, I go to see movies. Like somebody who dreams: when he’s dreaming he desires to dream on."  

Bertolucci’s equation of filming and dreaming is everywhere implicit in this work. There are everywhere narrative gaps, logical jumps, and “inexplicable” scenes such as Joe’s cavernous “Ode to Billy Martin” or his tribute to Travolta in a gay bar. Frequent time warps and strange decors (including the discovery of the draper hanging from a curtain rod) tend to confuse and divert the “manifest” narrative purpose.

There are many examples of primary process thinking in the film: in terms of condensation, the film is particularly rich. While it is true as Bertolucci said, that “every character in this movie has two faces at least,” (e.g., Caterina is both guide Ariadne, and seductress Arachne), it could also be argued that every two characters in this movie have one face. As Joe’s guide to Italy, Caterina plays Ariadne doubled by Ariane; both offer their bodies to this lost adolescent, and each provides him with a “fix” on his birthday: Ariane at his party and Caterina at her party.

On the male side, clearly each father doubles not only the other but also the son. Joe claims he can do everything that Dad does, assumes his dead father’s place in the car. As a condensation of his Italian father, Joe exchanges shoes with him and then discovers that both father and son are in love with their mother. The gay seducer in the bar where Joe does his Travolta imitation is not only a visual double of the Italian father, he is one of Pasolini’s actors and reputed lovers. This uncertainty about the parents’ sexuality suggests condensations of father, the gay, and Maria (as Lesbian seductress of Caterina). Caterina’s own search for a father
figure (in her music teacher and ultimately in Verdi) suggests a condensation of mother and son figures. Ultimately the entire film can be read (oneirically) as a masked ball in which any character can substitute for any other.

One of the reasons this becomes possible is the degree of projection operating throughout. If the film can be "read" from Joe's point of view, then much of the mother's and father's fantastic behavior can be seen as pure projection: Caterina's desire to find a father and the Italian father's attachment to his mother. From Caterina's point of view, Joe's incestuous feelings (the dinner, the seductions) read equally as mere projections of her desire.

The film also affects a remarkable series of displacements: the moon and heroin for Joe, opera and her own voice for Caterina, teaching and the creation of a fictive universe for Milan are but a few striking examples of this phenomenon.

As a dream-script, however, it differs from Bertolucci's earlier wish-fulfillment fantasies in its degree of self-consciousness, which invites analysis of its autoreferentiality. It seems to present itself as an object for analysis or interpretation, yet, like a dream, never totally accessible by the signs that point to it. As such it would belong to the class of dreams, discussed by J.B. Pontalis, which are dreamed for analysis, which patients "have dreamt...directly as dreams, and dreamt...finally in order to tell them." Pontalis' analyses of such dreams suggest some uncanny analogies with Luna. So much of Luna seems to be dedicated to making us conscious of its status as (an oneic) film and especially as a part of a set of fantasies, that ultimately, it recalls the

"patient [who] will bring dream after dream, and relentlessly manipulate images and words. The dream will incessantly move him further away from self-recognition, while he claims to look for it by auto-interpretation...He steals his own dreams from himself."15

To understand the ulterior function of such dreams, we must understand that the dream-process is originally linked to the mother image. "To Freud, the dream was a misplaced maternal body," notes Pontalis: "He had committed incest with the body of his dreams, he penetrated their secret, he wrote the book that made him conqueror and possessor of the terra incognita."16 Like the mother herself, then, the dream (and by analogy Luna) is an object which we invest libidinally with fear and pleasure. Pontalis hypothesized that "every dream refers to the maternal body in so far as it is an object in the analysis... Dreaming," he continued, "is above all an an effort to maintain the impossible union with the mother, to preserve an undivided totality, to move in a space prior to time."17 Using Pontalis' subsequent analysis of the phenomenon to elucidate its cinematic analogue, we can better understand the nostalgia for—and impossibility of—the union as constituting a single wish-fulfillment! Pontalis notes (following Lewin's theory of the dream screen) that both dream and film are projected onto a screen or at least suppose a space allowing representation. But this screen functions ironically in the dual modes implied by the two antithetical meanings of the word: as locus of projection and as means of protection. If the screen itself is (the) maternal (breast) as Lewin suggests, then the dream (or film) points to the mother, indeed functions like the child's transitional object by connecting the dreamer with the mother by making her absent.18 But it protects from the mother by more than assuring her absence. In dreams dreamed for analysis, the dreamer valorizes an unusual aspect of oneic activity:

The dream...as a representation of an elsewhere, guarantor of a perpetual double, or a staging, a "private theatre" with its permutation of roles...allows one...
assume any of them. One can find something useful in the functioning of the mechanisms [of the dream] much as a writer does in his methods of writing: The condensation, which collects in one image the impressions from multiple or contradictory registers, satisfies our desire to deny the radical difference; the compulsion to symbolize... The wish to establish new links indefinitely, and in so doing to lose nothing. The displacement... offers the analysis and the possibility of never having to remain at a fixed point, but of assigning himself an elusive vanishing point. The subject identifies himself with the displacement itself, as though with a phallus, which is everywhere and nowhere; nulliquité more than ubiquity. 23

The position of such a dreamer again displays an uncanny resemblance both to the content of Luna as well as to Bertolucci's relationship to the film and to cinema in general. The condensation of characters in Luna and the series of symbolic movements out of normal space toward a realm of fantasy or space before time, both correspond to this particular type of dreamer's need to avoid a fixed point of reference. In discussing his ideal film, Bertolucci evoked movement as the very essence of the cinematic art: "All my pleasure is the camera, the movement is all my decision" 24 And elsewhere he exclaimed: "Where am I going? I don't know... A movie is an adventure, really, of jumping on a boat and going with a wind that takes you nowhere...." 25

Bertolucci's "nowhere," his quest for mystery 26 sound remarkably like a dreamer who has identified with displacement or with "nulliquity" itself.

Virtually the entire set of Bertolucci's films can be understood as a structure of constant displacement as an attraction-avoidance of the idealized, fantasized maternal object. Prima della rivoluzione, The Spider's Stratagem, The Conformist,
Last Tango, 1900, and Luna all deal explicitly with a fundamental approach-avoidance position vis à vis a maternal object. ²⁷

This dance of displacement ultimately functions as a screen, a protection against the inside, against the conceivable union with the mother-image that is implied by the dream screen as projection, or as Pontalis describes it, “against incest consummated with the mother, incest which combines joy and terror, penetration and the act of devouring, the nascent body and the petrified body.” ²⁸

It is not surprising then, despite the consistent doubling of Caterina and Joe, that the central moment of Luna represents an attempted incestuous seduction by the mother (the dream-screen as maternal object) which is thwarted and displaced by the son (the screen as protective projection). Joe leaves his mother’s devouring and inert body to practice a game of self-penetration with the addict’s needle—in order to return to dream. The scene is indeed emblematic of the thoroughly (and in this case morbidly) narcissistic tendency of the dream experience. As Pontalis would put it,

in the end, the dream process (of the dream-for-analysis) is diverted from its major function—to produce wish-fulfillments, or make it rise to the surface—to being taken as an aim in itself. The dreamer attaches himself to his dreams so as not to be cast adrift. ²⁹

In discussions of The Spider’s Stratagem and Last Tango in Paris, Bertolucci has at least three times returned to the analogy of spiders:

In nature it is usually the female that devours. Genetically, over the centuries, some males have understood her mechanisms, have understood the danger. Some spiders just approach the female, but stay within safe distance. Exciting themselves with her smell, they masturbate, collect their sperm in their mouth and wait to regain their strength after orgasm. Because that is how they get devoured, when they are weak after ejaculation. Later, they inseminate the female with a minimal approach, and thus she cannot attack them in the moment of their weakness. ³⁰

The dance of the male spider in this analogy, this “minimal approach” to the devouring female, recalls both Bertolucci’s definition of Luna as a “dance of inconsistency, dance of incoherence, dance of confusion” ³¹ and the identification with displacement itself just discussed. Indeed, this play of perversity, coupled with the self-conscious perversion of the use of dreams in Luna, present remarkable analogies to the structure of perversion itself.

In her analysis of sexual perversion, ³² Joyce McDougall argues that sexual perversion is often the result of the child’s idealization of the mother in the absence of a meaningful father image. Generally this leads, in cases of perversion, to the projection of the destructive aspects of the same-sex parent onto the opposite sex, resulting in an overweening sense of guilt. Aberrant sexual configurations seem to serve as a manic defense against this depressive guilt, are compulsive, always involve game-playing and seem to require an anonymous spectator. The construction of essential illusions which must not be tampered with, raises questions about what is real. “In many ways,” notes McDougall, “the perverse play is comparable to a dream... [and] resembles a stage play in which some vital links are missing... It is in a manifest content, making use of primary thinking, reversal, displacements and symbolic equivalents.” ³³ She adds,

the pervert has created a sexual mythology whose true meaning he no longer recognizes, like a text from which important pieces have been removed... The
By its perversion of the "normal" function of dream, by its tendency toward a repetition compulsion of both fundamental themes and of specific elements of his other films, *Luna* emphasizes its own "playfulness. Indeed *Luna* "reads" as a text from which important pieces have been removed and to which enigmatic elements of an unconscious personal mythology have been unaccountably added. The intensely personal level of the content and structure of this film coupled with its self-consciousness as film and the ultimate identification with displacement itself, suggest an element of perversion within Bertolucci's directorial stance, which may in fact be a hyperbole for cinema in general.

Bertolucci's almost voyeuristic manipulation of his actors, his need for a specifically *anonymous* spectator and his insistence on playfulness and perverse sexual themes both seduce the spectator into an identificatory role (as double or dreamer) and hold the audience at a distance. In enacting this desire "to be loved and rejected at the same time" Bertolucci, recapitulates with his public the essential dynamics of the dream for analysis, of perversion and finally of the cinematic experience itself. We unwittingly become both doubles and parental imagoes in the film experience—identifying constantly with Joe and Caterina (who double and refuse each other). In his desire to eradicate radical differences, Bertolucci seems to have entered cinema in order to insist on his own and his spectator's position of permanent displacement. Perhaps this is another reason why the automobile is so ubiquitous in *Luna*. For Bertolucci, the perpetual dream-filled sleep of Endymion, like Joe's nap nestled in his mother's lap in the back seat of their car, recapitulates a primal and unconscious motivation fundamental to the cinematic enterprise.
If *Luna* fails as melodrama, it does succeed in evoking through its insistence on the oneiric and an almost perverse system of intertextual allusions a major and perhaps unconscious purpose in Bertolucci's cinema: a reflection on the medium itself.

REFERENCES

7. This scene constitutes an allusion to the opening scenes of Bertolucci’s *The Conformist*.
11. Ibid., pp. 89-90.
12. *American Film*, p. 42.
16. *American Film*, p. 36.
17. *American Film*, p. 38.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 127.
21. Ibid., p. 128.
22. Pontalis, p. 132.
23. Ibid., pp. 130-131.
24. *American Film*, p. 41.
25. Ibid., p. 38.
26. Bertolucci’s first, and only, book of poetry is entitled *In Cerca del misero*.
28. Pontalis, p. 132 (italics mine)
29. Ibid., p. 131.
33. Ibid., p. 377.
34. Ibid., p. 379.
35. Of his actors, Bertolucci said, “Sometimes you have to cheat them. Sometimes you have to provoke them. Sometimes you have to rape them, in a way.” *American Film*, p. 38.

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