

FILM FURY: TWO

Italy and fascism: is it too red?

By James Fox
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Bertolucci: Problem of politics

WHEN A GROUP of top Paramount executives sat with Bernardo Bertolucci in a viewing cinema earlier this year to watch an unfinished version of his epic movie 1900—the longest, most ambitious and most expensive film ever made in Italy—the 35-year-old Italian director was given the hint that the content was “a little too red” for Paramount’s taste.

Now, with the film completed, running at 5½ hours and divided into two parts, Paramount have

demanding that Bertolucci cuts no less than 2½ hours out of it before they will distribute it in the US—thus effectively refusing to handle it. Bertolucci has accused Paramount of doing this for political reasons and has refused to cut an inch.

Paramount and others had backed the film with \$8m.

Last week the completed version was publicly shown in Italy for the first time. It has already been hailed as a critical masterpiece and in Venice last week riot police had to be called in to stop filmgoers storming the cinema to see it during a series of private showings.

The film is highly charged with political emotions and by the very nature of its content—the background to the narrative is Italian history from 1900 to 1945 with the rise of socialism and the defeat of Fascism—is closely relevant to present-day politics in Italy. Bertolucci’s message is clear in his rhapsodic sequences of the political history of the peasant class in his native province of Emilia—a “class,” he says, “which is destined to victory.”

It is not only Paramount, however who dislike the film. Last week, it was viciously attacked in a seminar in Venice by a group of left-wing Italian cinema critics, shocked at the way Bertolucci, who was once their intellectual protégé has attempted to seduce the public by the shameless use of beautiful images, and by the very scale of the production itself.

Accusations hurled at Bertolucci were that the American capital behind the film made the political content “irredeemably polluted;” that the film was unrealistically optimistic and that in the end it was simply “merchandise.”

Bertolucci countered both attacks on the front page of an Italian newspaper on Friday by saying that “the scandalised expressions of the people accusing me (the critics) are identical in intensity to those of the American distributors.

“The Americans were scandalised because there were too many red flags in the movie. Therefore, I’m caught in the crossfire of two scandalised reactions apparently from opposite sides, but in reality with the same prejudice—moralistic and demagogic in Italy and threatening and authoritarian in the United States.”

Bertolucci suffered the same moralising from left-wing cinephiles after Last Tango in Paris, his first major commercial success and his first departure from the Marxist themes which dominated his earlier films. It was

the success of Last Tango that persuaded three studios, United Artists, 20th Century Fox and Paramount to back Bertolucci’s talent for this latest epic.

1900 has an all-star cast to ensure maximum appeal—Bert Lancaster, Sterling Hayden, Dominique Sanda, Robert De Niro, Donald Sutherland, Gerard Depardieu and Stephania Sandrelli.

In entrusting a huge budget to a director who is a member of the Italian communist party, in order to make a political film, Paramount and the others were taking an obvious risk. So, as it turned out, was Bertolucci.

When I interviewed him during the shooting near Parma last year he said of the film: “1900 is the century of a great Utopia which will become a reality. It’s the century of the end of the bosses, and the death of the social and moral role of the bosses.”

The two key executives at Paramount who delivered their ultimatum to Bertolucci, David Picker and Barry Diller, were not available for comment in Los Angeles yesterday. A source at Paramount said, however, that the feeling about the film was that although it was very beautiful it had too much “gauche Vuitton” (radical chic) about it.

“We didn’t think at the outset that there was going to be quite so much of it, and we don’t know whether there is a US audience for it. The final decision hasn’t been made.

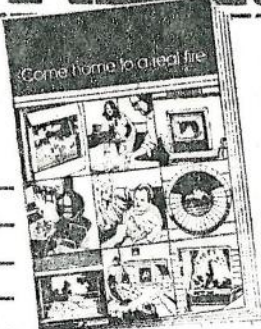
It has not, however, escaped the attention of the Left-wing Press in Italy that Paramount proprietor Charles Bluhorn is a declared anti-communist and a member of John Connally’s “Citizens Alliance for Freedom on the Mediterranean,” whose aim is to prevent a communist victory in Italy.

Meanwhile 20th Century Fox has offered to distribute 1900 in the US at a length of no more than four hours. Asked yesterday whether he would allow any cuts in the film Bertolucci said: “We’ve already got 45 minutes more than Paramount offered us originally. So, who knows? Maybe in a month we may win.”

He added: “To say it’s ‘radical chic’ is incredible. It sounds like some Fascist joke.”

In answer to his Left-wing critics Bertolucci calls 1900 “a shameless monument to the contradictions of our system.” He said that in order to reach a wide public, “I have been forced into the absurd contradictions which all directors know, even in socialist countries—to get money from wherever you can. These contradictions have exploded in this film.”

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