

*Bertolucci, film, literature.*  
*The case of Prima della rivoluzione.*

Abstract

Bertolucci came to cinema almost by chance. Pier Paolo Pasolini, who had intuited the talent of the young man whom he knew thanks to the friendship that linked him to Bernardo's father Attilio, in 1961 wanted him as assistant director for *Accattone*, and then, only a year later, proposed that Bernardo himself direct *Commare secca*, an adaptation of one of his short stories.

In 1964, when *Prima della rivoluzione*, his second feature film, was shown at Cannes, Bertolucci was just 23 years old. To make the film, Bertolucci had left Rome and had returned to Parma, his place of birth, in which the story of an impossible change is set: that of the young Fabrizio, an unsatisfied bourgeois who would like to burn the bridges with his family and with the social class to which he sadly belongs. His search takes the form of a love story with Gina, his young aunt, and commitment in the PCI, which then however concludes with failure: a definitive return to order, marked by his bourgeois marriage to his previous sweetheart and his renunciation of his political militancy.

*Prima della rivoluzione* is not strictly speaking an adaptation, yet the film establishes an extremely complex dialogue with literary and visual tradition, *in primis*, with *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Stendhal's masterpiece, but also with many other cinematographic and literary works: from Pasolini to Melville, from Antonioni to Godard, with meaningful encroachments into the territories of lyric and painting. The high occurrence of re-readings and quotations corresponds, in *Prima della rivoluzione*, to many aims. First of all, by using a voice that continually implies other texts in a more or less explicit way, quoting constitutes in itself a manifestation of subjectivity, perfectly coherent with the artistic project of a young director sensitive to a new idea of cinema. The models of such aesthetic research are principally Brecht and Godard; the need to define oneself

in an unorthodox way with regard to the practice of classical cinematography emerges very strongly, a practice rejected in the name of a new canon, the identification of which appears continually thwarted by the contradictions that belong to cinematographic discourse.

The abundance of borrowings in *Prima della rivoluzione* has pushed academics to occupy themselves intensely with the film, in an effort often exerted exclusively “to reconstruct its sources, to reveal its autobiographical tendencies”.<sup>1</sup> The principal objective of my work is rather to interrogate the strong intertextual dimension of the work. That implies an “articulated and critical reflection on the role of the author and the problematic link with tradition and the cinematographic text”,<sup>2</sup> in which desire of expressive autonomy and respect for the tradition overlap, on the horizon of a personal authorial project.

The choice of *Prima della rivoluzione* as terrain for analysis is thus motivated principally by its nature as a modern and polymorphous text that is open to multiple avenues of comparative analysis, from which comes the importance of this study, centred on a study of analysis and comparison, of reconstruction and ‘vertical’ interpretation.

The hermeneutic approach is based on respect for the text, a recognition of the openness of artistic expression, the search for the meaning ‘for us’ and an acceptance of its relativity. Susan Sontag, on the other hand, reminds us that interpretation always sets in motion an act of impoverishment, by giving an univocal form to the multiple openings of the work of art; according to David Bordwell, this work, moreover, through deductions and opinions that are affected heavily by the perspective of observation, are never definitive and change with the process of reading.<sup>3</sup> To interpret always remains a necessary gamble, the only way possible for there to be knowledge; without it, to the critic, nothing remains except the technical terms and the impressions of the judgments.

One of the aspects of modernity of *Prima della rivoluzione* lies precisely in the intensity with which the work calls the spectator to a complex and difficult hermeneutic study, thanks to its expressive originality and the scale of the intertextual dimension, that inevitably tends to go beyond an entirely conscious series of references. *Prima della rivoluzione* indeed establishes a composite connection to many of its models: on the one hand, the object of a structured

focus, geared to recognising affinities and distances in the intended perspective of actualisation and the interplay between different authorial poetics and different historical, political and cultural contexts; on the other, less recognizable texts, where the overlap with the new text is articulated through dialogue that goes beyond the intentions of the adaptor. The goal of our work is to bring to light this ambiguity, the complexity implicit in every relation with a tradition.

As far as the poetic word is concerned, Harold Bloom, in his *The Anxiety of Influence*, outlines a model of authorial relation that we can easily recognise in *Prima della rivoluzione*, and, more generally, throughout Bertolucci's work; moreover, such a model can also be an excellent point of departure for understanding what the cinematic adaptation lives through *tout court*. According to Bloom, "poetic history [...] is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves".<sup>4</sup> The artist's attempt towards self-affirmation does not therefore take place in a vacuum, but bears the context in mind; the mechanisms through which an author establishes her or his own position with regard to tradition are individual and describable. But above all – the North American critic highlights – the process is based on an interesting psychological dimension: "poetic influence is a variety of melancholy or an anxiety-principle".<sup>5</sup> The relation with the *auctores* is therefore always competitive, and the anxiety that characterizes it takes on a double meaning: on the one hand, the desire to be recognized as a continuer, on the other, the desire to stand out and to establish oneself as *auctor* towards other possible imitators. Intertextuality appears thus an inevitable given if, as Bloom recalls, citing Lichtenberg, "to do just the opposite is also a form of imitation".<sup>6</sup>

According to Bloom, within the continued need to confront the models there is, in the essence of the work, a defence mechanism that in Freudian terms hides behind the disparate insistence on priority and originality on the part of the artist, and her or his need to bend, supplement or deny the influence of the models. 'Poetic influence need not make poets less original',<sup>7</sup> concludes Bloom: it is precisely in the dialectic between need for recognition, due to inserting oneself into a tradition, and a tension towards uniqueness, that can bring out an authentic creative dimension. Artistic originality, therefore, always overlaps

with declarations of love with regard to the cultures of the forefathers. Bertolucci, as we know, has many.

The procedure followed by Bertolucci in *Prima della rivoluzione* appears problematically suspended between the irrational and alogical close proximity of the symbol and the dialogic tension of modern allegory, already highly recognisable in the series of intertextual references that characterises the whole film.<sup>8</sup> In a wider sense, the film appears therefore to stage, in an almost paradigmatic and exemplary way, the dialectic that underpins cinematography *tout court*, its visionary and irrational power produced by a technical and rational praxis that is necessarily projected. The modernity of cinema lies precisely in that contradiction, and it is resolved through an ‘impure’ form: on the one hand, through the unreliability of desires, the falsifications of fantasy, on the other, through the complex search for truth that is set in motion by the ontological value of the image and its technological recording. If, therefore, in *Prima della rivoluzione* the openings of isolated fragments appear on the one hand, with their “short circuit of the spirit,”<sup>9</sup> to express an immediate and participating insight into an affect or a mysterious meaning, on the other hand, the complex construction of the text ends up being contradictory and unequal, and the multiple rereadings that are contained within it appear marked by the rational intent of the *Verkörperung der Ideen*, bent towards the coherent arrangements of commonly understood meanings.

In *Prima della rivoluzione*, overall, the luminary, poetic and mysterious fragment loaded with meaning coexists with a constructed project, whose character appears fleeting, and in continual redefinition. The search for meaning in *Prima della rivoluzione* therefore takes place along the allegorical route of contamination and shattering fragmentation that characterises both the episodic structure of the plot, as well as together with the construction of the sequence and the individual scenes, as well as other choices of undoubted importance, such as, for example, those relating to the composite and polyphonic musical remarks. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Prima della rivoluzione* moves in a hybrid cinematographic space, deformed and explicitly ‘artificial’, in which quotation, document and fiction overlap in an inevitably ambiguous style of writing. Years later, before filming *La luna*, a film that is moreover indebted to

*Prima della rivoluzione*, that very Bertolucci will would give a name to his method of work, drawing from the suggestion of *Le plaisir du text* by Roland Barthes: a *nouvelle dramaturgie*, which consists principally of “putting together things that, on appearance, according to the rules of the game, cannot be together”, “clearly heterogeneous, contrasting materials”.<sup>10</sup> The method that we have used to engage more closely with *Prima della rivoluzione*, an exemplary text of the twentieth century, is based on such a hermeneutic approach: allegory and symbol are distinct meaningful procedures, both active in cinematographic writing; recognising the modalities of the values guarantees the attribution of meaning on our horizon of interpreter-spectator and in the social-cultural context of the time.

The intensity of comparative work, linked to a hermeneutic approach based on a steadfast attention to the procedures of meaning, has allowed me to achieve a double result. Firstly, I have been able to identify a few original relations between the film and its models: for example, a few aspects of how I deal with the Stendhalian presence in the film and the reuse of materials of nineteenth century melodrama, filtered through the previous reading by Visconti are entirely innovative, as is, moreover, the link with Pasolini that is addressed through a perspective that in large part distances itself from all that has already been brought into focus by previous studies. Secondly, my work intends to outline an innovative model for what concerns the adapted methodology by introducing to the study of cinematography a hermeneutic approach that is widely used in literary studies: this complex procedure of meaning – and recognition of meaning – based on the distinction between symbol and allegory can be suitably applied to cinema, given the impure character of its nature and its writing.

The first chapter of my work has a clear introductory function. Aimed at presenting the whole project, to defining the perspectives of engagement with the text and the most relevant socio-artistic coordinates within which one links the comparative and hermeneutic operation, it constitutes the necessary premise of the whole discussion.

Chapter 1 is instead entirely dedicated to *The Charterhouse of Parma*, the most obvious model of *Prima della rivoluzione*. From Stendhal's novel, the general characteristics are highlighted, with special attention to a few aspects of its composition, mostly linked to its historical dimension, which were of particular importance in the light of its posthumous cinematographic re-elaboration. Other essential cross-references of a thematic nature and motifs of great importance present in Stendhal (like the themes of vision and relations between people and nature) are left to the analysis of the following chapters.

With chapter 2, the discussion enters a more focused cinematographic and comparative dimension. *Prima della rivoluzione* is not only presented, but also analysed in its more explicitly programmed sections: the memorable opening sequence, centred on the link with the city, the protagonist Fabrizio and his ambitions of revolt, and the final section, encompasses in a contrapuntal relation the failing of the Bertoluccean hero, assimilated on the bourgeois horizon of his fellow citizens and forced into a humiliating parallel of the comparison with the competitive commitment of his political mentor, the school teacher Cesare. It is precisely in these sections that, absolutely not by accident, the dialogue with tradition appears particularly intense: with not only Stendhal, but also Pasolini, Baudelaire, his father Attilio, Pavese, and Melville. I have tried to interpret the character of every reuse within his adaptation by re-reading it in the light of a wider ideological and artistic project.

Chapter 3 follows an already defined intertextual analysis, within the scope of the preceding chapter, in its load-bearing axes and its weighty and important cultural references. The testing ground, this time, is that of the representation contrasted with urban and natural spaces, that crosses the whole film in a decidedly unbalanced dialectic. As well as giving voice to its dialogic articulation with the artistic tradition, in the representation of the countryside Bertolucci concentrates his experimental and anticonformist calling, centred on the nostalgia of symbolist correspondence, allegory, contamination, and the obsession of impermanence.

In chapter 4, the comparatist focus goes beyond the confines of the confrontation with defined and identifiable models (literary, theatrical, cinematographic) to propose an explicit reflection on the nature of figurative representation *tout court* in *Prima della rivoluzione*, in at least a few sequences

(that of the Stagno Lombardo and the Regio theatre), in which Bertolucci, more than define the pantheon of his points of cultural references, alludes to one of his own ideas of cinema, seen as a terrain of the imaginary, a space of desire, of memory and the irrational. Precisely in the light of such a position, the process of quoting and reinterpreting models and their insertion into an original artistic project takes on a peculiar character.

The conclusion that ends the work reiterates the modern and allegorical character of *Prima della rivoluzione*. A detailed bibliography will be added here.

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<sup>1</sup>F. SANTOVETTI, *L'angoscia e la rivoluzione: Bernardo Bertolucci e il cinema di poesia*, in "MLN", Vol. 108, No. 1, Italian Issue (January 1993), p. 152.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 152-53.

<sup>3</sup>Cfr. S. SONTAG, *Contro l'interpretazione*, Mondadori, Milano 1967, p. 17 and D. BORDWELL, *Making Meaning. Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989; in particular see chapter 4 (*Symptomatic Interpretation*), pp. 71-104.

<sup>4</sup>H. BLOOM, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford University Press, New York 1973, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>As Eco recalls, allegory "puts into play images already seen elsewhere, [...] it recalls scenes and intertextual frames that we are already familiar with" that are linked to each other by "a logic already made familiar to us through the wonder of intertextuality" (*Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Einaudi, Torino 1997, p. 251).

<sup>9</sup>This is the well-known definition by Huizinga, according to whom in symbolist art, "thought does not seek the link between two things by following the hidden spirals of their causal connections, but rather finds it with a sudden leap" (J. HUIZINGA, *Autunno del Medioevo*, Sansoni, Firenze 1941, p. 277).

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<sup>10</sup>From the presentation of the film shot in Roma on 7 March 2006 in, in *La luna* (edizione in DVD), ed by L. PAVAN, Dolmen Home Video, Milano 2006, now in B. BERTOLUCCI, *La mia magnifica ossessione*, Garzanti, Milano 2010, pp. 104-05.