

Bertolucci's *1900*: a postmodern metanarrative

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Summary

This article focuses on Bertolucci's film, *1900*, in an effort to demonstrate the significance of the motif of *recurrence* in its narrative. Lyotard's description of the rhythmic structure of narrative provides the key to understanding this aspect of the film. It is also argued that the film articulates a related postmodernist philosophical model of history which, on a metanarrative level, paradoxically constitutes a sceptical attitude towards precisely what Lyotard calls a metanarrative – here specifically the Enlightenment version of justifying knowledge and socio-political institutions with reference to the ideal of progress. Attention is given to the question of the various contexts in which the term 'post modern' is encountered, and the debate on modernity versus postmodernity is indicated as furnishing the apposite theoretical space for the subsequent analysis of Bertolucci's film. Briefly, this analysis involves showing that, in the course of the (historical) events covered by the narrative, the growing expectations of justice on the part of the peasants (represented by the character Olmo) are repeatedly disappointed, despite apparent progress and an ostensible lessening of the distance separating peasant and *padrone* (notably Alfredo, Olmo's landowner counterpart). Moreover, the recurrence of certain modes of experience in the course of three generations establishes a meta-pattern which answers to the description of a 'post-modern metanarrative'.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op Bertolucci se speelfilm, *1900*, in 'n poging om die sin van die tema van *herhaling* in die filmnarratief te demonstreer. Lyotard se beskrywing van die ritmiese aard van narratiewe vorm bied die sleutel tot die verstaan van hierdie aspek van die rolprent. Daar word ook betoog dat die film 'n hieraan verwante postmodernistiese geskiedenis-filosofiese model artikuleer wat, paradoksaal, juis op 'n metanarratiewe vlak 'n skeptiese houding impliseer teenoor wat Lyotard 'n metanarratief noem – hier spesifiek die Verligtingsweergawe van die regverdiging van kennis en sosio-politieke instellings aan die hand van de vooruitgangsideaal. Daar word aandag geskenk aan die vraag van die verskillende kontekste waarin die term 'postmodern' aangetref word, en aangedui dat die debat rondom moderniteit versus postmoderniteit die gepaste teoretiese ruimte voorsien vir die daaropvolgende analise van Bertolucci se film. Kortliks kom hierdie analise daarop neer om aan te toon dat, in die loop van die (historiese) gebeure wat deur die filmverhaal gedek word, die toenemende geregtigheidsverwagtinge van die boerestand (verteenvoerdig deur die karakter Olmo) herhaaldelik teleurgestel word, in weerwil van oënskynlike vooruitgang en 'n skynbare verkleining van die afstand tussen boer en *padrone* (in die besonder Alfredo, Olmo se landheer-teenhanger). Origens vertoon die herhaling van bepaalde ervaringswyses in die loop van drie geslagte 'n meta-patroon wat beantwoord aan die beskrywing van 'n 'postmoderne metanarratief'.

We have art in order not to perish from the truth – Nietzsche

One of the reviewers of Umberto Eco's remarkable novel, *The Name of the Rose*, drew a parallel between Eco's book and the book promised to Faustus by Mephistopheles, which, according to the latter, 'contained *everything*' (*Books and Bookmen*). The Italians seem to have a penchant for encompass-

sing artistic visions, for, if Eco's novel is a literary microcosm, Bernardo Bertolucci's *1900* is its cinematic equivalent. This remark does not concern narrated time (days in the novel as opposed to decades in the film) or the immediate epistemic, semiotic or social significance of their respective themes, but rather the different, antithetical attitudes, experiences, beliefs; in short, the alternative, recurrent possibilities of human existence which constitute the fabric of their distinct narratives.

I shall not here elaborate on Eco's book; it is precisely on the moment of *recurrence* in the narrative of *1900* that I wish to focus. As the film's narrative demarcates an ('identifiable') historical period, its 'truth' involves a certain conception of the cognitive import of (film) art but also of history, since this conception determines whether truth or, for that matter, justice is taken to 'recur' or, alternatively, to be progressively in the making. I take my cue from Jean-Francois Lyotard's characterisation of 'narrative knowledge' – to which he (surprisingly) bestows cognitive legitimacy equal to that of abstract scientific knowledge – in terms of temporality: 'Narrative form follows a rhythm'; he says, 'it is the synthesis of a meter beating time in regular periods and of accent modifying the length or amplitude of certain of those periods' (Lyotard, 1984: 21). Again: '... we can hypothesize that, against all expectations, a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past' (22). As Fredric Jameson remarks in the foreword to Lyotard's book, this is to say that narrative is here seen '... as a way of *consuming* the past, a way of forgetting' (xii). Precisely how Lyotard's conception of 'narrative knowledge' applies to Bertolucci's film, I hope to show in what follows. At the same time, I should like to demonstrate that the film projects what may be called a postmodernist view of history. But perhaps the question of postmodernism should receive some amplification at this point, in order to provide a theoretical context for the subsequent analysis of Bertolucci's film.

It is unlikely that any attempt to characterize 'postmodernism' at this stage will or can be conclusive. In a way, it is a chameleon-like term which adapts noticeably to the various conceptual environments in which it makes its appearance. Most familiar of these, perhaps, are current architectural theory and literary criticism. Writers such as David Lodge and Charles Jencks have given currency to the notions of postmodern(-ist) literary forms (e.g. the postmodernist novel) and postmodern architecture, respectively. For Lodge, postmodernist writing distinguishes itself from modernism (which replaces the traditional ideal of art as imitation with the model of self-referentiality) and from antimodernism (which, in the spirit of a modified realism, continues the mimetic tradition) in so far as it defies their respective rules of composition, substituting principles such as discontinuity, contradiction, randomness and excess (Lodge, 1977: 39-44). 'Postmodern' may thus be seen as a category which serves to distinguish certain contemporary forms from others, and from older ones, e.g. in architecture the playful historicist creations of Michael Graves or Charles Moore from the platonic high modernist buildings of Mies van der Rohe, with their Utopian aspirations of totally transforming social life (Jencks, 1984: 5-37; 147-148). It is not, however, in the strictly literary or

architectural-critical sense that *1900* may be described as postmodern, although these are related to the sense in which the term applies to the film. We have to move to a different context – the philosophical – for its appropriate application.

Moreover, 'postmodern' displays a family resemblance to a whole cluster of terms held together by the prefix 'post'. These include 'post-individualist', 'poststructuralist' and 'postindustrialist', and although Bernstein seems to me to be right about the difficulty of filling in the 'content' of these 'posts' (Bernstein, 1985: 25), I believe that their mutual resemblance derives from various forms of discontent with the condition qualified by 'post'; or, again, from an awareness that Western culture has somehow moved beyond a condition variously describable as 'modern', 'individualist', etc. It is a moot point whether this awareness is not more fundamentally a *desire* to leave behind a cultural ethos which seems to some to have foundered in a morass – perhaps 'cesspool' is more fitting – a notion which again presupposes a pervasive dissatisfaction with this ethos. On a philosophical level it is precisely the question of the legitimacy of the latter – in the guise of the so-called 'Enlightenment project' – which defines the space of the debate concerning modernity and postmodernity.

Undoubtedly the main champion of modernity today is Jürgen Habermas who, in the face of all its detractors, persistently and persuasively argues that the project of modernity is as yet incomplete but not for that reason devoid of legitimacy. He accepts Weber's characterization of cultural modernity in terms of the division of reason into the tripartite structure of (the autonomous spheres of) science, morality and art, which, since the enlightenment, has given rise to a culture of experts with respect to these domains (Habermas, 1981: 8-9). Unfortunately this growth of specialization has gone hand in hand with its separation from daily life – what Habermas calls 'the hermeneutics of everyday communication' (9). Hence the attempts, in surrealism for instance, to 'negate' this compartmentalized culture by 'levelling' art and life (10). Habermas detects two reasons for the failure of surrealism. Firstly, the destruction of the aesthetic form which ineluctably accompanies the reconciliation of art and life precludes the emancipatory effects which follows where the transcendence of societal constraints by art is recognized. More importantly, however, given the three autarkical spheres of modern rationality, it does not follow, according to Habermas, that the dispersal of the contents of *one* of these, viz. art, can save everyday life from cultural alienation (Habermas, 1981: 10-11). What is needed, in his view, is nothing less than '... unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements' (11). Habermas is thus engaged in the ongoing articulation of '... the presuppositions of the rationality of processes of reaching understanding, which may be presumed to be universal because they are unavoidable' (Habermas, 1985: 196). In short, he is drawing the contours of a 'procedural' or 'communicative' conception of rationality which revitalizes the 'intentions' of the Enlightenment tradition while avoiding the pitfalls of its mistakes, notably historicism and transcendentalism (Habermas, 1985: 193-195). In a manner reminiscent of Husserl's discovery of

universal structures underlying everyday experience as the very conditions of its possibility (Natanson, 1973: 20-41), Habermas claims to eschew the '... snares of Western logocentrism' (a term which, ironically, derives from a postmodern thinker, viz. Derrida) '... through the analysis of the *already* operative potential for rationality contained in the everyday practices of communication' (Habermas, 1985: 196).

Habermas's claims notwithstanding, Lyotard seems to have him in mind where he (Lyotard) illustrates the notion of a 'metanarrative': 'For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the enlightenment narrative ...' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii). Metanarratives such as this one, according to Lyotard, serve as sources of legitimation of science, i.e. they justify scientific activity in so far as it seeks or approximates the truth. A science which has recourse to a metadiscourse for this purpose is designated as *modern* by Lyotard (xxiii), and, as in the Habermasian example above, it (the metadiscourse) may imply a philosophy of history which, in turn, faces the task of legitimating socio-political forms and institutions on a metanarrative level. Hence Lyotard's definition of *postmodern*: 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives' (xxiv). For Lyotard contemporary advanced culture may evidently be shown to display postmodern features; we no longer seem to have reason to believe in historical progress in terms of knowledge or justice. Keeping this in mind, it is perhaps the appropriate moment to return to Bertolucci's *1900* which, as will (I hope) be seen, so admirably embodies just this sceptical postmodern stance with respect to the grand (Enlightenment) narrative of historical, economic and socio-political progress. It is after all not the purpose of this article to defend either Habermas or Lyotard, i.e. to promote either a modernist or a postmodernist interpretation of the state of our culture.¹ The preceding discussion is merely intended to provide a setting for the understanding of the film in question.

In *1900* the fundamental socio-economic opposition is between peasant and landowner or *padrone*. This antithesis is given narrative significance (and inversely, imposes narrative unity on the film) by the more or less simultaneous birth in the year 1900² of the two principal characters whose different, yet related lives are intertwined with and reflect the socio-political causes and consequences of the catastrophic historical events between 1900 and 1945. Finally, the (again) more or less simultaneous death (albeit ambiguously presented) of these two principals – Olmo, the peasant (Gerard Depardieu) and Alfredo, the *padrone* (Robert de Niro) – at an age and in a manner reminiscent of the deaths of their respective grandfathers, sustains the narrative coherence of the film by fittingly providing the 'thanatic' (GK. *thanatos* – death) counterbalance to the originary moment of birth.

The film-narrative does not start with the birth scene in 1900, however. In a by now familiar gesture (in literature, cinema and theatre) it opens at a later point, viz. on Liberation Day in April, 1945, which is, in a sense, the end of the ('main body' of the) narrative. This beginning at or near the end, being the kind of beginning it turns out to be, is an effective hermeneutical device

on Bertolucci's part, in so far as it highlights the difference in response (or 'reception') – on the part of the audience – to the merciless and gruesome treatment meted out to a fleeing couple by a group of peasant women pursuing them with pitchforks at two distinct stages in the narrative. The first presentation of this scene, viewed by the audience in a *tabula rasa* fashion in relation to the rest of the narrative to follow – unless one has seen the film before, in which case there is a further modification of one's reception – evokes horror and an understandable puzzlement on the audience's part. Why this vindictiveness towards the retreating man and woman? By the time (near the end of the film) that the narrative catches up once more with this early scene – i.e. when it recurs – incomprehension has made way for understanding. Having witnessed the atrocities perpetrated in the course of more than twenty (narrated) years by the fleeing Attila (Donald Sutherland) and Regina (Laura Betti) – for they now have names – the peasants' vindictiveness has assumed the character of terrible justice.

Typical of the narrative mode of temporality, though, when this scene recurs, it does not strike one as something past, something which happened 'before' – even though some of it has been seen before – but as a *present* series of events. 'The narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past', says Lyotard, 'but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation. It is the present act that on each of its occurrences marshals in the ephemeral temporality inhabiting the space between the 'I have heard' and the 'you will hear' (22). His remark applies to narrative as a whole, of course, but here its applicability is heightened by the recurrence of the scene in question. The 'return of the same' is experienced as being the necessary present outcome of a causality of actions and events which also constitutes the present ground of understanding on the part of the audience. This holds true even though the fictional sequence of events is projected onto a recognizable historical field, viz. Italy in the first half of the twentieth century. The narrative 'now' takes the place of the historical 'then'; the spread of Italian socialism and the corresponding growth of fascism in that country between the two world wars may ordinarily be consigned to the past, but in the self-enacting film narrative they attain an enduring presence. The significance of this abiding present, as well as of the 'return of the similar' in the film reaches far beyond the repetition of the film's opening scene, though, as will become clear further on. It does seem to give Bertolucci's motion picture a certain paradigmatic import from the start, however.

By the time Atilla makes his appearance in the story, Olmo has already returned from the trenches of the First World War. The roots of understanding the scene of the peasants' retribution against him and Regina go back further than this, of course, to the birth of Alfredo and Olmo, from which time the growing resentment and concomitant expectations of social justice on the part of the peasants are apparent. When the old Alfredo Belinghieri (Burt Lancaster), young Alfredo's grandfather, distributes bottles of wine to the peasant men working on his lands, they take their cue from Leon (Olmo's grandfather) when he initially refuses to drink with Alfredo to their grandsons' health. The old Alfredo is disconcerted when, as one man, they discard

the bottles and carry on working. He senses their resentment, but insists that Leon join him in a toast. 'Born together,' he exclaims, 'it must mean something!' 'it probably means they'll die together,' is Leon's cynical but significant retort.

And indeed, over and above the virtual simultaneous birth and death of Olmo and Alfredo, which neatly demarcate the temporal boundaries of the narrative, death functions as an equalising force in the film. Nowhere does it show any partiality to either peasant or landowner, fascist or socialist. From the very first scene of the motion picture, on Liberation Day, 1945, where a young shepherd dies, clutching his bleeding belly after being gunned down, while stammering uncomprehendingly that the war 'is over', to the last, where Alfredo (by now virtually senile) lies down across the railway tracks in the path of an oncoming train, death is the one – the final – unifying principle.³ Near Alfredo in this scene, leaning his head against the telegraph pole whose humming fascinated him as a child, sits Olmo in exactly the same position as his grandfather sat against a tree when he died, also with his eyes open. This suggested simultaneity of their dying has perhaps the further explicit meaning that peasant and *padrone*, separated yet thrown together by the social and temporal accident of their birth, share at least a common human mortality.

It is the social chasm between them that Alfredo is – curiously enough, considering his avowed friendship with Olmo – incapable of crossing. Various reasons for this incapacity suggest themselves in the course of the film. Despite the fact that Alfredo recognizes the injustices committed by his father, Giovanni, against the peasant labourers and on occasion even comes up with an ineffectual attempt to intervene on their behalf – when his father ignores the custom of giving half of the maize harvest to the workers – he ultimately proves too weak to establish a just dispensation on the estate when he becomes the *padrone*. Given his landowner ancestry, it is perhaps too much to expect of him to run his estate socialistically or even democratically, although his wish to be at one with the peasants is poignantly expressed when, as a boy, he tells Olmo: 'I am a socialist too, now!' Yet incidents like the half-hearted intervention mentioned above, or his telling departure from the church – an ironic symbol of power – where landowners (including his father) have just, with the approval of the clergy, pledged capital to the suppression of the socialist revolt, do create the expectation of rather drastic changes following his succession of his father as *padrone*. These expectations are disappointed. Although it is certainly true that one is afforded glimpses of more food on peasant tables when Alfredo is *padrone* than during his heartless father's time, he fails to face up to the realities around him in a manner demanded by a sense of justice. This is especially the case when fascism – the landowners' instrument in their fight against socialism – rears its ugly head.

Why is Alfredo unable to oppose fascism firmly and courageously? Because of inherent weakness of character or simply cowardice? As a boy he does seem to lack Olmo's nerve when he initially fails to meet the latter's challenge to lie with him between the tracks while the train passes above them. But he goes back on his own, later, and performs the feat to prove to himself that he is not 'yellow'. It is because of the 'tyranny of the *status quo*?' to be born into

a world where landowners *in fact* are assigned a position superior to that of peasants, has, like all factual states of affairs, a misleading normative force which may (and often does) stand in the way of reform. It is Alfredo's eventual relish of the power – in its turn dependent on property and wealth – which his position as *padrone* affords him, which stands in the way of decisive action in the interest of at least the peasants who live on his estate? Olmo entreats him on more than one occasion to fire the murderous Attila from his post as foreman on the estate, but when Alfredo finally does it, it is too late to stop a massacre. (In fact, throughout the film, Alfredo is always 'too late'.)

Perhaps Alfredo's 'weakness' is most accurately grasped as the ineluctable contamination of those that have the most to lose under conditions of social and political conflict. Seen in this way, Alfredo's 'escapist' spree in the company of his hedonist playboy uncle, Ottavio, and the fantasy-loving Ada – whom he eventually marries – shows itself to be the outcome of a conflict within himself: between his awareness of the growing threat of anarchy and his realization that, sooner or later, he will have to face up to it. After his father's funeral this escapist tendency manifests itself once more when, instead of addressing his grief-stricken mother on the issue of the moment, he promptly (incongruously) announces his wedding to Ada.

Ironically, it is the hedonist uncle and Ada who are able to identify the evil in Attila and his fascist henchmen immediately. Alfredo, on the other hand, is stricken or contaminated by a kind of helpless passivity, which in effect promotes the commitment of crime in the name of order and the 'strength' of the Italian nation. At one stage Olmo rightly accuses him (Alfredo) and his kind to have caused the suffering around them: not doing anything about an unjust state of affairs is also a form of doing, of causing, albeit a negative one, which has the effect of reinforcing the existing condition. As when, after the boy Patrizio's gruesome murder by Attila and Regina, Alfredo stands as if mesmerized, unable to stop Attila's blackshirts from assaulting Olmo, accused of the murder by none other than Attila himself. Yet he knows as well as Ada – who urges him to intervene – that Olmo could not have committed the crime, because he was in Ada's company during the time that it happened. This passivity on the part of Alfredo provokes an angry accusation by Ottavio that he has become 'like them'.

Hence, the strands in the film's rich fabric are variegated, sometimes contrasting sharply, sometimes complementing one another, but always closely intertwined. There are the various generations' 'versions' of the *padrone* and of the peasant; there are the different varieties of hedonist, mixed together with differing quantities of escapism and moral assertiveness; socialists such as Olmo's fervent Anita oppose fanatical fascists such as Attila; Bertolucci's film even has its nihilist (in appearance as well as in speech and action). In the latter, the opposing forces of emancipatory socialism and authoritation fascism come together and dissolve in a striking manner. The nihilist, who intervenes when the blackshirts are beating up Olmo – while Alfredo looks on passively – acts as a kind of catalyst. He confesses to the murder of Patrizio although (we know) he is innocent, and when, some years later, he turns up unexpectedly at the estate where the peasants are slaughter-

ing a pig, he tells an incredulous Olmo that he 'confessed' simply to save the latter, and spent years in prison (until a general amnesty was declared). 'In jail, under a tree, in a barn,' he exclaims, 'its all the same!' And, as he walks away through the archway – a visual image of the 'framing' character of film, indeed, of all fiction – we hear him cry: 'I walk and I walk and I walk. Can't stop! Where is socialism?' In this sense he is a catalyst: his wild, striding, nomadic figure, together with his words embody, not only a nihilistic assessment of *all* possible states of affairs as equally valuable or devoid of value, but also – more importantly – a spatial metaphor for historical mankind striving for the just social order which, in the face of the lasting desire for power, is never realized.

In fact, despite the desire for justice, poignantly (but also somewhat comically) expressed by Rigoletto at table on one occasion, things do not seem to change much by way of emancipation of the peasantry. Also, in spite of apparent progress – on a technological level, i.e. in terms of a hallmark of the 'modern' world – we witness a recurrence, from one generation to the next, of the structure of social domination. We have an evocative filmic portrayal – in terms of sight and sound – of this recurrence in the scene where Alfredo's father, Giovanni, searching for him in the dark after Alfredo ran away from the dinner table, calls out his name repeatedly: 'Alfredo! Alfredo!' In response to Giovanni's calling, the boy Olmo, fantasizing about his own father (whom he never knew), imagines the latter calling out to him (Olmo) in similar fashion, and imitates this imaginary paternal calling, so that his voice carrying his own name, alternates hauntingly with Giovanni's, the cadence of their voices an epiphany of the wave-like rise and fall of history itself: 'Alfredo!' 'Olmo!' 'Alfredo!' 'Olmo!' The historical struggle between classes is here sonically expressed in the form of two names voiced in counterpoint.

To be sure, the quality of the relationship between *padrone* and peasants differs from one generation to the other – the 'modifying accent' of rhythmic narrative form which Lyotard discerns. Alfredo's father Giovanni, for instance, represents a modification of this relationship to the detriment of the peasants on the estate (which, by the way, he secures for himself in a deceitful way *after* the old Alfredo's suicide). Apart from his contemptuous rejection of the customary sharing of the harvest with the harvesters, earlier on he leaves them destitute after an obliterating storm to make up for his losses, calling it their corresponding 'sacrifice'. This sets in motion one of the most moving scenes in the film, with the horrific response by one of the peasants to a snide remark by Giovanni about the size of his ears, viz. to take his knife and, with cool deliberation cut off one ear and hand it to the stunned *padrone*. 'He only lost his ear', comments another peasant, addressing Giovanni, 'but you've lost your soul!' The camera follows the mutilated man – a blood-soaked cloth wrapped around his head – to the hovel where his starving family quickly finishes the pitifully few chunks of food he shakes out on the table in front of them. When his children complain that they are still hungry, he takes out a kind of wooden flute and starts playing on it, exhorting them to listen, which will make them 'forget their hunger'. His art transports them

from their present deprivation, just as Bertolucci's art transports the audience from the 'real' world they inhabit.

In contrast to Giovanni's 'rule' as *padrone*, there is ample evidence of the old Alfredo's generosity to the large 'family' of peasants on his land. In the scene where the boy Olmo is addressed by his grandfather – who, it transpires, may not be his real grandfather at all – he is placed on the huge table where the forty-odd members of the clan are seated and makes his way through and over a pleitude of food and drink to Leon's patriarchal seat at the head of the table. Certainly, as Leon reflects on occasion, with the old *padrone* there is never any doubt as to who is in charge, but somehow the latter's presence never exudes the meanness which oozes from Giovanni.

The young Alfredo, in turn, is – as may already be apparent – a thoroughly ambivalent figure. Involved with the peasants (he calls Olmo his best friend) as well as distanced from them (he tells the childless Ada, who dotes on Olmo's motherless little daughter, Anita, that the girl does not belong in the villa), he shows no malevolence towards them, except as already specified, in a negative manner by his lack of decisive action. (At one point he declares emphatically: 'I never hurt anybody!'). He is willing to share a prostitute with Olmo, but does not come to the latter's rescue when he is unjustly attacked and, on becoming *padrone*, reminds Olmo that he is 'his master'. The modifications in accent between grandfather, son and grandson should not disguise the fact that, as perceived by (at least some of) the peasants and also at crucial moments by the audience, they (these differences) are not essential. During Alfredo's 'trial' on Liberation Day by the (armed) peasants led by Olmo – immediately after Attila's execution – one woman corrects another's erroneous accusation of Alfredo's grandfather by pointing out that the particular injustice was committed by his son, Giovanni. The plaintiff is unimpressed, however. 'A *padrone* remains a *padrone*' is her laconic reply. As if to confirm her cynical appraisal, Alfredo, who sat passively for the duration of his arraignment – ending with Olmo proclaiming the *padrone*'s (figurative) death: 'The *padrone* is dead!' – gets up after the peasants' disarmament by the representatives of the local liberation committee and informs Olmo and his youthful captor, Leonida, calmly: 'The *padrone*'s alive'. The scene ends with the camera receding from the pair, Olmo and Alfredo, jostling and struggling with each other, Olmo pulling Alfredo this way and the latter shaking himself free and straining to go the other way. The very next scene, we soon realize, takes us about thirty years hence, with two old men, recognizable as Olmo and Alfredo, *still* jostling and struggling, still involved in the proverbial love-hate relationship – close yet distant. This scene closes with their (suggested) death, peasant and *padrone* finally reconciled by that grim, ineluctable judge.

These final scenes, which shatter the utopian dream of equality between peasant and *padrone*, provide the concluding articulation of the vision of history by which Bertolucci's film is animated and sustained. One doubts whether Olmo, who – perhaps out of compassion for Alfredo? – engineers the *padrone*'s effective acquittal by cleverly announcing his 'death' to the peasant 'jury', really believes that equality between them can truly be realized. At any rate, in the film it is not, and if one wonders about the obvious correspon-

dence between this state of affairs and historical reality, i.e. about the 'truth' of the film narrative, perhaps the answer to the question is that, far from merely presenting a 'documentary' of a certain period in Italian history Bertolucci's film explores the reasons – the exercise of power for instance – for the (recurrent) historical domination of one social class by another.

Alternatively, returning once more to the earlier consideration of postmodernism the film offers – in narrative form – a (philosophical) model for the understanding of history; something similar to what Lyotard describes as a metanarrative. Similar, but not identical, because the model mapped out by *1900* features an important difference. By 'metanarrative', it will be remembered, Lyotard understands a 'discourse of legitimation', a 'grand narrative' – e.g. 'the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth' (xxiii) – with respect to the status of science. In other words, a metanarrative is the way in which that form of knowledge which we call science justifies itself as working towards some goal, which is already somewhat anomalous if we consider that, as Lyotard points out (xxiii), science is by its very nature 'in conflict with narratives'. It should be apparent, further, that *1900* does not project a metanarrative in this sense. In fact, the narrative model of history which emerges from the film by way of reconstruction is, in its turn, abnormal (if not paradoxical) when one considers Lyotard's characterization of 'postmodern' as 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (xxiv). For what Bertolucci's *1900* articulates on a metanarrative level, i.e. in the form of a discourse on or 'behind' the film narrative, is precisely a 'postmodern metanarrative' i.e. one marked by an incredulity about the possibility of justifying any narrative which posits the attainment of a 'good ethico-political end'. In a sense, therefore, it may be said to formulate the 'last metanarrative'.⁴ Or, in terms of the currently fashionable critical strategy known as deconstruction, *1900* 'deconstructs' itself as metanarrative; i.e. it systematically undermines the condition of its own possibility as a source of legitimation with regard to the belief in historical progress. (We may also note the curious combination of this 'philosophical' postmodernism of the film with its 'anti-modernist' principles of composition [in Lodge's sense of the term, mentioned earlier]: a 'modified' realism closely resembling history and suggestive of '... a reality that exists prior to and independent of the act of communication' [Lodge, 1977:40]. For lack of space this point cannot be further pursued at present.)

The belief in progress, so strong in the 19th century, is after all one of the sustaining metanarratives of modern Western culture. And while, as previously mentioned, *1900* provides the filmic images of *apparent* progress, these are juxtaposed with the more persistent and finally unsettling images of the perpetuation of 'pathological' structures of social authority and power, in Nietzsche's phrase the 'recurrence of the similar'. The audience is afforded a view of significant instances of progress in agricultural as well as military technology – the latter very much understated – together with a demonstration of the consequences of such 'progress'. In fact, a consideration of the consequences or implications leads to a contradiction of the idea of progress, albeit on another (more fundamental) niveau. The introduction of machines

into the agricultural domain, for example, receives a mixed reaction from the peasant workers. Their attitude alternates between open rejection, mistrust and a naive acceptance of these machines. In the latter case, it is accompanied by the belief that machines will relieve the worker of a portion of the labour-burden, which turns out to be justified to a certain extent, except that such relief is unavoidably linked to the growing redundancy of the labourer on the farm. This increasing mechanization of agriculture and the concomitant lessening of *padrone's* dependence on peasant prepares the way for Giovanni's refusal to adhere to the harvest-sharing custom, as well as for the scene where Attila attempts to rid himself of the troublesome Olmo once and for all by offering him and his daughter for 'sale' together with some horses, having 'replaced' these with a tractor. The fact that this scene ends with Attila's humiliation by Olmo (only to be followed, not surprisingly, by Attila's grim and cold-blooded revenge on the peasants, by which time Olmo and Anita have fled), does not obscure the extent to which the progressive mechanization of agriculture goes hand in hand with the deterioration of the peasant labourers' lot. We witness the inexorable extension of domination through – and by implication eventually by – technology. This subverts the (superficial) impression of progress, the upshot being that, far from guaranteeing progress in the sense of social emancipation, technological development ensures (or at least provides the means for the continuation of) socio-political domination. In a striking – albeit countervailing – affirmation of the power of the machine, the peasants appropriate the tractor on Liberation Day to tear down a fence on the Belinghieri estate – a gesture symbolizing their hope of liberation, just as the huge red 'flag', stretched like a canopy over the dancers, embodied their dream of an all-embracing communal bond. That the dream cannot last becomes clear when Bertolucci's retreating camera – following Anita and her friends elatedly running with the flag – eventually picks up the diminishing patch of moving red against the green expanse of the fields, the large canopy now reduced to almost insignificant proportions.

By now it is a commonplace that authoritarian governments worldwide depend upon sophisticated technology – military and other – to perpetuate their oppressive rule. With the aid of the iconography which is peculiar to the cinema,⁵ Bertolucci's film supplies us with the conceptual means to grasp how this is possible. But much more: in the process it reveals the paradigmatic contours of a philosophical model of social history. That it succeeds in sustaining the integrity and coherence of its sweeping vision for four hours (narration time), is ample proof of Bertolucci's artistry. Not that this essay, which focuses largely on one aspect of *1900*, viz. its status as (meta-)narrative with regard to the question of history, progress and social emancipation, can do justice to the richness of Bertolucci's vision. Because of this thematic demarcation, many of the film's constituent features escape the present perspective. These include the significance of the film's iconography, e.g. the pervasive imagery of the grotesque, as well as the question of its self-conscious theatricality – ostensible straightforward realism notwithstanding – nowhere more apparent than in the 'Verdian' opening of the birth scene, where a costume-clad peasant hunchback called Rigoletto laments Verdi's

death against a background of strangely portentous, artificial blue light. In view of all these considerations, but especially by virtue of the significance of the (meta-)narrative knowledge it imparts, Bertolucci's *1900* contributes in large measure to the redemption of 'the storyteller's art', the erosion of which in our science-dominated world was pointed out by Walter Benjamin.

One final note: despite the fact that the film seems to lend itself to an interpretation in Marxist terms, I have avoided this as far as possible, although certain of my terms – e.g. emancipation – have familiar Marxist and neomarxist connotations. Besides, Bertolucci appears in the end to differ from Marx regarding the expectation of emancipation, and to be closer to the historical pessimism of someone like Adorno. In other words, in his view the dialectic in history does not resolve itself as a reconciliation of opposites in the form of a classless society; it turns out to be, in a sense, a negative dialectic.⁶ My evasive strategy does not do violence to the film, however. Like all works of art, it proves to be capable of responding to an alternative interpretation.

Notes

1. Cf. in this regard Rorty's 'Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity' (1985) and Watson's 'Jürgen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard: Post-modernism and the Crisis of Rationality' (1984).
2. The film's title, read together with the subtitle immediately subsequent to the opening scene on Liberation Day, April 1945, which says: 'Many years before . . .', suggests that Olmo and Alfredo were born in 1900. The birth scene is introduced, however, by the hunchback Rigoletto(!) stumbling down the road behind the Belinghieri villa, crying: 'Verdi is dead!' which, in turn, suggests their year of birth to be 1901.
3. This appears to be the significance, too, of the peasant Rigoletto crying 'Verdi is dead!' while behind him, on the estate, the two baby boys are being born.
4. I owe this phrase, with thanks, to Derick van Heerden.
5. Elsewhere, in an essay entitled 'The Art of the Cinema' (1984) I have elaborated on this subject. Obviously it is too complex a matter to examine in any detail here.
6. This was pointed out to me by Jan Kirsten.

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