

Introducing Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

IU Cinema

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1. INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Brittany.

I am very pleased to be here again this evening.

Let me first commend the IU Cinema's staff for their outstanding efforts that have helped the IU Cinema become widely recognized—in just its first five years of operation—as truly one of the finest university cinemas in the nation. During that time, the cinema has screened more than 1,000 films and has hosted visits from acclaimed filmmakers from around the world, including IU's own Kevin Kline and Jonathan Banks, and honorary IU degree recipient Meryl Streep, who was effusive in her praise for the Cinema, calling it one of the finest projection houses she had ever seen.

Cinema director Jon Vickers, as some of you may know, is on sabbatical this semester, and is spending much of his time visiting international film festivals as an ambassador for the Cinema and helping to lay the groundwork for future film and media production in the state of Indiana. And I also want to commend the Cinema's associate director, Brittany Friesner, who has overseen programming and the Cinema's day-to-day operations this semester.

2. CELEBRATING THE SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Tonight, it is my privilege to introduce the final film in this semester's President's Choice series.

Today, without question, increasing international integration and rapidly expanding global interconnectivity are among the major forces driving and shaping our world—and understanding and responding prudently and sensibly to these forces is of paramount concern for all of us.

Given this fact, as well as Indiana University's great strengths in international studies and our high national rankings in the number of students who study abroad, and in the number of international students who study at IU—all of which underscores the fact that Indiana University is one of America's great international universities—we inaugurated the new School of Global and International Studies two-and-a-half years ago.

Just over six weeks ago, we celebrated the opening of the school's magnificent new home—just to the north of the IU Cinema. We were honored to welcome to campus Secretary of State John Kerry, who gave an excellent talk in the IU Auditorium to help celebrate the opening of the school and the new facility.

And so, for this semester's President's Choice series, I selected three international films in order to further commemorate the establishment of the school and the opening of the splendid new building.

In August, the Cinema screened Fernando Meirelles' excellent drama, *City of God*, which tells the story of the slum gangs of Rio de Janeiro. The film was ranked Number 7 on *Empire* magazine's list of "The 100 Best Films Of World Cinema."

Earlier this month, the Cinema screened the 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*, which depicts the events that took place during the Algerian War of Independence in the 1950s and is considered an important commentary on urban guerrilla warfare. In fact, in 2003, it was screened at the Pentagon as an illustration of the situation the United States was then facing in Iraq. The Criterion Collection DVD includes a documentary that discusses the film as modern-day case study. Counterterrorism expert Richard Clark noted that the rebels in Algeria were organized in a way that was similar to al-Qaeda, and that torturing individual members for information had no significant impact on the group's ability to function.

And I am very pleased to have the opportunity to say a few words about the film you are about to see tonight: Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 film, *The Last Emperor*, which in the words of film critic and scholar Peg Aloi is "one of the most provocative and stunningly beautiful films of the past 30 years."¹

3. BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI'S *THE LAST EMPEROR*

The Last Emperor tells the story of the life of Puyi, the last emperor of China, who was crowned emperor in 1908 at the age of two years and ten months. Puyi reigned until February of 1912. He was the last Qing emperor. The film spans all of the major events of modern Chinese history including its transition from empire to republic and then to a Communist state. Puyi died in 1967, shortly after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

The screenplay by Mark People and Bertolucci is based in part on Puyi's autobiography and on the memoirs of Reginald Johnston, the Scottish scholar who was hired as Puyi's tutor.

¹ Peg Aloi, "The Last Emperor," *The Boston Phoenix*, December 24, 1998.

Film scholar James Steffen writes that “The shooting of *The Last Emperor* was an epic event in itself—perhaps the ultimate international co-production.”²

It was the first feature film made in and about China to be produced with the full cooperation of the Chinese government, and was, famously, the first feature film for which permission was granted to film in The Forbidden City. In fact, Queen Elizabeth II, who was visiting Beijing at the time Bertolucci and his crew were filming the enormous coronation scene, was unable to visit the Forbidden City because Chinese authorities gave priority to the film.

Scholar Claretta Tonetti writes that “*The Last Emperor* is, among other things, Bertolucci’s homage to the pleasure that a symphony of colors can offer to the eyes.”³

In the 1992 documentary *Visions of Light*, Bertolucci’s cinematographer Vittorio Storaro—who was the cinematographer on Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* and on *Apocalypse Now*—said that he used the phases of light to represent stages of the emperor’s life. Red, according to Storaro, symbolizes birth and beginnings. Orange is the warm color of the emperor’s family and the Forbidden City. Bertolucci very much admired the famous “imperial yellow”—which is associated with the emperor and the sun. Bertolucci found it to be very close to the yellow of Parma. Green represents knowledge—and you will notice that Puyi’s tutor rides a green bicycle. You will also notice that the Forbidden City features a limited color palette because, as Storaro said, it represents a limited portion of reality. Bertolucci and Storaro actually considered filming the portions of the film set in the Forbidden City in black and white—an idea they abandoned—much to the relief of costume and set designers who had spent months researching the colors of the clothing of the era and the various antechambers of the Forbidden City.^{4 5}

² James Steffen, “The Last Emperor,” Turner Classic Movies, Web, Accessed November 20, 2015, URL: <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/21409|0/The-Last-Emperor.html>

³ Claretta Tonetti, *Bernardo Bertolucci: The Cinema of Ambiguity*, (Twayne Publishers, 1995), 204.

⁴ Arnold Glassman, Stuart Samuels, Todd McCarthy, *Visions of Light: The Art of Cinematography*, (Kino International, 1992).

The production used 19,000 extras, and more than 10,000 costumes were made for the film.⁶

Costume designer James Acheson said that even if the production had employed every seamstress south of Beijing, they would not have had the time or the money to construct all of the elaborately embroidered robes you will see in the film—so what appears to be elaborate embellishment on many of the costumes was actually simulated. For the Dowager Empress's costume, for example, the decorative embellishments were sculpted in wax, cast in aluminum, gold plated, and then sewn onto an old Hong Kong theatrical costume. The resulting garment weighed 50 pounds.⁷

The outstanding cast includes Hong Kong-born American actor John Lone as the adult Puyi and Chinese-American actor Joan Chen as Puyi's empress. Peter O'Toole, who plays Reginald Johnston, is the film's most recognizable star. Bertolucci considered Marlon Brando, William Hurt, and Sean Connery for the role. In fact, Bertolucci had extensive discussions about the role with Connery, who, of course, is Scottish as was the actual Reginald Johnston, but Connery ultimately convinced Bertolucci not to cast him.

The Last Emperor won nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director. Vittorio Storaro and James Acheson, whom I mentioned earlier, won Oscars for cinematography and costuming—and the soundtrack, which includes music by David Byrne of Talking Heads fame, won for Best Original Score.

The film, in fact, swept every category in which it was nominated—quite a feat for a challenging, complicated historical and political epic made by an Italian director with an international crew and a relatively unknown international cast.

⁵ "Making the Last Emperor," *The Last Emperor* Criterion Collection supplements, part 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

And now, enjoy *The Last Emperor*.