Novecento: Friendship, Class and Character

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10. Novecento: Friendship, Class and Character

Bertolucci’s *Novecento* (1976) starts with a shot of a painting of a bearded man. While classical music plays and the opening credits roll, the camera slowly zooms out. The bearded man turns out to be marching ahead of a throng of peasants. To his right marches a man in similar attire: beard, hat, jacket slung over his shoulder. To his left we see a woman carrying an infant strapped to her waist. The trio marches ahead of the crowd....

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1945. Singing a battle song, a young partisan walks through a field with a herd of grazing sheep to a stand of poplar trees. There, a German soldier pops up out of the underbrush, opens fire and runs away. The mortally wounded partisan stumbles back into the field and falls down, stammering:
The war is over.........Why?

Drama combined with song: clearly this movie is inspired by Italian opera. In an adjacent field, all men are called to arms to conquer the remaining enemies, Germans and Fascists. While the men leave, the women bring in the hay. One of them sees a couple trying to flee with their belongings strapped to bicycles:

It's Attila and Regina!

The women set off across the fields in pursuit and manage to cut the couple off. The two try to make a run for it, but the women with pitchforks block their way. Meanwhile, young Leonida has taken a shotgun into padrone Alfredo's house and directs him to the cowshed. Alfredo asks him:

Did you know that my grandfather died here?

Leonida did not know and makes Alfredo sit on a milk can. Leonida doesn't want to be called Leonida anymore either:

Call me Olmo.... after the great partisan leader!

He aims his gun at Alfredo. But before he pulls the trigger, we go back in time.

Summer of 1901. Night is falling while a hunchbacked jester drunkenly weaves through the trees, repeatedly shouting:

Giuseppe Verdi is dead!

In the background we hear music from Rigoletto, emphasizing the movie's operatic nature. In the next scene, we see the jester at a large farm where his relative Rosina has just given birth. The jester runs outside, shouting:

It's a boy!

An anonymous voice comments:

Another mouth to feed ...
A couple of hundred yards away, in the big mansion, Eleonora is giving birth too. Padrone Alfredo Berlinghieri is pacing in the garden, fretting that the farmer's son arrived before his grandchild! But then Giovanni, his son, appears on the terrace and shows him the baby: another boy. Padrone Alfredo is satisfied and gives the child a name:

Alfredo… he will be named after me.

To celebrate, the padrone takes bottles of wine from his cellar and passes them out to the workers who are mowing the grass in his fields. Leo, the most senior member of the Dalco family employed by the Berlinghieris, refuses to drink at first. But Alfredo insists, putting the bottle between them on the very spot where Leo's scythe would strike it. The message is unmistakable: drink with me. The dialogue is telling:

Born on the same day, that is significant.

It probably means we'll die on the same day...

Philosophy from a pig sty! Mine will grow up to be a lawyer.

Mine a thief.

When the men part ways, Alfredo hears that the farmer boy's name will be Olmo. He's a bastard. We never find out who the father is. Could it be Leo? Or even Alfredo?

Summer of 1908. As young boys, Alfredo and Olmo grow up together. Their relationship is one of friendly animosity in which they keep challenging each other, usually at Olmo's instigation. It is him, for instance, who dares Alfredo to lie down on the train tracks
and let the steam train thunder over him. Alfredo chickens out while Olmo stays put, covering his face with his hands. We also meet the boys' respective families. The Dalcos sit down for dinner with some forty people while pater familias Leo, wearing a hat, presides over the gathering and calls the shots in a scene that is reminiscent of the Last Supper.

Leo takes Olmo to task and asks him what he's hiding in his hand. It's money that Olmo has made catching frogs. Leo stands up and holds out his hand. Olmo gives him the money, as Leo says:

**What's yours, is ours.**

The Berlinghieri family in the mansion is much less numerous. Giovanni sits at the head of the table, sharing dinner with his wife Eleonora, his son Alfredo and Eleonora's sister and her daughter Regina. Old man Alfredo refuses to join them and takes his dinner into the adjoining room. He refuses to acknowledge Giovanni's authority. But he has grave doubts about his own life. He takes one of the Dalco daughters into the cowshed to see if there's any sexual life left in him.

He guides her hand to his crotch. The young milk maid seems barely aware of his intentions and cheerfully retorts:
No-one can milk a bull!

Old man Alfredo gives up, sends the girl back to the party and hangs himself from a beam in the cowshed after setting all the cows loose. Leo grumbles but clears up the mess.

Alfredo's younger son Giovanni dictates a false will to ensure he is the sole heir to the estate and his older brother Ottavio is cut out of the will. Shortly after, he brings the Dalco family bad tidings: it's been a bad harvest and everyone will have to settle for half. The tension between the landed gentry and the peasants is rising. The union helps to organize a strike. Some of the fields are flooded and no-one milks the cows. Scabs arrive to do the work. These are people who are even worse off than the local peasants. At age 73, Leo sees the events unfold with mixed feelings. He dies slumped against a tree trunk, indeed in the same year as Alfredo the elder.

Fall of 1918. In the First World War, Olmo fights with the Italian army against the Germans. Giovanni arranges for young Alfredo to avoid military service and grooms him to manage the estate and further mechanize labor. Upon his return, Olmo rekindles his class-conscious friendship with Alfredo, now played by Robert de Niro, left.

There are two new workers at the farm: Anita Furlan, a teacher and Attila Mellanchini, the steward. There is an immediate animosity between Attila and Olmo. In the following years, Attila develops into an aggressive secretary of the ruling class.

Various peasants in the region are forced to leave their homes due to the poverty brought on by the war and increasing industrialization. Mounted police oust the peasants from their dwellings, but sometimes the peasants resist and manage to thwart
the evictions. In one case, the women lie down on their backs on the dyke to block the road to the house. The horses refuse to trample the bodies. The peasants’ non-violent resistance wins out.

After an ill-fated sexual escapade in Genoa, Olmo and Alfredo embark on serious love relationships. Olmo courts Anita and Alfredo pursues Ada. Attila is seduced by Regina. He becomes the leader of the local fascists by hooking a cat to a wall and killing it with a head butt.

1928. In the 1920s, Alfredo and Ada regularly travel around Italy and visit Uncle Ottavio, an eccentric photographer, who lives in Venice and Genoa. On another extended visit, Alfredo receives a letter telling him his father Giovanni has died in the cowshed. It’s time to return to the estate. He returns just in time to catch Olmo stealing his father’s gun, which is another prediction come true; Olmo has grown up to become a thief. Alfredo decides to let it go, particularly when he hears that Olmo’s wife Anita has given birth to a daughter but died in childbirth. Shortly after, Alfredo and Ada marry and throw a huge party at the estate. Alfredo takes his new role as padrone seriously and disciplines Regina and Attila. Regina warns Alfredo about Attila, telling him not to underestimate Attila:

**He’s your guard dog.**

Regina and Attila retreat to hatch their plans. When Attila discovers a boy named Patrizio eavesdropping on them at the door, he grabs him. Attila won’t let go and swings the boy around by his feet. The room is small and the boy’s head hits the wall four times before Attila decides it’s enough. A few hours later a search is mounted and the boy is found dead. Who is the culprit? Attila accuses Olmo, who has just arrived. His blackshirts immediately give Olmo a serious beating. Alfredo walks up to the scene, but is slow to intervene. Ada is aghast. The wedding festivities are over.
1930s. In the years that follow the incident, Ada initially tries to swim against the tide by teaching Olmo’s daughter to read and write, but Olmo has reservations. Gradually, Ada withdraws, developing a drinking problem and hardly leaving the mansion anymore.

Finally, Alfredo and Olmo talk to each other privately, like they used to. They discuss Ada, having children, their youth, and more recent events. Olmo says:

I remember your wedding day. When I was beat up. You looked on and did nothing.

Alfredo juxtaposes another memory:

Do you remember stealing that pistol from my father’s locker? Why don’t you use it?

They share a history, and tensions, but they also share a basic sympathy, a connection and a sense of goodwill. The talk ends with a joke.

Winter of 1939. The tension between Attila and Olmo continues to rise. Attila, through Olmo’s doing, ends up in a bombardment of horse manure. When Olmo literally rubs his face in it, reprisals are inevitable. Olmo flees. The fascists wreck his furniture. But then Alfredo suddenly shows up in the doorway and calls out to Attila:

I no longer wish to make use of your services.

As soon as Alfredo has left, the fascists take revenge. They take the whole family hostage in the courtyard, making them stand in the rain and subjecting them to humiliations. Five of them are shot. Afterwards, Attila walks away, calling out:

You are the scum of Italy.

Spring of 1945. Liberation Day. We’ve come full circle to the first scenes of the film. The women stab Regina and Attila with their pitchforks and take them to the courtyard.
There, the local population treat the couple like pigs and take them to the graveyard, where they kill Attila and leave Regina behind with her head shaven. Olmo, now a famous partisan leader, shows up. All fascist symbols are removed from the courtyard. Leonida steps forward with Alfredo, whom he has taken prisoner. Olmo presides over a public trial of the padrone.

Olmo reaches the conclusion that the padrone figure is dead, but that Alfredo may live. Not everyone agrees with this distinction, but the skeptics are stunned by the arrival of a jeep and two trucks from the new communist regime. Time to surrender all weapons! Olmo sets an example by being the first to obey this order. When peace returns to the courtyard, Alfredo walks over to Olmo and tells him under his breath:

**The padrone is alive.**

He walks away, but Olmo follows and they start pushing and shoving each other. The camera pans away and back to reveal the two men, 30 years later, old and grey, together on a dirt road, still pushing and shoving and correcting each other.

Finally, they give up. Olmo sits down and slumps against a pole. He dies in the same way as his grandfather Leo. Alfredo lies down across the rails while the train draws near.
At the precise moment that the train passes and the closing credits start to roll, we see young Alfredo lie lengthwise under the train with his hands over his eyes.

1900/Novecento, 1976, Bernardo Bertolucci, Italy, 302 minutes.

Screen play: Franco Arcalli, Giuseppe Bertolucci, Bernardo Bertolucci

Starring: Robert de Niro (Alfredo Berlinghieri), Gerard Depardieu (Olmo Dalco), Dominique Sanda (Ada), Stephania Sandrelli (Anita), Donald Sutherland (Attila), Laura Betti (Regina), Burt Lancaster (grandfather Alfredo), Sterling Hayden (Leo Dalco).

Soundtrack: Ennio Morricone, Verdi, and various folk songs.

Virtues and Values

Alfredo and Olmo are born on the same day, on the same estate. As boys, they are playmates. As young men, they explore the world together, later bringing their women along. Theirs is a joyous friendship, affected by two differences. Alfredo is landed gentry, destined to become the next padrone. At age 27, he becomes the owner and manager of his family's large estate. Olmo is working class, and what is worse, he is a wage worker with hardly any
property to his name. The second difference pertains to character, with a link to role models. Alfredo has three father figures to emulate. His grandfather Alfredo is a headstrong, flamboyant patriarch; his father Giovanni is subordinate to Alfredo, grouchy and opportunistic; his uncle Ottavio is artistic and decadent. Alfredo takes after all three. He is a cautious but occasionally frivolous patriarch. He is insecure and opportunistic, and decadent (particularly in his twenties). But most of all, Alfredo is an observer. Olmo's biological father is unknown. His only father figure is Leo, a stubborn, assertive and natural clan leader who demands loyalty. We see the same characteristics in Olmo. He too is stubborn, passionate, courageous and loyal. But above all, Olmo is an agent and a leader. So while Alfredo represents the decline of the ruling classes, aware that change is afoot but unable to let go of power, Olmo represents the rise of the working class. He embodies the political change and spreads that ideology. As they get older, the men's friendship changes, becoming one of mutual benefit. They benefit from their connection and sometimes look out for each other. Alfredo does not betray Olmo when he sees Olmo stealing his father's gun. He also stops the fascist Attila from killing Olmo. In return, Olmo uses a ruse to spare Alfredo's life when he presides over the trial against him. The fact that Alfredo doesn't step in right away when the fascists are beating up Olmo is in line with his character. It would have required Alfredo to take initiative, which was always more Olmo's role.

Form

The painting with which the movie opens is the work of G. Pelizza da Volpedo (1868-1907, an Italian neo-impressionist from the Piedmont region. His greatest achievement (in all senses of the word) was this painting entitled Il Quattro Stato (1901); 2.93 x 5.45 m. It features three people in front of a large throng of peasants. Wage workers were the “fourth class”, lower than smallholder farmers, the third class. The painting symbolizes the rise of social awareness in Italy. Clearly, opening a movie with a 3-minute zoom-out of this painting behind the credits is a political statement.

Red is a significant color in the movie. The long scene in the courtyard toward the end of the movie, when old scores are settled, gets strong visual support from an immense red flag that dominates the frame several times.
Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) wasn’t just a famous composer, but also a politician who strove during his term in the senate to unite Italy. In 1851, he inherited an estate and so belonged to the same class and time as old man Alfredo. It was also the year Verdi wrote Rigoletto, an opera about a hunchbacked jester, based on Victor Hugo’s play Le roi s´amuse (1832). Although he died in 1901, Verdi’s legacy as a nationalist and composer lived on in the hearts and minds of Italians and far beyond.

The movie title 1900 is used only in the English-speaking world. Bertolucci was not happy about it; the Italian title Novecento means ‘Twentieth Century’. And indeed, the movie is not about the fin-de-siècle, but rather about the modern times that unfolded from the turn of the 20th century until 1945. Bertolucci himself had become a member of the Italian communist party in the late 1960s. Novecento is his gift to the peasants from his native region. This Italian film opera combines the earthiness of farming (blood, milk, soil and manure) with the ideals of liberation from feudalism and the development of solidarity. The narrative doesn’t focus on the political movement of Italian communism, but on the contemporaneity and differences between two youths who represent the old ideology and the new.