

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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LUNA (aka La Luna) 1979

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

Described by some critics as ‘a Freudian Opera,’ Bertolucci’s film is certainly luscious and spectacular. And daring. Its exploration of mother-son incest is graphic and subtle at the same time. The director has said that the idea for the film came to him while in a session with his psychoanalyst. ‘I suddenly realised that I had been talking about my father for seven or eight years – and now I wanted to talk about my mother.’ In this film, though transgressive subject is presented less as sexual abnormality and more as family dysfunction. Although it had poor box office on release, it is now regarded as one of the most penetrating films about the complexity of the inter-generational struggle that exists in all societies.

The moon of the title might be taken to refer to Caterina, who, like the celestial orb, has no light of her own and is illuminated only by stage lights and the love bestowed on her by others. It might also explain the near-lunacy of some of her behaviour. It is noteworthy also that the story has only two main characters—Caterina and Joe—with the others playing very minor roles.

PEOPLE

Caterina	Caterina is an American opera singer.
Joe	Joe is her teenage son.
Marina	Marina is Caterina’s friend.
Giuseppe	Giuseppe is Joe’s real father.
Arianna	Arianna is Joe’s girlfriend.

SYNOPSIS

Caterina is an American opera singer preparing for a tour to Italy when her husband suddenly dies. Her neglected son, Joe, thinks (wrongly) that his father has died. When his mother takes him to Italy and performs to great acclaim, Joe takes up local kids and gets addicted to heroin. After Caterina finds out and feels guilty for neglecting him, she develops a more-than-maternal love for him. When she reveals that her dead husband is not his biological father, Joe finds his real father. Pretending to be his son’s friend, Joe informs the man that his son died of a drug overdose. A final reconciliation is achieved when the real father meets up with Caterina, who tells him that his son is alive and is the boy who pretended to his son’s friend.

SCENES

Prologue On the veranda of a beachside villa in Italy, Caterina licks honey from the leg of her little baby, Joe, and lets him lick the honey from her finger. Pretty young Caterina, in short shorts, does the twist with her boyfriend (the baby’s father). Little Joe doesn’t like losing his mother’s attention and frowns.

Death of a husband Fifteen years later, in a New York apartment, opera singer Caterina, her husband, Douglas, and her teenage son, Joe, have breakfast. The adults are getting ready for their trip to Italy, where Caterina will perform. Joe wants to go with them but is told no by both of them. When Douglas gets the car out of the garage, he has a massive stroke and dies.

Move to Italy Caterina decides to move to Italy, taking Joe with her. In Rome, Joe gets in with a fast, affluent crowd, although he also revels in the applause for his mother’s performances. In one magnificent scene, he wanders backstage, while she sings in Verdi’s ‘The Troubadour,’ and is thrilled at seeing the complex machinery that produces the effects on stage.

Drugs Having forgotten Joe’s fifteenth birthday, she rallies and stages a grand party at the family

house. Much to Joe's embarrassment, she makes a spectacle of herself, dancing with abandon. Then she creeps up on Joe and Arianna, who are huddled together in a doorway. She thinks it's innocent teenage love but, close up, she sees that Joe is shooting heroin.

Mother-son fight Her attempt to understand why he uses drugs gets nowhere, and the two of them are soon happily singing along together, until she spots the marks on his arm. Now, they fight like cats and dogs and swear at each other. Later, Joe wanders into abandoned construction sites in order to shoot up and frequents bars, where he is prey for gay men.

Collapse When they make up, Joe says that he misses his father. 'You don't miss him, do you?' he says accusingly. He feels cold, from withdrawal, and she puts him to bed. Taking off his jeans, she says, 'I don't remember buying you those sexy underpants.' When Joe's condition worsens and he collapses, she calls a doctor. 'When he wakes, talk to him, talk to him a lot,' the medic tells her.

Drug seller Unable to expend her anxiety through physical exercise, Caterina breaks down and announces that she doesn't want to sing anymore. She meets Mustafa, a young émigré from North Africa and a friend of Joe's, who takes her to his modest house outside of Rome. She confronts him with selling drugs to Joe, but he deflects the conversation toward Joe's loneliness and his need to talk. When she tries to give him money so that he won't sell to Joe, he tells her that he's 'shutting up shop' and returning to Algeria. As she leaves, he thrusts a vial of heroin into her hands and says, 'Joe might need it.'

A gift When she returns to the flat, she finds flowers everywhere and Joe cooking dinner. Overcome with relief, she smoothers him with kisses. They both dress formally and sit down to candlelight, but the meal is horrible. Pushing the plates aside, they go for the champagne and Joe explains that he takes drugs because he 'doesn't give a shit.' A minute later, when he feels the need for a hit but hasn't got any, she gives him the heroin given to her by Mustafa. She helps him prepare the white powder but he goes ballistic because she didn't bring any needles. She watches in horror as he improvises with a fork and draws blood. To comfort him, she ends up masturbating him.

Maestro She pays a visit to her old teacher in Parma, who is now in a wheelchair. Although he appears neither to see nor hear her, she speaks to him. 'You were a tyrant, but you taught me how to use my voice. You're vain. But I've come to tell you that I hate my voice. I'm not going to sing anymore.' When he switches on a tape recording from Mozart's 'Cosi fan Tutte', she is swept away with emotion and sings with him.

Love-like kisses Having discovered that his mother went to Parma, Joe finds her and they drive back together. Stopping at a rail crossing, she tells Joe that it is the spot where his father first kissed her. When he looks confused (because Douglas has never been to Italy), she kisses him on the lips. And when he returns her kiss, she does it again, with more passion.

Separation Driving on, she stumbles across the house where Verdi lived and enthuses about his creations. When Joe isn't interested in what she calls her 'family', she gets angry with him. After they get a flat tire, Joe drives off and leaves her behind to be picked up by a man, who entertains her with stories of Fidel Castro. The 'Communist,' as he calls himself takes her to a roadside restaurant, where Joe is also eating. Neither acknowledges the other, and she flirts with the man, which enrages Joe. The whole scene turns into an operatic farce, and in the end mother and son are reunited.

Incest After 'the Communist leaves,' they go into a bed room. 'I want to touch you,' she says, with more than a little sexual implication. 'I'm scared too, my baby!' She undresses him and kisses him. He responds and she writhes with desire and bends his head to her pubic area. He lies inert, but when she says she loves him, he screams, 'No! You never loved me. You hate me. You're fucking crazy! Bitch!'

Real father While Joe is preparing his heroin, she finally tells him that she wanted to show him the house where she lived with his real father (the scene shown in the Prologue). In the morning, she drops him off at the father's house, where he runs some kind of creative arts school. Joe follows the man out of the city to his home in the countryside, where he pretends to be his son's friend (that is, a friend of Joe's). 'Your son never forgot you,' he says. 'He looked for you everywhere. It drove him crazy and he started to shoot heroin. He died of an overdose.'

Reconciliation When Joe catches up with his mother, she is preparing for an opera in the local open-air amphitheatre. When Joe asks why she broke up with his father, she says that he was in love with

his mother. When the father comes to the rehearsal and finds out from Caterina that his son is Joe, he slaps him in anger. Later, sitting apart in the audience, they both enjoy Caterina's triumphant performance.

THEMES

1. Psychology

Oedipus complex

Overview The director remarked that his film is about the 'obvious fact that every man is in love with his mother.' What he didn't add is that in his Oedipal story, the mother is the one who pushes the mother-son bond beyond love and into sexual desire. That intense, physical maternal love is introduced in the prologue, which shows Caterina licking honey from baby Joe's thigh and putting her honey-laden finger into his mouth. The film also dramatises the other fundamental emotions in the Oedipal triangle: the son's hate/competition with the father, and the son's pain at losing his mother. In the end, though, Joe has his Oedipal cake and eats it, too, because his (real) father is resurrected and restored to him.

Oedipal triangle Following the prologue, the story moves forward fifteen years to New York. Caterina, a famous opera singer, is married to Douglas. Joe is an angry teenager, who thinks Douglas is his father. As the adults prepare for Caterina's next tour, she is concerned about Joe's cold and reminds him of his dental appointment the following week. 'Mom,' Joe says, 'You never take me with you. I want to go to Italy with you.' Mother says no, and he says, 'But I can do all the things Dad does. Make your reservations for you, negotiate your contracts. I can even do it better.' Rejected by mom, the son goes to his father, who has a glass of whisky in hand. 'Are you drinking?' he says accusingly. Then he bets his father that he can't hit a tennis ball across the street into the park. Five minutes later, the father is dead. This opening scene thus contains the tensions of a classical Oedipal triangle. The son and mother are close, but he loses her. He competes with his father, and the father dies. Of course, the son doesn't himself kill the father, but he isn't overly upset and even orders mourners to stop crying at the funeral.

filial adoration and torment Joe now has his mother all to himself, but she remains a somewhat distant *diva*. In a key scene, Joe sneaks into the opera house and watches her with rapt attention, even telling other audience members to be quiet when she is singing. He applauds with the audience at the end of one of her numbers and keeps on clapping when the others have stopped. Enthralled, he goes backstage after the performance but finds his mother surrounded by others. Moreover, she has forgotten that his birthday is the next day. He says he only wants a few people at the party, and she agrees, saying, 'Yes, only the people who really love you.' He stares at her and replies bitterly, 'People who really love me don't forget my birthday.' Without a father/husband figure, Joe and Caterina are dependent on each other. He adores her, but she doesn't have time for him.

2. Relationships : Maternal Love

Dysfunctional mother-son Relationship: The main strength of the film is its subtle depiction of the complex and evolving nature of the mother-son relationship. It begins in physical intimacy and matures into love, while threatening to spill over into something more sexual at the same time. Indeed, it is difficult to know where to draw the line, which is the problem the characters struggle with, too.

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Fighting An unusual illustration of the love between mother and son occurs immediately after she has discovered that he is junkie. It begins tenderly, with her singing happy birthday while he plays the piano. She

caresses his arm and he smiles broadly, until she sees the needle marks on his inner forearm. Suddenly they begin to fight. Calling each other 'bastard' and 'fucking bitch', they pull hair and swing arms. It only ends, when he slaps her hard, stunning them both. Although the scene is played out in anger, her rage arises from her concern for Joe's welfare. They are not fighting to hurt each other; they are fighting because they are hurt. Fighting, it seems, is just one phase of loving.

Kissing The moment when the maternal embrace crosses the line into a lover's desire occurs at a railway crossing. Caterina and Joe have just been reunited in Parma, where she has gone to pay homage to her old teacher. Leaving her teacher's house, she is overjoyed to find that Joe has followed her there. As they drive back to Rome, they have to stop at a barrier in front of a railway line, where she tells Joe that it is the spot where his father first kissed her. Swept away by her memory, Caterina leans across the front seat of the car and kisses him on the lips. He returns the kiss. She leans over again and they kiss for a long time. Neither one speaks. A train rattles by, cutting across the screen, as if marking a division. In another visual metaphor, the barrier is lifted, like the removal of a taboo. The kissing between mother and son is not passionate or sexual. It is loving, but at the same time it is more than maternal and filial.

Masturbation A sexual scene of far greater consequence occurs much later. Caterina knows that Joe is a heroin addict, for which she partly blames herself. One night, he is desperate for a fix and injures himself using a fork for a needle. He collapses on the bed, cold and shaking with withdrawal pains. She kneels next to him and cries, 'Oh, my god! What have I done to you?' As she rubs his chest to comfort him, he guides her hand down toward his penis and helps her to masturbate him. As he pants with desire, she draws him to her and he sucks her breast. She then uses her hand to complete the masturbation, and when he comes, he falls asleep in her arms. She appears neither shocked nor angry with herself. She has cared for her son, relieving his terrible pain.

Touching In the scene just described above, Caterina does not seem to derive any sexual pleasure from the experience. She is more doctor than lover. But that changes toward the end of the film after she and Joe have had a 'lover-like' kiss and end up together on a bed. They have separated in anger but find each other in the same restaurant, at different tables. She flirts with a man in order to make Joe jealous, and when they are alone in the bedroom, she tells Joe that she wants 'to touch' him and begins to kiss him with increasing passion. At first, Joe doesn't respond, but slowly he returns her kisses, which makes her writhe with desire on the bed. Suddenly, he turns against her and gets up.

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CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Caterina The single most important feature of Caterina's character is that she is a popular and dedicated opera singer. She is as self-absorbed, vain and melodramatic as the roles she plays on the lavish sets. She is also neglectful and then remorseful as a mother of a wayward son. Once she becomes aware of his desperate condition, she clings to him as she would to a lover.

Vain Caterina's performance in the first section of the film, soon after reaching Rome, is greeted with thunderous applause. The scenery is intoxicating, the singing is exuberant and she leaves the stage in a cloud of euphoria. Behind the curtain, she is swamped with admirers, chanting 'Bravo!' Inside her dressing room, she continues to perform, exclaiming how she 'held that B flat for nine measures' and that she never felt so strong. After Joe arrives, she berates him for not bringing her to the opera house as he had promised. 'I don't know how I could perform with you,' she complains. Joe snaps back, 'I heard a ten-minute applause,' suggesting that he isn't really needed. Caterina pauses before saying, 'Actually, it was a standing ovation.' Her voice is triumphant and her bearing regal, as she strolls across the room. Later, when she chides her old teacher for being vain, we know that it is not an insult.

Grief-stricken Caterina is shocked when she discovers that Joe does not just use drugs but is

dangerously addicted to heroin. After their formal dinner turns to disaster with overcooked food, Joe begins to feel ill, gets cramps and goes into withdrawal pains. And when, in his desperation, he uses a fork for a needle, Caterina is overcome with guilt. Burying her head in his chest, she sobs and cries, 'What have I done to you, Joe?' The scene and her words might be operatic, but there is no doubt that she is genuinely stricken with grief for her role in her son's condition.

Dedicated The reason that she neglected her son is that she is passionate about her art. She is a driven and dedicated opera singer, who practices every spare moment and reveres the profession as if it were her family. That commitment is illustrated in a scene, toward the end of the story, when she is driving with Joe and happens to pass Villa Verdi, where the great composer lived and worked. Overcome with emotion, she tries to communicate to her son what it means to her to be standing outside the iron gates and looking at the place where he composed the great operas that she has performed. 'He'd look out his window and he'd see a little hunchbacked peasant and he'd create Rigoletto. He saw Egypt, Venice, the world, everything.' Joe's indifference infuriates her and she cries, 'This are my roots. He's like my father.' Truly, the world of opera is her family.

Erratic Caterina is anything but predictable. Lost in her art, she doesn't always know whether she's on stage or not. And she sometimes appears to behave like a spoiled child, in imitation of her son. A good example is the scene of Joe's birthday party. Feeling guilty for not remembering the date in the first place, she compensates by hosting a grand affair, almost operatic in scope. There are dozens of people, lots of food and live music. Hearing a small group of girls singing on the street below, she goes into ecstasy and invites them up to play at the party. 'Oh, Joe!' she enthuses, 'The most beautiful girls in Rome! Like angels!' A minute later, trying to console her gloomy son, she mentions casually that she once tried to kill herself. Joe is shocked, but she jumps up and invites the girl singers into the party. As they perform, she prances around, yelping with joy, like a bubbly teenager herself. She has embarrassed Joe with her wild display. We see that she is unstable, swayed by evanescent emotions and contemptuous of social conventions.

Devious Having seen how erratic she is, we should not be surprised that she is also devious. That quality is displayed in the scene in the restaurant after Joe has driven off in their car and left her to be picked up by a man, who regales her with stories of Castro. She and 'the Communist' sit at one table, and Joe sits by himself at another, neither having acknowledged the other. Both, however, make a display of themselves. While Joe plays the drums with his utensils and plates, Caterina flirts outrageously with the unattractive man, all the time with her eye on Joe. The man is led on to expect a sexual dividend at the end of the scene, but she drops him and takes up with her son. She has deceived both of them, both the man and her son.

Joe Joe is a moody teenage boy, whose busy mother does not have enough time for him. He can be sweet but also rude, self-centred and yet generous. In short, he is as contradictory and erratic as his mother. But being only fifteen, the adult worlds of love and sex are confusing and hurtful for him.

Innocent Young Joe is on the threshold of his fifteenth birthday when he meets Arianna, a girl of similar age and inexperience. Soon, they have sex in the cinema, watching a Marilyn Monroe film, but rather than illustrate his maturity it reveals his innocence. When he says that he wants to go 'inside her,' she asks if he knows how because she's 'never done it.' Joe laughs and says, 'You're excused. I'm a virgin, too.' She asks what comes first, and he says, 'We kiss.' Then he asks her to help him take off his jeans. She unbuckles his belt and rips them off. 'Christ!' he yells. 'You didn't have to pull them all the way off!' Poor Joe is trying to act like the stars he sees on the movie screen, sexy and in control, but every time he speaks, it reminds us that he is a kid.

Angry Joe is unhappy from the moment we first see him at the breakfast table in New York, and he grows angrier with each scene. The rage finally explodes toward the end when he drives off and leaves his mother by the roadside. She has just called him a 'junkie' and driven at speed down a narrow road, almost crashing the car. When a tire bursts and she fixes it, she screams, 'Sometimes being a mother can be a real pain in the ass.' Hearing that, he roars off before she can get back into the car and doesn't go back for her. Neglected and now verbally abused by his mother, he can't take it any longer and causes her to walk miles before someone picks her up. His anger at his mother is intense and he doesn't care if she has to walk to the next town.

Lonely From the very beginning, we also know that Joe is lonely. Neglected by his mother, he takes up with the 'wrong crowd' in Rome and becomes an addict. There are several scenes that illustrate

his isolation but one stands out. He has left the house and wandered into an abandoned building site in order to shoot up without being seen by his mother. He is, however, watched by a poor boy who speaks to him in Italian, which he can't (yet) understand. Joe's replies in English, telling the youngster about the New York baseball team, whose manager has just unexpectedly retired. It's a big loss to Joe, who obviously loved the team and regarded the manager as a surrogate father. After giving details of the manager's achievements, he says to the young boy, 'Oh, you don't know anything about baseball. You're Italian. All you guys do is play soccer.' He continues on like this for a minute more, speaking to himself. Sitting in the vast and echoing, half-built structure, his only audience is a boy who doesn't comprehend what he's saying. Joe is lonely.



(Joe and Caterina)



(Caterina at her husband's funeral)