

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ME AND YOU (Io e Te) 2012

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

Me and You, Bertolucci's final film released nine years after *The Dreamers*, tells a modest yet poignant story of a fragile boy and his drug-addict step-sister. It is shot almost entirely in a basement, where the young boy hides out, because the director was in a wheelchair and himself had limited mobility on set. Adapted from Niccolò Ammanti's novel of the same name, the film explores the relationship between its two main characters over the course of seven days. It touches on some of Bertolucci's favourite topics (incest, growing up and aging) and has some of his signature features, such as lush lighting and a focus on textures and gestures that reveal what's beneath them. The film did not make the cut to be shown in the competition at Cannes, and it is far from his best work. Nevertheless, it is a satisfying and at times beautiful exploration of a young boy's confusion on the cusp of manhood.

PEOPLE

Lorenzo	Lorenzo is a 14-year old boy.
Olivia	Olivia is his 25-year-old step-sister.
Mother	Lorenzo's mother is unnamed.
Grandmother	His grandmother is also unnamed.

SYNOPSIS

In an unnamed Italian city, Lorenzo fools his mother into thinking he's going on a week-long skiing trip and hides himself in the basement of their apartment building. After one day, his step-sister, Olivia, barges in and spoils his blissful isolation. They hardly know each other and at first her aggressive behaviour creates tension. It also turns out that she is a junkie and undergoes days of suffering withdrawal. As the days pass, though, the two of them share secrets and establish a rapport. The night before the last day, they each make the other promise to do something that will change their lives for the better—she is to stop taking drugs, and he is to stop hiding from people. Olivia breaks her promise before the morning comes, but Lorenzo appears ready to face the world anew.

SCENES

Lorenzo Lorenzo lives with his mother in a nice flat. He is a proper teenager (14) with spotty cheeks and a full head of less than tidy hair not hidden by the earphones that are his only ornamentation. In the opening scenes, we learn that he has regular sessions with a psychiatrist and that his mother is relieved that he is going on a week-long ski trip with his schoolmates. That shows how much he's changed since last year, she tells her husband on the telephone.

Escape Lorenzo doesn't want to go on the trip because he doesn't like crowds, but rather than disappoint his mother, he pretends to go. Carefully deceiving her about his plans, he manages to sneak into the apartment building and hide himself in a basement room. First though, he visits his grandmother in a nursing home and shows her affection. Then he stocks up on food and drink, buying seven of everything.

Basement hideaway Inside the basement, he makes sure he has everything he needs—food, computer, phone and a square glass box. The last item is an ants' nest, which he tends meticulously. There's also a cage with a baby armadillo running around. When his mother calls to check on him, he tells her he's having a great time with the ski group.

Olivia From nowhere, a young woman enters the basement. She is Olivia, his older step-sister, who's come back to pick up her box of stuff stored in the basement. When she sees that expensive jewellery given to her by their grandmother is missing, she accuses Lorenzo's mother of taking it. After they exchange more testy words, she leaves.

More deception Before long, though, Olivia is back, saying she needs somewhere to sleep. He refuses, desperate to keep his privacy, but she threatens to wake up the whole building and he lets her in. They chat more easily this time, but he still wants her to leave and makes up a story about a decomposing corpse in the basement. She refuses to leave and he becomes angry. But when his mother calls and demands to speak to the teacher, Olivia comes to the rescue and impersonates another teacher and they exchange numbers. By this trick, she now has Lorenzo in her power: if he turns her out, she will tell his mother where he is.

Drug addict Olivia goes into 'cold turkey' and reveals that she's an addict. 'Please leave me alone. Forget about me,' she cries in agony. Lorenzo is attentive but doesn't know how to help. When she tells him that their father funds her heroin habit to relieve his guilt, they argue again about his parents. Her withdrawal pain continues and they have a violent struggle when she demands that he get her sleeping pills. She is knocked to the ground, and seems unconscious. He falls on her, asking for forgiveness and she begs him to help her.

Stealing pills On another visit to his grandmother, he speaks about Olivia, whose mother the old lady remembers as 'showy but very nice.' When his grandmother dozes off, he takes her sleeping pills and gives them to Olivia. She is grateful, but their truce is broken when he finds an older man in the basement. She has asked for his help, and he has come to drive her to a farm with horses by the sea. But now she decides she doesn't need rehab and decides to stay with Lorenzo. As the man leaves, he pays her for one of her arthouse photographs.

Recovery As days pass, Lorenzo is obsessed with his ants and pet armadillo, and keeps his mother content on the phone. After Olivia has fully recovered, they go upstairs to his mother's apartment to get something to eat (the ants escaped and ate all their food). When she sees his mother asleep on a couch, she bends down close and he begs her to move away. Back underground, they enjoy the beer and decent food and play around together.

Olivia's background As they relax and chat, she describes her past, which included photography and video art. She says she had exhibitions, even won an award and went to Los Angeles. The photos, she explains, are part of a series called 'I am a Wall,' which represent her attempt to 'dematerialise' and dissolve all conflict with others.

Her boyfriend Lorenzo is fascinated by his step-sister's life and asks about a friend she has just texted. He is her old boyfriend, who broke off their relationship because she was a junkie and who now wants to get back with her. He will pick her up tomorrow and take her to a beautiful place in the countryside to live. But only, she says, on one condition: that she stays clean. She's excited but also nervous because she's not sure she can 'live with normal people' after being on drugs for so long.

Dancing As if to symbolise her inner feelings, she begins to dance in slow motion to a popular song. She pulls him off the couch to join her and she lip-synchs the lyrics: 'Say, lonely boy, where are you going? Why so much pain?' Hugging each other tightly, they move around to the music.

Revelation When he asks why she left the family apartment, she explains that she threw a rock at his mother and almost killed her. 'I hated her,' she says, 'because she took my father away.' Lorenzo still can't understand, so she flings her arms around him again and continues to sing the lyrics about a lonely boy.

Promises After he makes her promise never to take drugs again, she exacts a promise from him to stop hiding. 'You're grown up,' she says, taking his hand. 'It's time to get a life.' While he's asleep, however, she arranges for drugs to be delivered to her through the basement window.

Parting In the early morning, they pack up and leave the basement together. He walks with her toward her rendezvous with the boyfriend who will take her to live in the country. Arm in arm, they agree that they had fun and could do it again. 'Our week in the snow,' she says with a laugh. They part in the middle of the street and he returns to his mother's flat with a smile on his young face.

THEMES

1. Psychology

LONELINESS

youth Although the film covers one week in the life of one teenager, and his step-sister, it manages to reveal fundamental features of youth in general. Like Bertolucci's previous two films (*Stealing Beauty* and *The Dreamers*), this one depicts the confusion and misunderstanding that growing up entails. Lorenzo is estranged from the world, he is angry at the powers that control him and, as a result, he is profoundly lonely. Cut off from the adult world, Lorenzo seeks solace in isolation and is only rescued from acute alienation by the similarly dysfunctional Olivia.

estranged We are given a visual dramatization of Lorenzo's estrangement in the opening scenes. He is seated in a psychiatrist's shadowy office, with his head bent down so that we cannot see his face. 'Nothing,' he says in reply to an unheard question. 'It's normal. He wouldn't have helped me either.' Apparently, Lorenzo has declined to help a friend who needed help. When the man asks how he felt afterward, he again says, 'Normal.' The man wants to know what that word means, and Lorenzo says, 'Normal means normal. Nothing.' The man assures him that things will get better. At home, minutes later, Lorenzo hears his mother on the telephone to his father. 'Yes. To open up, he needed an outsider,' his mother says, referring to the psychiatrist. She is so happy that her son is going on a school trip with a group of students. Listening to her, Lorenzo spins around, wrapping a lace curtain around his head. The adults have all the answers. He has all the pain.

enraged Although Lorenzo is not a rebel in the mould of some other Bertolucci heroes, he shares with them an inner rage. His face is almost always angry, and the music he hears is raucous. The teenage angst burst out in particular scene, which illustrates its ferocity. His mother is driving him to school, where he will join other kids on a ski trip. As he sits beside her, she peppers him with questions—Did you bring your phone? Your music, your this, your that? Suddenly, he tells his mother to let him out. She says no, he says please and she laughs. And then he bangs his fist on the dashboard and screams, 'Let me out!' He has a good reason for wanting to get out early (because he's not actually going on the trip), but the scene is important because it reveals the anguish behind his scowling but calm face.

lonely Although Lorenzo prefers to be by himself, he is not happy. He brushes off schoolmates, can't relate to his mother and his father never appears. His only connection, other than his beloved ants, is his grandmother, who's on her death bed. His basement becomes his hiding place, where isolation offers freedom from the stupid adult world above. The depth of his unacknowledged loneliness is revealed not through dialogue but through a song in a scene when he dances with Olivia. She has just explained that feeling isolated when you're high is not the bliss he imagines. Without a word, she starts to sway to slow, languid music and pulls him up to dance with her. As they move together, she sings the words: 'Say, lonely boy, where are you going? Why so much pain?' As the song goes deeper and deeper into the lonely feelings of a boy, he draws her closer and closer. The song David Bowie's rewritten Italian version of 'Space Oddity' ('Ragazzo Solo, Ragazza Sola' 'Lonely Boy, Lonely Girl') has touched his heart and soothed some of the pain of his isolation from the world.

2. Relationship

SIBLINGS

brother-sister Running alongside, and relieving, the tension of Lorenzo's isolation is a second theme of the bond between brother and sister. These two young characters are designed to be about as different as possible: boy and girl, aged 14 and 25, with different mothers. They have different histories and don't remember the same things about their childhoods, which makes their slowly developing rapport more poignant.

tension At first, and not surprisingly, Lorenzo and Olivia have a tense standoff. Not having seen each other for years, she barges into his secret hiding place and demands money. Then, when she sees that some of her jewellery is missing, she blames 'that bitch, your mother.' Normally passive Lorenzo feels stung by the insult and pushes her hard. It turns out that, many years before, Olivia nearly killed Lorenzo's mother because she took her father away from her. When one parent leaves a marriage, it is often seen as betrayal by the children, and so step-siblings can easily blame the new marital partner for any family troubles. Certainly, Olivia and Lorenzo are caught in this fiery dynamic

of mixed families.

respect Little brother Lorenzo soon discovers that he can learn a lot from his big sister. Once she's recovered from her cold turkey, she is gay and playful, which encourages him to ask about her past. This occurs while they are having a good meal (stolen from his mother's apartment upstairs) and drinking beer. Lorenzo compliments her on her photographs, which he has seen on a computer, and she explains that she worked as a photographer and video artist. 'I even won an important award when I was 18,' she says, pacing around with a cigarette. Lorenzo looks up at her from his seat with new eyes. 'Yes,' she says, 'I even went to LA.' This is impressive to 14-year-old Lorenzo, who says he can't believe it. His step-sister has just turned into a new person, right before his eyes.

friends By the end of the film, the rapport between Olivia and Lorenzo has grown to the extent that they are intimate friends. The night before their idyll ends, they are sleeping close together, almost like lovers. Suddenly, he turns over and says, 'Promise me one thing.' She agrees and he tells her to swear she will quit drugs. When she does promise, she, in turn, asks him to do something for her. 'Quit hiding,' she says. 'It's time you got a life. If you get knocked around once in a while, it doesn't matter.' As she gives him this advice, she holds his hand. Each of them has found a close friend, someone who can point them on the right path.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lorenzo Young Lorenzo is a loner, slightly autistic, in fact. He shuns people and delves into the natural world of reptiles and insects. Shy and fragile, he is also kind and affectionate, though that does not prevent him from throwing a teenage tantrum. He has a keen imagination and would like nothing more than to live in isolation from the messy world outside his private self.

Fastidious One feature of Lorenzo's slightly autistic character is his love of precision, or, put another way, his avoidance of ambiguity. This trait is illustrated during his conversation with his mother while they are eating in a restaurant. She happens to mention that his father is happy that he (Lorenzo) is going on a ski trip. 'What did he say?' the boy asks. 'That he was happy,' the mother answers. But Lorenzo wants more precision. 'What were his exact words?' he demands in a cold voice. Again, she simply says that he said he felt good. 'No,' Lorenzo says, now raising his voice and drumming his fingers on the table. 'What exactly did he say?' This scene shows us that the young boy needs things to be precise and to have boundaries because then the chaos of the world can be controlled.

Whacky It's hard to find another word to describe Lorenzo's sometimes bizarre comments and behaviour. The most sensational example, which few viewers will forget, occurs again during the scene in the restaurant with his mother. Just as his attractive mother dips her fork back down into a heap of pasta, Lorenzo notices that a single man has been watching them from a nearby table. 'Mom,' he says slowly, 'do you think people seeing us here, could they think we're a couple?' When she very sensibly reminds him of their age difference, he says she looks young and asks her to imagine that an epidemic has wiped out the earth's population. 'You and I find the antidote and we're saved. We're the only ones left on earth. Humanity is doomed unless we...' Now, she is angry and tells him to stop, but he doesn't. 'Come on,' he says, 'it would save humanity.' At this, she screams at him to shut up. This is classic Lorenzo, imaginative, unfazed and insensitive.

Affectionate Lorenzo is also a sweet kid, who never wants to hurt anyone and often shows kindness. The best illustration of this quality is a scene he has with his grandmother, who is in a nursing home and appears to be in her final weeks. While he sits on her bed, playing cards with her, she tells him that she really liked the story he told her last time. 'Which one?' he asks. 'The one about a pastry maker,' she says. He nods and says, 'Oh, yeah, the pastry maker who tames beetles. That's a good one.' After surreptitiously giving her sleeping pills (presumably not approved by the nurse), he says he'll come back next week. She laughs and says she'll be in a cemetery by then. He also laughs and says, 'Ok, I'll have my coffin put on top of yours, like a bunk bed.' 'Good,' she says, 'that way we can chat.' Lorenzo bends down, kisses her forehead and hugs her. He is a delight to his dying grandmother, telling her stories, cheering her up and sharing her gallows humour.

Olivia Olivia is a haggard beauty at twenty-five. She is aggressive, jittery and unreliable, but she is also playful, intelligent and supportive of her naïve step-brother. Her early promise as an art photography was destroyed by a heroin addiction that still haunts her. Although she represents experience, in contrast to Lorenzo's innocence, the prognosis for her future is not positive.

Edgy When Olivia first appears, in the darkened basement wearing a full-length raggedy and hairy coat, she looks like some mythical beast emerging from a cave. After she discovers Lorenzo, cowering behind boxes, she demands that he help her find her 'stuff.' Producing a razor blade from somewhere, she slits open her box and then turns on Lorenzo, accusing his mother of stealing her jewellery. Next, she wants money. He says he doesn't have any, she grabs him by the collar and shakes him. From the first moment, she has been belligerent, jerky and rude. The scene is crucial because it establishes the angry gap that these two characters will have to close by the end of the story.

Reflective Much later, we learn the primary causes of Olivia's pugnacious character. She is a junkie, but she also has the intelligence to reflect on her drug habit and what it has done to her. She has just been telling Lorenzo about her early success as a photographer but then 'the drugs messed' her up. 'Nothing touches you when you're high,' she tells him. 'You don't feel anything. No one can hurt you.' Lorenzo is fascinated because that emotional isolation is just the kind of condition he desires. But she is wise enough to warn him: 'It makes you indifferent,' she says, 'which is not a nice thing because you become cold and mean.' She is the voice of experience speaking to the innocence of youth. Luckily for him, she steers him in the right direction. Unluckily, for her, she doesn't follow her own advice.

Buddhist Olivia is more than reflective. She tries to practice some aspects of Buddhist philosophy. This unexpected feature of her character emerges during another long conversation with Lorenzo in their private subterranean world. Cut off from ordinary society, the two of them are able to indulge in imaginary worlds, telling tall tales and wearing costumes found in the boxes. Olivia explains that her ideal state of existence is something close to the Buddhist notion of non-being. She explains this to a wide-eyed Lorenzo while describing her early photographic exhibition called 'I am a Wall.' Pacing around and smoking a cigarette, she says, 'I wanted to de-materialise...Me and you, if we didn't have a point of view anymore, we'd be the same....we'd stop being against each other...we'd accept reality and not judge it...like a Buddhist.' When Lorenzo points out that Buddhists don't use drugs, she agrees but says, 'It's not easy being a Buddhist.' She's right about that, but her speech contains the key phrase 'me and you', which gives us some clue to the meaning of the film. Opposition and conflict, me against you, me against the world—this is what makes us 'cold and mean.' When me and you come together, like Lorenzo and his grandmother, or Lorenzo and Olivia, that is true happiness. Olivia said when she was younger and closer to that Buddhist state, she could go through walls because they're weren't any. Lorenzo has hidden himself behind walls and she wants to knock them down.



(Olivia and Lorenzo)