

We Have Never Been Chaste Sexuality and Cinephilia in Post-Maoist Cinema

Yomi Braester, University of Washington

Abstract

The essay examines post-Maoist cinema by looking at two interrelated issues: the portrayal of sexuality and cinephilia during the Maoist period. Sexual urges are inextricable from post-Maoist cinema; in particular, the connection between eros and revolution serves to criticize Maoism from within. Another common trait is the long shadow cast by films made in the Maoist period. Whether by explicit reference to movie-going in the diegesis or through allusions understood by those familiar with Maoist oldies, post-Maoist cinema tends to be highly cinephilic. The onscreen reemergence of cinephilia – often in conjunction with the eruption of youthful libido – is no low-stakes game; rather, it enables a critical view of Maoism. This essay focuses on *The Dreamers* (*The Dreamers - I sognatori*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 2003) through a diachronic and synchronic lens, placing the film side by side with other movies – the historical precedent *La Chinoise* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967) and the roughly contemporary Chinese film *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, Jiang Wen, 1994).

Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (*The Dreamers - I sognatori*, 2003) is regarded by many as a post-ideological portrayal of the 1968 Paris riots, a semi-pornographic revisionist account of French Maoism. Slavoj Žižek writes that '[the] shift from political engagement to the post-political Real is perhaps best exemplified by the films of Bernardo Bertolucci, that arch-renegade [...]. This span achieved full circle with *The Dreamers*'.¹ In this view, the Maoist disruption of capitalism that fueled the 1968 events, already defused by late twentieth-century neoliberal cooptation, receives a dog's burial by Bertolucci. I argue otherwise: *The Dreamers* offers a sober-minded, sympathetic corrective; as such it is a prime example of post-Maoist cinema. As I define it, post-Maoist cinema explicitly addresses its position as heir to Maoist films. Probing into Maoist ideology and practice in the 1950s to 1970s, post-Maoist cinema is largely neither post-political nor flippant. It explores both the allure and limitations of Maoism and Maoist cinema.

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 59.

I examine the position of post-Maoist cinema by looking at two interrelated issues: the portrayal of sexuality and cinephilia during the Maoist period. Libidinal passion, and especially young people's budding sexuality, have been crucial components of professing Maoism, and sexual urges are inextricable from post-Maoist cinema. In particular, such films build upon the connection between eros and revolution to criticize Maoism from within. Another common trait in post-Maoist cinema is the long shadow cast by films made in the Maoist period. Whether by explicit reference to movie-going in the diegesis or through allusions understood by those familiar with Maoist oldies, post-Maoist cinema tends to be highly cinephilic. The protagonists are avid film watchers; the frame is filled with movie memorabilia; and the later films imitate earlier classics. The onscreen reemergence of cinephilia – often in conjunction with the eruption of youthful libido – is no low-stakes game; rather, it enables a critical view of Maoism.

Maoism, as addressed in this essay, is always at a remove from the ideology and writings of Mao and his apparent followers outside China. Maoism takes the form of performative acts: it amounts to a pledge of allegiance, often uninformed of ideology and policy; Maoist references often aim at gaining social capital. Such self-fashioned Maoism is further veiled by onscreen representation. The films at hand do not provide straightforward documentation; rather, the directors reflect on what Maoism could be, or could have been, or might have signified in earlier films.

Many studies argue the exact meaning of Maoist ideology, and how it was interpreted and deployed differently around the world.² Scholars also debate the role of sexual repression and liberation among the youth who found themselves overnight drawing a line from their parents' generation. Memoirs and novels suggest the prominence of sex in the life of young people at the time.³ As part of the film's plot and imagery, however, the protagonists' desires are transposed to a symbolic register. Onscreen carnal and cinephilic passions are commentaries on historical and current perceptions of Maoism. This essay focuses on *The Dreamers* through a diachronic and synchronic lens, placing Bertolucci's film side by side with other movies – the historical precedent *La Chinoise* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967) and the roughly contemporary Chinese film *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, Jiang Wen, 1994). The circumstances in France and the People's Republic of China (PRC) diverge, of course, widely: Mao's policies were different from how his thought was received and interpreted around the world. From today's perspective in particular, a contrarian gesture, even shouting

² See for example Robert J. Alexander, *Maoism in the Developed World* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2001); Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajat Kumar Kujur, *Maoism in India: Reincarnation of Ultra-Left Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³ See for example Emily Honig, 'Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited', *Modern China*, 29.2 (April 2003), 143-175.

We Have Never Been Chaste

Maoist slogans, may be welcome in Europe or the U.S. when besieged by the ultra-right. The PRC, on the other hand, is still ruled by Mao's party, and the return to repressive Maoism is possible if not already in motion. In juxtaposing European and Chinese post-Maoist cinema, I do not claim their affinity as much as challenge their identification as post-political cinema.

The reception of *The Dreamers* resonates with the debate around onscreen reconstructions of the Maoist period in the PRC. In this article I look also at the relation between sexuality and Maoism in *The Dreamers* and in Chinese films. I argue that the sex in these films, often breaking taboos and represented in transgressive form, aims at a critical reassessment of Maoism. The question is not whether such sexual behavior ever took place, but rather what its symbolic value may be.

Having just voiced my reservation about Žižek's reading of *The Dreamers*, I should stress the relevance of his reproach of post-politics. Not only has militant ideological engagement gone out of vogue, but the self-congratulatory tone in discussing communism in the post-Cold-War era is uncritical and self-righteous. Žižek disavows the 'vulgar anti-communist cliché' that Eastern Bloc totalitarianism was tragedy, and the return to communism would be a farce.⁴ To this we may add that communism, murderous and totalitarian as it was, has always had its farcical side as it could not live up to its utopian ideals.

In *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), Žižek makes the case that dictatorship is especially vulnerable when it claims to speak in the name of the people. To undermine such a political system one needs not to deride the leader but the people. Showing 'ordinary people [...] in their daily conformism, stupidity, egotistic lust' proves that 'there is no mythic people which serves as the ultimate legitimization'. Indeed, some of the most effective cinematic blows to communism were delivered in Miloš Forman's scenes of debauchery mentioned by Žižek – and in carnivalesque moments in post-Maoist Chinese films. These episodes should not be dismissed as nihilistic but rather understood as a level-headed rethinking of Maoist ideology and the Maoist cinematic legacy.

Maoism as an Adolescent Fantasy

The Dreamers is told from the perspective of Matthew, an American student in Paris in 1968. He frequents the Cinémathèque Française and identifies himself as a cinephile. During the demonstrations over the firing of the director of the Cinémathèque – the event that foreshadowed the more overtly political riots three months later – he meets a brother and sister his age, Theo and Isabelle. Raised by an artistic bourgeois couple happy to pay lip service to the revolution and to buy social stability with their money, the two siblings take a more

⁴ Žižek, p. 1.

rebellious approach. Before storming the barricades at the end of the movie, the siblings show their nonconformism by studying Mao's Little Red Book and carrying on an incestuous relationship in front of Matthew. The plot follows the three young people as they lead a carefree existence together, without any grown-ups to watch over their antics. They seem to represent a microcosm of the Maoist movement in 1968 Paris.

In between increasingly transgressive sexual acts – and in conjunction with them – the three reaffirm their fervor for the cinema. They often challenge each other to recognize reenactments of famous scenes. When Theo fails to recognize his sister's version of *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), she orders him to masturbate, in her and Matthew's presence, to Marlene Dietrich's photo. Later Matthew fails to name *Scarface* (Brian de Palma, 1983) and is coerced into making love to Isabelle – her virginal experience, it turns out – in front of Theo. (In the original novel, *The Holy Innocents*, the brother also rapes Matthew and proceeds to scatological humiliation.⁵) The made-to-shock sexual scenes overshadow the cinephilia and Maoist imagery that facilitate the unusual ménage à trois. The sexual degradation follows a cinephilic fall from grace as the young men admit their incompetence in putting image and film title together. In both scenes, the defeated men are overpowered by artwork hanging behind them – a poster of *La Chinoise* and a Chinese print of Mao standing above a sea of red flags, respectively. Theo has made his room into a Maoist shrine; as the three act out their fantasies, the ideological backdrop literally frames them and symbolically creates an ineluctable scaffolding around them.

The poster of *La Chinoise* alludes to many strands in Bertolucci's film: it refers to the siblings' cinephilia and to their interest in Marxism, as Godard's film is viewed as presaging the events of 1968 and marking the beginning of Godard's Maoist filmmaking period. More importantly for the purposes of this essay, the poster suggests an analogy between *La Chinoise* and *The Dreamers*. Godard's film is hardly an encomium to 1960s French Marxism; rather, it offers a sympathetic criticism of the fate of ideological fervor in the hands of well-meaning but naïve youth. A five-person Maoist cell is ensconced in a bourgeois Paris apartment, where they make love, read the Little Red Book, and lecture to each other. The one woman who comes from the countryside parrots their slogans, serves their meals in porcelain ware, and occasionally prostitutes herself to finance them. The leader, a woman who fancies herself as a Chinese revolutionary by wearing a Parisian couture version of the Mao suit, attempts a botched political assassination. Godard's Marxist sympathy and his later fashioning of *La Chinoise* as a Maoist manifesto notwithstanding, *La Chinoise* reads as a satire.⁶

The Dreamers is often compared to *The Terrible Children* (*Les Enfants terribles*, Jean-Pierre Melville, 1950), which also describes a love triangle that includes two incestuous siblings. Bertolucci seems, however, equally indebted

⁵ Gilbert Adair, *The Holy Innocents* (London: William Heinemann, 1988).

⁶ On Godard's claims that *La Chinoise* voices his commitment to Marxism, see Wolin, pp. 114-17.

We Have Never Been Chaste

to *La Chinoise*, which also takes place almost entirely in a well-heeled Parisian apartment decorated in Maoist chic, revolves around an enigmatic and sensuous redhead and, most importantly, features a small group of college-age youngsters who keep tormenting themselves over finding the correct political response to current affairs. In structure and ideological content, *The Dreamers* resembles *La Chinoise* rather than *The Terrible Children*. Insofar as *La Chinoise* is a Maoist film, *The Dreamers* identifies itself as explicitly post-Maoist: not a flattening of the ideological content, but a nuanced and often critical way of looking back.

Post-Maoist Cinema and Post-Cinema

The identify-the-movie game played by the protagonists of *The Dreamers* is on its face cinephilia gone awry, reduced to a trivia game and at the same time played for exceedingly high stakes. Yet the scenes also address the viewers of Bertolucci's film and signal the post-Maoist fate of cinephilia. Wanda Strauven has noted that the games in *The Dreamers* show how movie watching now extends to the home, where a film can be paused for reflection.⁷ By this interpretation, Bertolucci anachronistically introduces a cinephilia divorced from the film theater through the use of home video. Strauven is correct in seeing *The Dreamers* as a reevaluation of cinephilia from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, but she ignores an important twist in Bertolucci's presentation of the cinephilic quiz. The game scenes keep interrupting the diegesis with sequences from the films to which the youngsters allude. (Such non-diegetic asides also resonate with *La Chinoise*.) The film viewers are therefore privy to images and sounds unavailable to the protagonists. This additional information involves the viewers in separate challenges to recognize the earlier films. The film viewers identify with the characters' cinephilia; yet the viewers are placed in a different position: unlike the characters, the viewers avail themselves of readymade images, easier and quicker to spot, that indeed suggest an early twenty-first-century home video setting.

Similarly, references to places of cinematic significance around Paris seem to address Bertolucci's viewers as much as to gratify the protagonists. The three young people go to the Louvre, where they reenact the run through the museum in Godard's (now) classic *Band of Outsiders* (*Bande à part*, 1964). As in the quiz scenes, the diegesis is intercut with shots from the originary film. To fully appreciate the parallel, one must observe the scenes from outside, as only the viewers of *The Dreamers* can. Such is the anachronistic, meta-cinematic image of Jean-Pierre Léaud in front of the Cinémathèque, as his younger self appears in documentary footage from the Cinémathèque demonstrations Roland-François

⁷ Wanda Strauven, 'The Observer's Dilemma: To Touch or Not to Touch', in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 148-63 (pp. 159-160).

Lack notes such references as examples of the current cine-tourism that traces New Wave film locations. The viewers can return to Paris and Parisian films of the 1960s.⁸ Yet Bertolucci does more than serve as a tourist guide: he suggests that film is now known mostly second-hand, through appropriations and home-consumption copies. Cinematic images all become déjà-vus. *The Dreamers* bids farewell to an era – and suggests the potential of post-cinematic cinephilia.

Were the Red Guards Maoist?

A prominent contradiction in the behavior of the protagonists in *The Dreamers* is their patent lack of political involvement. Matthew tells Theo:

The Red Guards that you admire – they all carry the same book, they all sing the same songs, they all parrot the same slogans. So, in this big, epic movie, everybody is an extra. [...] if you really believed what you were saying, you'd be [...] out there, on the street [...]. But you're not out there. You're inside, with me, drinking expensive wine, talking about film, talking about... Maoism. [...] I don't think you really believe it. You buy the lamp, and you put up the posters, but it ain't...

Matthew refers to the lamp next to him, a glass Mao bust lit from the inside, as a symbol of Theo's vacuous and vain relation to Maoism. At the same time, he criticizes Maoism as practiced in China. Indeed, a frequent question about French Maoists has been, to what extent did their ideology and actions comport with Mao's thought? The Maoist sympathy of prominent thinkers such as Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and the Tel Quel group in the 1970s seems to have overshadowed initial misgivings such as those voiced by Matthew, that Maoism was a fashion, an Orientalist fantasy, an empty use of slogans. As I have mentioned, traces of such doubt are discernible already in *La Chinoise*. Yet if in *La Chinoise* the group's choice to isolate itself in an apartment might be interpreted as keeping apart from the Parisian bourgeoisie, Matthew's view in *The Dreamers* exposes the solipsistic tendencies of the self-proclaimed Maoists. By putting these words in the mouth of Matthew, with whom the viewers may identify, Bertolucci – who has repeatedly admitted his debt to the French New Wave – offers an elegy to the idealism of his generation's youth.

The Dreamers is emblematic of how post-Maoist cinema finds itself between a rock and a hard place, as directors express both nostalgia for an idealistic period (in which they may have been personally involved) and criticism of past excesses and equivocations. Such nuanced view of Maoism might be interpreted as selling

⁸ Roland-François Lack, 'The Cine-Tourist's Map of New Wave Paris', in *Cinematic Urban Geographies*, ed. by François Penz and Richard Koeck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 95-111 (pp. 106-7).

We Have Never Been Chaste

out. This was the case not only for Bertolucci's film but also for many movies produced in the PRC since the mid-1980s.

In the PRC, post-Maoist cinema may be considered a distinct and prolific genre. At first came films reassessing the scars of the Maoist period and the Cultural Revolution in particular, such as *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi*, Xie Jin, 1980) and *Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993). Since the late 1980s, most treatment of the Maoist period turned to double-entendres and sarcasm. In addition to a general disenchantment with the government's dogmatism, people felt a growing cognitive dissonance between the free market economy promoted officially since 1992 and the Communist Party's insistence that the country still adhered to Maoist ideology. 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' looked more and more like capitalism, and the ensuing inconsistencies were foregrounded in what Western scholars have called 'postsocialist cinema'. In fact, films were especially apt vehicles of criticism: as older cultural elites were marginalized, popular media gained what approximated moral authority.⁹ The noncommittal, tongue-in-cheek tone of many films reflected the realization that in post-Maoist China artists were not presented with a simple choice between cooptation and dissent. Rather, the ideological use of art – and the representation of Maoism in particular – were subject to a complex and fluctuating politics of memory.¹⁰

One of the most prominent films in this category is *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan derizi*, Jiang Wen, 1994), whose contents and reception evidence the complexity of post-Maoist cinema. The plot follows a group of teenagers in Beijing around 1972. As many youth during the Cultural Revolution, they are left to their own devices while the parents are away, either sent to reeducation camps or on military duty. The movie does not show the violence of the first phase of the Cultural Revolution, when in the late 1960s houses were ransacked and people brutally beaten. Instead, the teenagers are seen horsing around and discovering their sexuality. As soon as it came out in 1995, the film ran into controversy. Feng Jikai, who had compiled an oral history of the Cultural Revolution, wrote that the film had nothing to do with his experience. Others noted that there were many perceptions of the Cultural Revolution, and that young people in particular lived through the period as 'a bright, sunny vacation'.¹¹ *In the Heat of the Sun* suggests the possibility of multiple, fragmented views of the Maoist

⁹ See Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ See Yomi Braester, 'The Post-Maoist Politics of Memory', in *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. by Yingjin Zhang (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 434-451.

¹¹ Yomi Braester, *Witness against History: Literature, Film and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 192, 200.



Yomi Braester

period – at odds with each other, marred by the breakdown of memory, and mediated through cinematic images.

In a key moment in the film, the voiceover narrator brings the storyline to a halt (while the image freezes) and states that he no longer knows what truly happened: ‘Ha-ha! Don’t believe any of it. I never was this brave or heroic [...]. I sadly realize that I have no way to return to reality’. The narrator, identified as the protagonist Ma Xiaojun speaking from the vantage point of the present, twenty years after the events, suggests the failure of both Maoist and post-Maoist historical interventions. The Red Guards’ purported heroism amounted to little, and the attempt of their generation to reconstruct the past in any meaningful way is doomed. The director Jiang Wen, who also plays the present-day Ma Xiaojun, distances himself from Maoist idealism. With self-effacing humor typical of Chinese post-Maoist cinema and much more sarcasm toward the protagonists’ motives than Bertolucci would exhibit, Jiang strips the Cultural Revolution of its ideological veneer. Ma Xiaojun and his friends, the three youngsters in *The Dreamers*, and the generations they represent in China and France, blurted Maoist slogans with great enthusiasm and even conviction, but Maoism was largely a subterfuge for more mundane passions. One may very well regard Mao himself as a phantasm that existed only in people’s minds.



Cinephilic and Carnal Passions



The failure of memory in *In the Heat of the Sun* is partly due to how the protagonists construct their lives around fleeting and moving images. Much like the three youngsters in *The Dreamers*, Ma Xiaojun and his friends reenact film scenes as a form of social bonding. Reference to revolutionary films such as *Lenin in 1918* (*Lenin v 1918 godu*, Mikhail Romm, 1939) and *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi baihu tuan*, Su Li, 1972) becomes part of their daily lives. The use of cinematic allusions within the diegesis, invoked by the protagonists and motivating the plot, may be regarded as a defining trait of post-Maoist cinema. The tribute to film classics suggests not so much an ideological continuity but a cinephilic alliance that destabilizes the claim to truth of both past and present.

As in *The Dreamers*, the film reenactment scenes in *In the Heat of the Sun* are linked to sexual exploration. In conjunction with their cinephilic bonding, the boys try to impress girls, comment on the girls’ bodies, and tease them into kissing. The most explicit scene, excised but still implicit in the final cut, shows Ma Xiaojun masturbating to the photo of a young woman, on her bed, after he had snuck into her apartment. The photo acquires cinematic attributes as Ma Xiaojun first views it through a telescope, and it later changes shape in his memories, from color to black-and-white. By coincidence, photos are also linked to masturbation in *The Dreamers* – Matthew places Isabelle’s photo in his underpants, and Theo ejaculates on Greta Garbo’s image. Such adolescent behavior is a common cinematic trope; what makes the parallel significant is that



We Have Never Been Chaste

both films link the cinephilic gaze to sexual initiation and (relatively) explicit imagery. Cinephilic fetishism leads to loss of sexual innocence, and by extension to ideological disenchantment. One can only look back at the Maoist period through a distorting telescope and wonder where things went wrong.

Post-Maoist cinema has inevitable sexual connotation, as the events of Paris 1968 are associated also with the sexual revolution. In the PRC, filmmakers were highly aware of the ideological implications of onscreen sexual appeal. At first, films such as *Romance on Lushan Mountain* (*Lushan lian*, Huang Zumo, 1980) and *Old Well* (*Lao Jing*, Wu Tianming, 1987) presented sexually charged scenes (tame by current standards, but scandalous at the time) as an ideological affront to Maoist repression. The so-called Fifth Generation of directors that rose to fame in the 1980s distinguished itself from Maoist cinema by flaunting 'primitive passions'.¹² Other films, such as in *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* (*Tianyu*, Joan Chen, 1998), expose cadres' abuse of political power for sexual harassment. By the 1990s, films started foregrounding also how sexual exploration continued in various guises during the Cultural Revolution. Examples include *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (*Xiao caifeng*, Dai Sijie, 2002) and *Peeping* (*Feng*, aka *Kui*, Li Wake, 2003). These films go against the grain of the official line about the Cultural Revolution simply by recasting Maoist ideology and practice in a down-to-earth context. As Ma Xiaojun says in *In the Heat of the Sun*, 'I never was this brave or heroic'. The youth stoking the Cultural Revolution were no glorious activists; they shouted slogans in the streets and masturbated at home. Acknowledging this unremarkable situation can be highly damaging to the Communist Party because of the Maoist claim to a revolutionary sublime. Post-Maoist cinema shows communism not as cowardice, but worse by its terms: as masturbatory.

The central role that sex plays in the plot and imagery of *The Dreamers* may also be illuminated by the post-Maoist criticism of revolutionary purity. Bertolucci's choice of explicit imagery, which in the US won the film the rare NC-17 rating, may be overdetermined. It may be seen as an auteurist gesture, a return to the director's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). Both films portray transgressive, borderline nonconsensual sex. As Asbjørn Grønstad notes, *The Dreamers* is part of a brutalist trend that makes the viewer ask, 'Should I stay or should I go? If I continue watching, what exactly are my motivations? If I leave, what does this protest signify, besides discomfort?'.¹³ The sex in *The Dreamers* is beautiful and sensuous, but also disorienting and scarring. As in Bertolucci's earlier film, the viewers are kept on edge and must recognize their complicity in ethically compromised situations.

At the same time, the homage to *Last Tango in Paris* highlights the chasm

¹² See Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

¹³ Asbjørn Grønstad, *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 44.

Yomi Braester

that has opened since the early 1970s: *The Dreamers* cannot recreate the shock caused by *Last Tango in Paris* since many movies have paved the way in the meanwhile. *The Dreamers* is by definition a post-*Tango* film. By extension, *The Dreamers* is performe post-1960s; it cannot revert to the mindset of the Maoist period, only mark the growing gap. No one steps in the same ideological river twice. Moreover, Bertolucci's film, post-*Chinoise* and post-*Tango*, is also a post-Maoist statement, suggesting not only that there is no return, but that the haloed point of origin was never all it's cracked up to be.

Post-Maoist cinema as I have defined it – films that have established an explicit rapport with the Maoist period – offer conflicted accounts of that time. The flagrantly deny the possibility of return to, or even reconstitution of, the 1950s to 1970s. The films provide complex descriptions that counter dogmatic narratives. *La Chinoise*, *In the Heat of the Sun*, and *The Dreamers* seem to suggest: we may never have been Maoist. Ideologically and sexually, we may never have been chaste.