

Critique

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*A Sunday in The Country (1984)*



The eminent French director Bertrand Tavernier, a director of pathological insight and *métier*, has made some remarkable films, such as *Coup de Torchon* and *Life and Nothing But*. *A Sunday in the Country* is considered by many to be among his best works so far. Said Robert Ebert: "My opinion is more tempered — if you're in the mood for a minimalist family drama in the beautiful French countryside without much 'drama' then it is worth seeing." Tavernier in the film appears more poetic and sensitive in his social milieu, as he found around him a great painter by nature. The story is written by Tavernier and his wife, Colo Tavernier. This 1984 film is a digitised version of an article

from *The Times's* print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. Running time is 94 minutes. This film has no rating.

*A Sunday in the Country* is exquisite - purposefully and almost painfully so - from beginning to end. Set at the turn of the century, on a single day at the country home of an elderly French gentleman, it records the particulars of a visit from his children. The household of Monsieur Ladmiral (Louis Ducreux), run by a single devoted servant (Monique Chaumette) whose master holds her greatly in awe, is ritually readied for the various meals, naps, meanderings and pleasantries that will mark the day.

The narrative highlights that Tavernier has built his work on the late 19th-century tale; we come to know, watching the film, that the elderly painter, Monsieur Ladmiral (Louis Ducreux), who lives at his country estate with a single servant. Occasionally, on a Sunday, Monsieur Ladmiral's son, Gonzague (Michel Aumont), visits with his wife, Marie-Thérèse (Geneviève Mnich), and their two sons. The film revolves around one of these visits. We learn that Monsieur Ladmiral is somewhat disappointed with his son and favours his daughter, Irene (Sabine Azema), who infrequently visits. Gonzague deeply loves his father but is constantly bothered by what he perceives as unfair judgment. His encyclopedic knowledge of international cinema, coupled with his passion for the cinema of his own country, has made him the best-placed person to discuss his own experiences as a filmmaker and the people he met throughout his active working life. Tavernier, as a humanist, tries to make contact outside himself; his painter, too, nearly represents Tavernier. Painter Ladmiral, like the director, propels his creative impulse in an aesthetic blend. Said Tavernier: "To make a poetic film, you need to be very meticulous and sensitive while blending form and content; to make a poetic film, you have to have Keats 'negative capability.'"



Before making *A Sunday in the Country*, Tavernier said: "It was only when I decided to include my own experiences that I knew that I could make this film. I'm not a teacher or a historian of cinema. I don't have any desire to give dates or show how films are made; I don't incline to discuss that aspect of things. I know that I met and worked with some wonderful people who were very passionate about the film industry. I knew also that I could say some interesting things about the films and the people I knew... things that you can't find in any books, because they were things that I either witnessed personally or were said to me privately by the people involved."



*A Sunday in the Country*, written by Mr. Tavernier and his wife, Colo Tavernier, and based on the novel "Monsieur Admiral va bientôt mourir" by Pierre Boast, is one of the director's very best films, acted as beautifully and thoughtfully as it is staged. The early part of the day, devoted to a visit by the septuagenarian's son, Edouard (Michel Aumont), and his wife and children, displays just how little importance the son's dutifulness holds for his father. Edouard, who has been called Gonzague for most of his life, has a plain, proper, yet faintly vulgar wife named Marie-Thérèse (Geneviève Mnich), who has engineered the name change and has a great deal more to say about her husband's

life. Edouard also has three handsome, well-dressed children who ought to be the apple of their widowed grandfather's eye. Yet, a portrait of a beautiful young woman, along with a few passing conversational references, makes it clear that the painter's daughter, Irene, is his more beloved child.

Irene (Sabine Azema) arrives from Paris midway through the day, thin and glamorous and thrilling. She has all the vitality her brother lacks, a fact of which he and his wife are unpleasantly aware. And the older man makes no effort to hide his adoration. Even Merced, the housekeeper, is as appreciative of Irene as she has been sullen towards Marie-Thérèse. Irene's visit, though brief, has a profound effect on her father, her brother, and even on the film's visual style. It is in Irene's company that Monsieur Ladmiral visits a rollicking outdoor dance hall, where Mr. Tavernier mounts the film's most visually breathtaking sequence. Everything about the colours and costumes, the faces and gestures of the extras, makes this an Impressionist painting come to life.



Monsieur Ladmiral, painting in a controlled and classical style despite his awareness of contemporaries like Cezanne and Monet (he makes several observations about the work of his fellow artists during the film), is drawn by his daughter toward

different, more vital notions of both art and life; this influence of Irene's helps shape the film's lovely closing scene. Mr. Tavernier is particularly adept at weaving the family's affairs into the film's perceptions about painting, until the two themes ultimately merge.



The overpowering visual approach forces the actors to work within narrow confines; each of them conveys as much through their appearance as through their words, thoughts, or deeds. The cast has been well-chosen with this in mind. Miss Azema and Miss Chaumette are particularly adroit. So is Mr. Ducreux, who makes the old gentleman rueful and affecting without sentimentalising him. Even Miss Mních, in the unflattering role of Marie-Thérèse, gives Mr. Tavernier exactly what is called for. He seems to be in complete control of every performer, every image, and every frame.

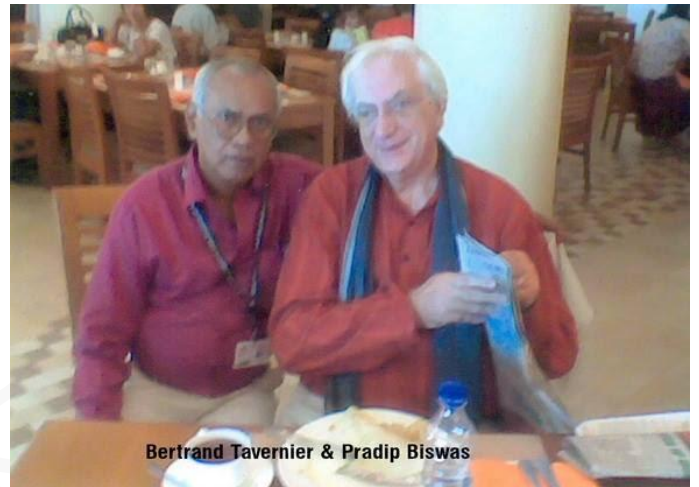
It is said the household of Monsieur Ladmiral (Louis Ducreux), run by a single devoted servant (Monique Chaumette) whose master holds her greatly in awe, is ritually prepared for the various meals, naps, meanderings and pleasantries marking the day neatly. Tavernier observes these ordered preparations with the same care and acuity that he brings to the family's uneven interactions. In addition to underscoring the

fact that Monsieur Ladmiral is an artist of wide renown, the film's painterly style is well attuned to its characters. Their behaviour throughout the day rarely interferes with the prevailing air of formulaic stance and comfort. Yet Tavernier, while conveying the elegance of the proceedings, is able, slowly and perceptively, to reveal all the inner grace and workings of this family, as well as much about its delicate history.



The rifts are exposed even more when Irene, unannounced, arrives at the estate in her new car. Monsieur Ladmiral adores his daughter and only wishes her the best — he wants her to get married, but dares not anger her. Just as unexpectedly as Irene arrives, she leaves, and soon her son, Gonzague, and his family as well; their visit prompts Monsieur Ladmiral to re-evaluate his own life. This film has its flaws. It is worth noting, ironically, that the undercurrents of strife in the family and the interactions of the various members are not meant to escalate the plot, nor are they exactly explained; instead, they are constructed to illustrate the archetypal interactions of a typical family

with oxymoronic moods and meanings. Tavernier succeeds in creating a taut, worthwhile, and meaningful film honed by painterly moods and temperaments. Tavernier's film *A Sunday in The Country* was in the competition for prestigious *Palme d'Or* at Cannes (1984) where it won the Best Director award. Said Peter Bradshaw: "Bertrand Tavernier: a flesh-and-blood lion of French cinema".



While this critic spent Tavernier at vintage *Cida de Goa hotel* nearly for a week, Tavernier said: "This film of mine has left out elements of 19<sup>th</sup> Century climate and made more contemporary of our times; if you notice with depth, you would discover how less vocal the film can be compelling and of eloquent silence to touch your soul; you must have a good aesthetic eye for my film that says little but suggests more."

A good work is something that sparkles like the northern star. *A Sunday in the Country* is like that, remaining ever illuminating.

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