Bertrand Tavernier, who has directed such varied films as *Death Watch* and *A Sunday in the Country*, chooses to explore diverse subjects partly because he is afraid of his natural tendency to return to the same themes and characters. On the set, Tavernier has caught himself repeating certain sequences from previous films. But he feels that despite his decision to explore different epochs and varied worlds, his central theme remains the same:

"Most of the characters that interest me are people who are preoccupied by the problems of communicating, and they are always people in crisis. On some level they are always creative people. Whether it be the Regent in *La Fête Commence* or Nathalie Baye in *Une Semaine de vacances*, Harvey Keitel in *Death Watch*, or even Michel Piccoli in *Les Enfants Gâtés*. The Regent of France was a musician, because he listened to music during the film. He was an intellectual, a writer, and he was dealing with the problem of power, like the central character of *Coup de Torchon*, who was dealing with corruption. I know that all these films have something in common, because at certain points it became a standard joke with the crew. They would say, 'Here we go again. We're doing the same sequence again that we did in his..."
last film.’ It’s true that, superficially, I like changing with each film, because I like exploring new worlds. But even in my choice of epochs, I have always chosen the moments when something was coming to an end, whether it was after ’68 in L’Horloger de St. Paul, or 1912 in Un Dimanche à la Campagne.”

Quite recently, Tavernier decided that he would not contradict his desire to return to the same theme. “I had great difficulty in letting go of the people in A Sunday in the Country. And I didn’t want to leave them for anything. They stayed with me for a long time, and they’re still with me. I wanted to remain in their atmosphere, and you know, that changed a lot of things for me: It changed the way I thought about directing. Suddenly, I found I could allow myself to retain certain things in the scenario that I wrote, which I would never have dared retain before A Sunday in the Country.”

Tavernier realizes that he has always, on some level, made films that describe his own creative process. He is not interested in making films about himself, in a documentary sense, but rather in exploring the relationships that surface in his imagination. “I have the impression that I always identify myself very strongly with most of my characters, and that they are, to some extent, allegorical images of a film director. Frequently, the main characters are my doubles. When I make a film, I always experience conflict between the central character and the secondary roles. I have very bizarre relationships with my secondary characters. Often, I feel that I am using them to reply to the doubts of the central character. Because one of the main characteristics of my central character is doubt, and a certain kind of questioning, and anxiety. Some of his questions are answered by the other characters, and another kind of question is resolved by the film itself, by the way it is shot. And another kind of question is answered and responded to by the public. I always want to leave a place for the spectator, and I know that some questions can only find a response in the audience.”

Tavernier believes that it is his responsibility as director to respond to the questions of his central character and also bring reassurance and answers to his actors. “One uses different methods for each person, but I feel that actors are often fragile, and that they demand some kind of protection from a director.
There are thousands of ways of giving them what they ask for. Sometimes it's enough to create a good atmosphere on the set, so they feel wanted and needed, and that you have trust in them. It's so important that they should feel they can try anything. That you never censor them. And I try to extend this same feeling to the technicians—in fact, to everyone who works on a film of mine. And then you have to create in your team a desire to surprise you. I've seen films where people just do their job. But they don't try to astonish the director because they don't have human contact with him. And without human contact you can't make demands and people never transcend themselves."

Tavernier adapts himself to the particular needs of each actor and does not have any habitual style of directing. "Harvey Keitel needed to have a deep understanding of what he was doing. He asked lots of questions about motivation. But I think some of it was just a need to be reassured. With Phillippe Noiret it was completely different. He needs two or three guidelines. With Romy Schneider, all I needed was to mention a piece of music. I'd say, 'I want you to act it like that passage of Mahler. I want you to find that melody for me.' And she would know exactly what I meant, and she'd do it. Harvey would have asked me, 'Why not Beethoven. Why Mahler?' I think that's also to do with a difference of acting traditions. Jean Vilar was used to acting the French classics and he had a very analytical understanding of everything. He understood what I wanted, immediately."

Tavernier's sensitivity to nuances of emotion is perhaps the most startling quality of his work. He often manages to capture movement of an emotion that is not in itself dramatic. In A Sunday in the Country, there are moments when Dureux, the painter, sits alone in his studio and reflects. Nothing is said and he makes few movements, and yet one senses his silent emotions. His daughter, Sabine Azéma, is an energetic, explosively cheerful young woman, and yet Tavernier, without any helpful hints from the dialogue, makes us aware of her underlying pain.

I asked him whether film lends itself easily to the expression of such delicate nuances of emotion for he has a novelist's ability to describe the inner life of characters. "I feel that film can
Melinda Camber Porter
Conversation with
Bertrand Tavernier
Paris 1985

explore emotion in great depth. All the directors, like Renoir and Lubitsch, whom I admire, have explored feelings. And I don't just mean that film can do what the novel does. I'm not just talking about the dialogues. For there are moments when the way you place the camera and the way you edit sequences can suggest emotions that are as deep as anything that Stendhal or Balzac could create. So you see I don't think the cinema has any limits. I've heard writers say that film is incapable of doing this or that. It's not true. And nor is the way you achieve certain moments a matter of technique. The way you move from one angle to another can change the whole meaning of a scene. It's like saying that Stendhal's sentences were a question of grammar."

Since Tavernier's eye is focused on the emotions of his characters, so his camera and his script trace the story of feelings. "I've been wanting to go in a more emotional direction. And I want now to completely suppress the notion of intrigue, in the sense of a dramatic twist. These coup de théâtres irritate me. I kept some in the first part of Death Watch and I regret it. I want the story to spring from the emotions of my characters, and for these emotions to arise out of the inner self of a character. I don't want emotions to come from some accident dreamt up by a screenwriter. For I believe that one can express very pure emotions in film."

"My favorite films, like La Règle du Jeu and La Grande Illusion, are those where dramatic ironies are minimal, and when they happen they are organic to the material. They are true surprises that ask real questions. And in modern American cinema there are directors like John Huston who base the rhythm of their film on the rhythm of their characters. With an actor like Gary Cooper you couldn't impose a rhythm on him. He brought along his own music. And you mustn't confuse rhythm with speed. And film can move slowly and still have a rhythm and a speed. It's really a question of music."

Tavernier tries to orchestrate the melodies of his characters' emotions, and his next film will be about this part of himself. He has chosen to make another "emotional" film. "Like A Sunday in the Country. It's about the deep friendship, almost the love between two men, from very different cultures: about a black
tenor saxophonist and a young Frenchman. And I've set it in Paris in 1959, which for me was one of the most creative periods for jazz. I want to make a film about the anguish and passions of a jazz musician. But there will also be a strong story of friendship which even people who don't know jazz will be able to understand. In the same way as in A Sunday in the Country, people could understand the film without knowing anything about being a painter.”

Tavernier wants his films to be accessible to the public. He talks about critics with disdain, and would not be content with an audience of intellectuals. He lives in Paris but often finds the atmosphere suffocating. And though this next film is set in Paris, he will shoot most of it in Lyon, his hometown. During our conversation he was often on the defensive, and though I do not feel and did not suggest that he was a conventional director, he told me that many critics do not describe him as “avant-garde.”

“Critics always try to categorize people, and contrast them. They say that one director is traditional, and another is avant garde. And then, twenty years later, you see that the supposedly traditional director is still an important force and the avant garde one is old-fashioned. The film industry is large enough to harbor all kinds of directors, and there should be a law against critics who say one kind of cinema is superior to the other. As for me, there are moments when I envy what Godard does. But there's no reason for me to feel inferior to Godard. I lost that complex a long time ago. I think I'd be incapable of making his kind of films. I don't think Godard would have the discipline I have to make my kind of films. I don't think that there’s one genre of cinema that is superior to another, or that one genre of film renders another kind of film obsolete.”