# 13 Bertolucci's *The Conformist*: A morals charge

IN *Open City* THERE IS a minor character so loathsome and perverse that we do not even stop to consider his motivation in collaborating with the Nazis. He is the Roman police commissioner who strives to outdo even Bergmann, the Gestapo chief, in hunting down Resistance leaders. The character of this super-collaborator little interested Rossellini, who was far more intent on showing the heroics of the partisan Italians—those who stood up to the Nazi threat and even to Nazi torture rather than surrender their freedom and dignity to a tyrannous state. Rossellini's film bespoke a Manichean division of the world into resisters and collaborators, and the latter were without complexity or human interest (with the exception of Marina, whose betrayal was motivated by sentimental, not political, considerations).

It took the Italian cinema twenty-five years to be able to look back at Fascism and war in a more complicated way, to ask what induced Rossellini's police commissioner to condone, if not to abet, authoritarian rule. In *The Conformist*, Bertolucci tells the other story implicit in *Open City*—that of one man's reasons for collaborating with a murderous regime. Where Rossellini's didactic intent in 1945 was to generate a new Italian society based on Resistance ideals, Bertolucci's emphasis suggests a far darker lesson for the viewing public of 1970. The impulse to consider the phenomenon of collaboration, not of resistance, makes *The Conformist* a cautionary tale—one that enjoins us to heed our history lest we relive its worst moments. "That is why I say *The Conformist* is a film on the present," Bertolucci told Marilyn Goldin. "And when I say that I want to make the public

leave with a sense of malaise, perhaps feeling the presence of something obscurely sinister, it's because I want them to realize that however the world has changed, feelings have remained the same."[1]

Despite the radical shift in emphasis that separates Rossellini's film from Bertolucci's, and despite their vast stylistic differences, the works share a moral purpose which locates *The Conformist* in a realist tradition. Bertolucci's desire "to make the public leave with a sense of malaise," to force his viewers to confront their Fascist past and to rethink their relationship to it, constitutes a plea for moral responsibility akin to the early neorealists'. When De Sica said of his first postwar film *Shoeshine* that it was a contribution to the "moral reconstruction of our country," he was arguing not only for a politically activist cinema, but for a morally accountable one.[2] As a reaction to the Fascist film industry and to the ideology it espoused, the neorealists deplored any form of escapism and insisted that the public once more take charge of its political destiny. Similarly, Bertolucci's film may be seen as a parable of what happens when an individual, and by extension when an entire populace, abdicates responsibility for its moral condition. This tropological reading provides not only the interpretive key to *The Conformist*, but its link to the neorealist tradition whose technical divergence from Bertolucci's flamboyant cinema should not blind us to its kindred ethics.[3]

Perhaps the strongest argument for a moral reading of *The Conformist* can be made from a comparison between the film and the eponymous novel by Alberto Moravia. With the ex-

[1] See "Bertolucci on *The Conformist*: An Interview with Marilyn Goldin," *Sight and Sound* 40 (Spring 1971), 66. On the contemporary applicability of *The Conformist*'s themes, see the interview in Jean Gili, *Le cinéma italien*, p. 72.

[2] This quote is discussed at some length in my preface.

[3] On Bertolucci's highly ambivalent relationship to neorealism, see Francesco Casetti, *Bertolucci* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1975), p. 28.

ception of the ending, Bertolucci deviates little from Moravia's storyline, which begins with a childhood incident in the life of Marcello Clerici, scion of an upper middle-class Roman family in decay. When the thirteen-year-old Marcello is picked up and propositioned by a homosexual chauffeur, Lino, the child responds with a barrage of gunfire intended to kill his would-be seducer. As an adult, Marcello seeks to obliterate his sense of deviancy by conforming to the social mores and political ideology of 1930s Italy. Accordingly, he marries the unremarkable Giulia and ingratiates himself with the Fascist hierarchy by volunteering for a counterintelligence mission to be carried out in Paris. There he is to insinuate himself into the expatriate underground led by his former thesis advisor, Professor Quadri, and eventually to set up the anti-Fascist leader for liquidation. After an intense and erotically confusing sojourn in Paris with the professor and his bisexual wife, Marcello allows the assassination plot to reach its gory conclusion. The story then flashes forward to the fall of the Mussolini regime as the Clericis, seeking to escape reprisals, are killed by Allied strafing in the countryside near Tagliacozzo.

Moravia's ending is the logical conclusion to a story of inexorable fate: Marcello is marked from the outset by a love of violence and by a feminine sultriness which leads him to be seduced and to react with homicidal vengeance time and again. Though the encounter with Lino was consummated neither sexually nor murderously, it nonetheless dictates the cycles of seduction and destruction he is destined to play out for the remainder of his life. Marcello is portrayed as helpless to ward off this grim fatality, which makes him akin to the Greek hero-victim who, in seeking to escape his destiny, only helps to bring it about. With the deadly strafing on the road to Tagliacozzo, Moravia offers a modern technological equivalent to the *deus ex machina* that intervenes from above to facilitate the plot resolution, while giving his

story a final psychological and poetic twist.[4] The disciplinary action that Marcello had continually sought in vain from parents and Church is now finally issued by this agent of divine justice. And, appropriately, it is the gun he had always desired and had earned at such cost, from Lino and from the Fascist authorities, which lowers itself from heaven to bring him his final punitive reward.

Bertolucci has often remarked on the fatalism of Moravia's novel and has likened it to Greek drama in its governing principles. "The destiny of the conformist," he explained, "was like fate in the Greek tragedies"[5] and it is against this very mechanistic approach that the filmmaker is reacting in his adaptation of the novel. Bertolucci opts to replace Moravia's dramatic determinism with psychological determinism. "I prefer that the force of the subconscious take the place of 'fate,' " he told Joan Mellen.[6] Hence Bertolucci's ending eschews the "divine" intervention of American machine-gun fire and insists instead upon Marcello's final moment of psychic self-revelation and self-acceptance. Accordingly, the film ends as Marcello turns toward a young male prostitute with obvious pederastic intent.

Although this denouement certainly privileges the psychosexual determinants of Marcello's character, I find that Bertolucci's critical formulation of the difference between his emphasis and Moravia's is necessarily reductive. It is not simply a question of Moravian fate versus Bertoluccian subconscious, since the subconscious functions importantly in the novel as well, serving as the subterranean and inexorable force against which the textual protagonist must struggle. This is not to deny that Bertolucci has indeed replaced Moravia's

[4]Bertolucci himself invokes the *deus ex machina* comparison in "Bernardo Bertolucci Seminar," *American Film Institute Dialogue on Film* 3 (April 1974), 18.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Joan Mellen, "A Conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci," *Cinéaste* 5 (1973), 22. On Bertolucci's substitution of psychological motivation for fate, see Witcombe, *The New Italian Cinema*, p. 94.

fate with something else. But I would argue that the film is far more interested in the ethical consequences of Fascist adherence than in the psychological causes of it, as an analysis of the ending should indicate.

Prior to Marcello's visual embrace of the male prostitute, he has been wandering about the streets of Rome with his blind friend Italo Montanari, a Bertoluccian addition to Moravia's dramatis personae who functions in the film as the apologist for Fascist ideology and as Clerici's entrée into the secret service. When the two arrive at the Colosseum, they overhear a homosexual flirtation between Lino and the young male prostitute. The spectacle of Lino alive prompts a strange, seemingly demented response in Marcello, who shouts, "Where were you, what were you doing on March 25, 1917?" and again "What were you doing at 4 P.M., October 15, 1938?" The two dates correspond to the various murders for which Marcello believes he is responsible—that of Lino and those of the Quadris—and their linkage reveals the psychopathology of his conformist logic. To atone for the earlier crime, which made him a social outcast in his own eyes, Marcello pledges allegiance to a society in 1938 which requires acts of brutality and murder by its loyal henchmen. This creates the paradox of an atonement that recapitulates the very sin requiring expiation—the equivalent of the physician's homeopathic cure. The logic of Marcello's strategy is verbalized with satiric savagery in the scene of his premarital confession in church. "Blood washes blood," Marcello tells Don Lattanzi. "I confess today the sin I will commit tomorrow." "Are you a member of some subversive group?" asks the priest. "No, I am a member of the organization that hunts down subversives." With this answer Marcello earns Don Lattanzi's full absolution in advance.

It is no coincidence that Lino should be found alive on the very day of Mussolini's deposition. These twin events prove that Marcello's conformist logic is doubly flawed. With Lino alive, Marcello realizes that he never committed the very

murder for which the Quadri assassination was to exonerate him. Furthermore, in seeking society's forgiveness, Marcello had never asked *which* society, but had assumed that the Fascist state was absolute, universal, and immutable—not the aberration that history proved it to be. When Marcello discovers the fallacy of his logic, his subsequent ravings reveal the moral disorder at the root of Fascist thought. "His name is Pasqualino Semirama," Marcello announces to random passers-by. "He assassinated a man, a political exile, Professor Quadri, Luca Quadri and his wife, Anna Quadri. He's a pederast, a Fascist." Marcello then turns to Italo and shouts, "he too is a Fascist." By casting the blame for the Quadri murder on Lino, Marcello is performing a very perverse and morally suspect act of logical condensation. The explanation that he had offered in confession—that because he murdered Lino he must murder the Quadris—is shortened to "Lino murdered the Quadris" in a process that conflates the two clauses by making the object of the first one the subject of the second, neatly removing Marcello from the equation (and from all culpability). Such grammatical short-circuiting yields more than gratuitous results, for it reveals the ethical basis of authoritarianism. The agent is not morally accountable for his actions, he is merely the conduit of some external authority whose dictates he follows as a matter of duty. By accusing Lino of murder, pederasty, Fascist allegiance, and later by leveling the last charge at Italo as well, Marcello is disowning responsibility for his crimes in true authoritarian fashion. He is not the author of his moral being.

Marcello's projection of responsibility onto Lino at the end of the film retrospectively organizes an entire pattern of moral abdications. When Manganiello, the Fascist henchman, offers his services to his new boss, Marcello's first orders are to do away with his mother's drug-procuring lover, her Japanese chauffeur Chi. What masquerades as a test of Manganiello's loyalty is really proof of Marcello's cowardice in

refusing to avenge his filial honor himself.[7] More importantly, Marcello takes no personal responsibility for joining the Fascist party. Instead, he blames Quadri, whose anti-Fascist teachings at the University of Rome had sustained Marcello until 1928, the year of his mentor's torture and eventual self-exile to Paris. "You left, and I became a Fascist," Marcello explains, thus placing the entire burden of his political apostasy at Quadri's expatriate feet.

Most curious is the way in which Marcello disavows responsibility for the counterintelligence plan that was his very own devising. When the journey to Paris must be interrupted by a stop in Ventimiglia where Marcello will get his final briefing for the mission, he learns that plans have changed. "There is a counterorder from Rome," announces Comrade Raoul. Instead of spying on Quadri, "you must simply eliminate him." Marcello accepts these orders, and the accompanying pistol, undismayed. "This means I have no alternatives," he says with obvious relief that the final decision on Quadri's fate is not up to him. As if Marcello had nothing at all to do with the original conspiracy against Quadri, he greets this command with good grace like the proper functionary that he is.

If Italo Montanari, the blind ideologue, is the embodiment of Fascist theory, then Manganiello is the embodiment of Fascist practice. His name is a play on the Italian word "manganello," meaning club, which suggests his Pulcinella ancestry in the comedia dell'arte. Indeed, our first reaction to Manganiello is an amused one, not unlike the world's first reaction to Mussolini as a posturing, preening buffoon.

[7]This is one of Bertolucci's fanciful emendations to the text. Moravia's chauffeur was not Japanese, nor was he eliminated by Manganiello. Bertolucci's modification adds humor and thematic reinforcement to the film. Since "chi" means "who" in Italian, the name provides an occasion for comic equivocation between question and answer. The elimination of Chi proves Manganiello's brutality and Marcello's abdication of responsibility for his misdeeds.

Manganiello provides much of the film's humor, from his chat with the birds in a Parisian park to his hardly inconspicuous trailing of the Clericis and the Quadris on the eve of the assassination. The flash to a Laurel and Hardy photo on the dance-hall window furthers the comic implications of Manganiello's role—he plays the stout, bullying Oliver Hardy to Marcello's slight, sniveling Stan Laurel. However, as Fascism evolved from silly buffoonery in the world's eyes to malignant warmongering, so too does Manganiello's cinematic presence.[8] At the film's climax, he bespeaks the vilest articles of the Nazi-Fascist faith. "Cowards, perverts, Jews. They're all the same. If it were up to me I'd put them against the wall all together. It would be even better to eliminate them immediately, at birth." As a gestural accompaniment to this tirade, Manganiello urinates at the assassination site in the intermission between Quadri's murder and that of his wife.

Throughout the film, Manganiello has articulated the authoritarian defense against moral accountability. After giving Marcello the unwelcome news that Anna Quadri has joined her husband on the journey which is to end in their deaths, Manganiello disowns all blame for the predicament. "I mean I followed instructions to the letter." At two separate moments later in the journey to the assassination site, Manganiello remembers an episode in which the morality of the secret police missions is called into serious question. The fact that Manganiello sees fit to mention the incident twice suggests not only his failure to resolve the issue and his consequent discomfort with it, but also Bertolucci's insistence that we apply the moral lessons of this parable to the assassination that is about to occur. "Do you believe in fate, *dottore*?" asks Manganiello, who then begins to tell of a similar mission in Africa which was followed by a belated counterorder from Rome. So elliptical is this account that it leaves us eager to know more, but our curiosity will be satisfied

[8] On the deterioration of Manganiello's character in our eyes, see Robert Hatch's review of *The Conformist* in *Nation*, 5 April 1971, 446.

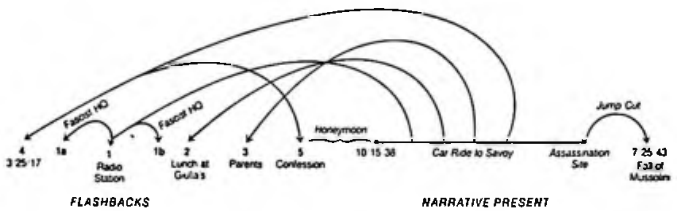
only much later in the film when Manganiello resumes his narrative just prior to their arrival at the assassination site. "In Africa, after so much work, four dead. He discovers it wasn't necessary. Our commanding officer said 'You've ruined me. You're beasts.' 'This, no,' I answered, 'we're men, not beasts.' " Of course, Bertolucci implies that the opposite is true for those who would follow orders regardless of their moral content. Manganiello's defense (and it is a flimsy one even in his own eyes, or he would not protest so much) is to attribute the fourfold murder in Africa to superhuman fate. When Manganiello argues that it was destined to be, and that he was merely an agent of the inevitable, he also links the Quadri murder plot to the principle of divine fatality. But this very association is given the lie by the astonishing frequency with which counterorders are issued.[9] If Fascist authority has the status of superhuman destiny, it must be absolute and inviolate, not subject to constant change by the vacillating command in Rome. What emerges from the shambles of this failed analogy is that orders are as fallible as the highly uncertain human beings from whom they issue, and to obey them as if they were divine writ, regardless of their equivocal morality, is to abdicate one's own human status. Manganiello and his ilk well deserved the opprobrium of their commanding officer.

In his structuring of the film, Bertolucci offers perhaps his most powerful illustration of the ethics of Fascist collaboration. Bertolucci has been criticized for his failure to follow Moravia's linear chronology and he has been accused of an arbitrary and confusing shuffling of past, present, and future.[10] I would argue instead that such reordering is not only purposeful, but essential to his moral adaptation of the Mo-

[9]Marcello himself comments on this in the novel. See Alberto Moravia, *The Conformist*, trans. Angus Davidson (New York: Playboy Paperbacks, 1982), pp. 126–27.

[10]See, for example, Hollis Alpert, Review of *The Conformist*, *Saturday Review*, 10 April 1971, 40, and Stanley Kauffmann's review, 10 April 1971, 24.

ravian text. "I thought maybe I need[ed] two times, the present and the past," Bertolucci said of his decision to break up Moravia's chronological storyline.[11] Accordingly, the filmmaker locates his narrative present in the car ride which takes Marcello and Manganiello from Paris to the assassination site on the way to Savoy. During the course of this journey, which begins early in the morning of 15 October 1938 and continues until 4 P.M., Marcello remembers the series of events leading up to his current predicament. These reminiscences are presented in a complex and disorienting group of flashbacks which take us about two-thirds into the film before the past catches up with the present and we have enough information finally to understand the opening sequence. The narrative exposition is given fitfully in a series of flashbacks whose order in the film defies any chronological sequencing. These include 1) a visit to Italo in a radio station; 2) lunch at Giulia's; 3) a visit to his mother at home and his father in an asylum; 4) the pseudo-murder of Lino; and 5) the confession in church and the honeymoon journey to Paris. Once in Paris, the narrative proceeds smoothly, and brings us up to the dance-hall scene on the eve of the assassination. After the murder, Bertolucci flashes forward to 25 July 1943, the day of Mussolini's downfall, for his film's denouement. The narrative structure, though far more complex than that of *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion*, may be diagrammed in similar fashion.




With his very first flashback, Bertolucci introduces us to the difficulties of his editorial style. We are in the radio sta-

[11] "Bertolucci Seminar," p. 23.

tion as a begrudging Italo congratulates Marcello on his impending marriage. When Italo goes on the air, Marcello dozes off, only to be awakened by a Fascist official who reports that the protagonist's counterintelligence plan is under consideration by the party higher-ups. This dialogue is punctuated by a flashback to Marcello's arrival at Fascist headquarters to submit his plan, and by a flashforward to Fascist headquarters to receive final approval. A later flashback, that of the 1917 encounter with Lino, takes as its point of departure a moment in the narrative present of the car ride to Savoy, but finds its point of return in another flashback—that of the premarital confession in church. T. Jefferson Kline sees in these disorienting editorial techniques Bertolucci's attempt to simulate a dream state—an argument supported by the fact that Marcello's flashbacks often seem to come in the aftermath of his dropping off to sleep.[12] I would argue that the oneiric effects are part of a larger mimetic technique on Bertolucci's part. Like the novel, whose narrator speaks in the third person but whose perspective is exclusively that of Marcello, the film mimics its protagonist's mode of vision. By structuring so much of the film around a series of flashbacks which are the product of reminiscence, Bertolucci establishes Marcello's subjectivity as the source of the camera's perspective. Marcello's cognitive style becomes Bertolucci's, in an example of the free indirect subjective which Pasolini considered the cinematic equivalent of free indirect discourse in literature. If this is indeed the case, then other elements of Bertolucci's style no longer appear to be arbitrary, bravura effects and become, instead, visual analogues of Marcello's mental state. His surrealism (the profusion of walnuts on Raoul's desk, the apples on Marcello's daughter's bureau, for example) the oblique camera angle as Manganiello first

[12]See T. Jefferson Kline, "The Unconformist," in *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation*, ed. Andrew Horton and Joan Magretta (New York: Ungar, 1981), especially p. 231.

follows Marcello home, the darkened sets, split-screen effects, and so on[13] all suggest an abnormal, chaotic mental state—that of a troubled psyche, beset by warring impulses, which seeks the solace of a strict order imposed upon it from without.[14] Marcello's rigid body language, typified by robot-like movements and a total absence of physical spontaneity, reflects, on a kinesthetic level, his efforts to control the chaos of his inner psychic state. Accordingly, Italo sees the potential for hysterical collapse in his friend as he admonishes Marcello several times in the film to "be calm."

Bertolucci's nonchronological structuring of the story does more than establish Marcello's consciousness as the cognitive center of the film, however. This ordering technique also says something crucial about the moral and existential consequences of adherence to Fascist thought. By privileging the car ride, which would merit no attention at all in a sequential telling of the story, the film is able to concentrate our attention on the present of decision-making whose results Bertolucci identifies with Fascism itself. The journey is really one agonizing process of choice—will Marcello intervene to save the life of his beloved, or will he watch her murder in complicitous passivity? By devoting so much attention to the decision, Bertolucci rejects the Moravian emphasis on inexorable fate and insists instead on Marcello's sovereign free will. In the novel, there is no car ride to Savoy and, more importantly, there is no witness of the assassination by Marcello at all—he learns about it after the fact from a newspaper account and then a verbal report by Manganiello (called

[13] On Bertolucci's surrealism, see Pauline Kael, "The Poetry of Images," in *Deeper into Movies*, p. 345. According to Joel Magny, Bertolucci's style in *The Conformist* mimics that of the prewar cinematic avant-garde. See "Dimension politique de l'oeuvre de Bernardo Bertolucci de *Prima della rivoluzione* à *Novecento*," in *Bernardo Bertolucci*, ed. Michele Estève (Paris: Minard, 1979), p. 66.

[14] Bertolucci also uses color as an external manifestation of Marcello's psychic disarray. See Bernard Oheix, "Notes sur les composantes du récit et de l'image," in *Bernardo Bertolucci*, ed. Estève, p. 118.

Orlando in the text). Instead, Bertolucci's Marcello not only beholds the event, but spends some ten hours in a car trying to decide whether or not to abort the mission.

Like Moravia's Marcello, Bertolucci's could have also stayed in Paris and let the Fascist hit men do their dirty work unobserved. But the phone call by Manganiello informing him that Anna Quadri has joined her husband precipitates Marcello into action. He travels with Manganiello in the initial hope of intervening to save Anna, as proved by his insistence on getting out of the car when Manganiello concludes, "There's nothing we can do for the woman." Marcello's original motives in undertaking the journey are heroic, activist, interventionist ones. In the name of love, Marcello will transcend Fascist allegiances, challenge his killer destiny, and escape to a promised land of freedom and erotic abandon. The dream he recounts to Manganiello dramatizes the romantic impulse that led him to undertake the journey to Savoy. "I was blind. You were driving me to Switzerland to a clinic. It was Professor Quadri who was to operate on me. The operation was a success, I got back my sight and I left with the professor's wife who was in love with me." In this dream, Marcello inadvertently maps out a possible happy ending to the film: a conversion to anti-Fascism, true love, and romantic escape. What Bertolucci is implying here is that Marcello could rewrite his story and become literally the author of his destiny were he to opt for the active heroism that would merit such a narrative reward. Instead, Marcello chooses to sit in cowardly inertia as two people are vilely murdered at his initial behest. The heroic ethos that bade him undertake the journey has evolved into passive, cowardly abdication of responsibility—an evolution suggestive of Fascism itself, where the promise of macho adventurism gives way to the dreary, morally evasive reality of carrying out other men's threats. The car ride to Savoy *is* Fascism in its movement from a seemingly heroic ethos to a passive and cowardly one.

Perhaps the most ingenious of Bertolucci's textual modifications is his insertion of Plato's myth of the cave, for this not only synthesizes the film's moral arguments, but also legitimizes his cinematographic techniques. From the very outset of the film, the theme of vision has assumed obvious moral proportions.[15] Italo Montanari, the Fascist apologist, is sightless, and as his first name suggests, we are to take him as a personification of an entire populace blinded by Mussolini's untruths. Likewise, Marcello is blind in his dream, and regains his vision thanks to the surgical intervention of Quadri. During the scene in Quadri's study where professor and exstudent retell the myth of Plato's cave, vision is explicitly wed to certain moral and political choices.

> Imagine an enormous tunnel in the form of a cavern. On the inside, [there are] men who have lived there since childhood, all enchained and obliged to face the back of the cave. Far behind them shines the light of a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners imagine a wall, low, similar to the little stage on which the puppeteer has his puppets appear . . . and now try to imagine men who pass behind that wall carrying statues of wood and stone. . . . What do they [the prisoners] see? . . . They see only the shadows that the fire projects.

It is the professor who gives the parable its political gloss. "Shadows, the reflections of things, as happens to you today in Italy." Meanwhile, Marcello has been unconsciously pantomiming this lesson by raising his arm in the Roman salute and then turning away from the light of the window to the wall on which his own silhouette is projected. At the end of the scene, Quadri suddenly opens the window shutters and Marcello's shadow dissipates in a visual enactment of the moment of Platonic enlightenment. Like the dream of restored vision, this triumph of light over shadow alludes to

[15] On the primacy of the visual theme in *The Conformist*, see Magny, "Dimension politique," pp. 65–66.

the possibility of a happy ending through a conversion to anti-Fascist truth under the aegis of Quadri. But the professor is not the unequivocal hero of the piece, as the Platonic allusion might initially indicate. Instead, further reading of the passage in *The Republic* gives support to Marcello's indictment of his professor's decision to expatriate. Socrates argues that the enlightened must not be allowed to remain aloof, but must share their illumination with their fellow citizens—an implicit condemnation of Quadri's move to abandon Rome and leave his Italian followers to their own devices. In his way, then, Quadri has also abdicated moral responsibility by forsaking the incipient anti-Fascist movement he was supposed to have led.[16] When Giulia announces that Quadri must be a typical intellectual, "negative and impotent," her mindless stereotyping is not without some measure of accuracy.

Retrospectively, the Platonic reference gives philosophic coherence and weight to many of Bertolucci's stylistic and imagistic choices. The sequence in which Marcello receives official approval for his spy mission offers the spectacle of large pieces of statuary—an eagle and the bust of a man—being carried through the ministry lobby. These, then, are the statues positioned on the low wall of Plato's cave and they, like the propagandizing images of Mussolini's rhetoric, will block out the light of the fire to produce those shadows that will be mistaken for the real. Elements of the myth of Plato's cave also recur in the penultimate scene of the film as a bust of Mussolini is dragged over Ponte Sant'Angelo in the wake of the tyrant's deposition. The headlight of a motorcycle which pierces the darkness suggests the illuminating power of anti-Fascist truth to dispel the shadows produced by the imagery of dictatorship.

With the myth of Plato's cave, Bertolucci gives a philo-

[16] According to Mellen, "Bertolucci in both *Il conformista* and *The Spider Strategem* (1969–70) condemns the default of intellectuals to devise and lead the necessary resistance to the rise of fascist power." See "Fascism in the Contemporary Film," p. 3.

sophical justification for his lighting techniques throughout the film. His predilection for black backgrounds and for striking chiaroscuro effects is no mere imitation of contemporary film styles of the 1930s, it is also a way of appropriating the moral teachings of Plato's myth. The Roman sequences of the film are considerably darker, suggesting the blighted vision of those prey to Fascist illusions. Light and dark are juxtaposed throughout the film: in the split-screen *mise-en-scène* of the confession, for example, or in the diagonal zebra stripes of Giulia's parlor, which reflect the pattern of her dress and move along the surfaces of the room as if a rhythmical wind were rippling the slats of her Venetian blinds. This zebra-stripe technique is used again, less flamboyantly, but far more momentously, at the assassination site. Here, the woodland setting gives verisimilitude to the alternating bars of light and dark that filter through the tall trees. If we interpret Plato's myth of the cave not as a static confrontation between truth and illusion, but as a dynamic model of conversion, then the light and dark imagery in the murder scene corresponds to the moral choice that besets Marcello. By opting not to intervene on behalf of Anna, Marcello chooses the Platonic shadows rather than the light. Bertolucci shows the moral consequences of this choice in a jump cut to a scene five years later, which is shot in almost total darkness. In fact, a blackout actually does occur some minutes into the scene which has caused this viewer, on several occasions, to suspect a malfunctioning projector. What Bertolucci is showing us in these final dark sequences is how Marcello has fulfilled the negative teachings of Plato's myth by choosing the shadows of Fascist compliance over the bright light of resistance.

The five-year interval between the Quadri assassination and Mussolini's downfall has brought some superficial changes in the direction of Marcello's vaunted normalcy. The Clericis have set up housekeeping in Rome and they have had a daughter, Marta—yet reminders of the atrocity abound. Marta is blue-eyed and blond, unlike either of her parents, but very

much like Anna. She is playing dress-up in the final scenes and just happens to be wearing the fox fur that Anna had lent Giulia in Paris, but had not lived long enough to ask for in return. When this blond Marta recites the "Ave Maria" at the prompting of her father, they stand against a wallpaper background of blue heavens and white clouds which suggests the artifice and insincerity of Marcello's belabored normalcy.

Plato's myth is given its most striking and ambiguous enactment in the final scene of the film when Marcello turns toward the male prostitute in acknowledgment of his own repressed desires. The young man lives in a niche in the Colosseum whose source of light and heat is a fire just outside the iron grating that serves as his door. When Marcello gazes upon the young man, fire, niche, and bars provide the equivalents of the setting for Plato's prisoners enchained in the cave. But the moral applicability of the myth is less obvious. Is Marcello embracing the shadows or the light in accepting his latent sexual inclinations? Though his gaze appears to be toward the back of the niche/cave and hence toward falsehood and illusion, his yielding to homosexuality would be a surrender to the truth which he had sought to deny through Fascism and murder—the political "shadows" of the story. By positioning the fire neither to the front nor to the back of Marcello, but to the left side, so that his face remains half in the shadow and half in the light, Bertolucci keeps the ambiguity alive. In so doing, he raises the metacinematic possibilities of Plato's myth and implicates the viewers in its moral challenge. "When you read the *Cave* of Plato's," Bertolucci explains, "the cave is exactly like the theater and the background is the screen and Plato says there is a fire and people walking in front of the fire and the fire projects the shadows in the background of the cave. It's the invention of the cinema."[17] Even without Bertolucci's explanatory gloss, the end of the film forces us to reflect on the illusionism of the me-

[17] "Bertolucci Seminar," p. 21.

dium itself when Marcello turns toward the male prostitute in the final shot. As his eyes seek out his object of desire, they meet our own gaze, breaking the conventional prohibition against looking into the camera and thus destroying the illusion of reality upon which the cinema depends. As he looks upon the young man and upon ourselves in curiosity and desire, he exposes the curious and desirous nature of our own relationship to cinematic illusion. What Bertolucci is telling us, in making this analogy, is to beware of the seductive allure of the shadows on the screen, to perceive them critically, not to endow them with power over us. Fascism worked because people succumbed to illusion, granting moral authority to superior forces which legislated their own ethics and imposed them on a passive, uncritical, irresponsible public. By owning up to the illusory nature of his art, Bertolucci is taking moral responsibility for it and is urging his viewers to accept his fictions for what they are. Bertolucci's plea for moral accountability would lack all credibility without its forthright application to his own filmmaking venture.

Our study of *The Conformist* would be less than thorough were we to ignore the film's title, which Bertolucci wisely chose to borrow from Moravia with all its multileveled meanings and attendant ironies. Indeed, in his very first flashback, Bertolucci offers the perfect visual and aural expression of that social conformity to which Marcello aspires. Three women, identically dressed and coiffed, sing in harmony before the microphone of a radio broadcast studio.[18] In Andrews Sisters fashion, they are individuated neither physically nor vocally as they conform to a collective image which discourages any revelation of difference. The next item on the program, Italo's Fascist apologia, is the ideological equivalent of the immediately previous exercise in

[18]For an insightful analysis of this sequence in which the radio station is seen as both the epitome of that normalcy sought by Marcello and an analogue to Plato's cave, see Andrew Britton, "Bertolucci: Thinking about Father," *Movie* 23 (1976–77), 1.

conformist entertainment. In celebrating "the Prussian aspect of Mussolini and the Latin aspect of Hitler," Italo typifies not only the excesses of Fascist rhetoric in general, but the fanciful effort to make two very different regimes conform to one another in a way that denies the individual identity of each. Cinematographically, Bertolucci illustrates this abdication of individual identity in his technique of shooting through glass.[19] At various points in this scene, Italo and Marcello are shot as mere reflections on the transparent partition separating the office from the broadcast studio. Both men have forfeited their titles to individuality—Marcello in his desire to be socially invisible, and Italo in his adherence to an ideology of coercive uniformity.

One of the many ironies of the title is that Marcello's very ambition to conform already sets him apart from the masses whose ranks he hopes to join. "Everyone wants to be different from the others," Italo tells him in the radio station. "Instead, you want to be the same." Throughout the film Bertolucci offers visual proof of how very self-defeating Marcello's efforts at assimilation are. As a child, he was singled out to be the victim of the gang assault which led him to ask protection of Lino. In Paris, as Marcello is being led to his audience with Quadri, he is accompanied by a group of the professor's disciples who form a hostile circle around this accurately perceived enemy of their cause. But the most striking illustration of Marcello's antisocial status is the celebrated farandole in the dance hall of Joinville which culminates the dance imagery throughout the film and bids us look back at its many prefigurations in earlier scenes. Often, during the course of *The Conformist*, dance has served as the moving image of social conformity. In the radio station, the indistinguishable singing threesome do a dance routine in perfect synchrony. Such is their enthusiasm for uniformity

[19] On this technique, see ibid., p. 4; Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 306; and Richard Roud, "Fathers and Sons," *Sight and Sound* 40 (Spring 1971), 64.

that they they cannot help but dress alike and execute these identical dance steps, even though the medium of the radio is indifferent to the visual aspects of their performance. When Giulia does a similar dance routine to the phonograph record her uncle sent from America, she is conforming to her society's appetite for exotica from the New World.[20] Anna Quadri is also associated with the dance. As a ballet instructor she is allied with classical, humanist culture—a link that Bertolucci has made explicit in several interviews where he has condemned the Quadris' anti-Fascism as stemming from bourgeois, idealist impulses and not from Marxist conviction.[21] Her teaching of ballet would suggest her connection with those very bourgeois cultural values which the Marxist revolution would seek to destroy.

If, by the end of the film, Bertolucci has not succeeded in convincing us of the metaphoric function of his dance sequences, the climactic farandole in the *bal populaire* should seal the argument. The spectacle of so many dancers who give their unconditional assent to a set of rules that govern the movements of each participant offers a perfect metaphor for social conformity. In the flamboyant tango that Anna and Giulia dance together they enact the parodic relationship that homosexuality bears to the social order. Just as the tango is a caricature of seduction, so too does homoerotic love appropriate, sometimes satirically, the conventions of heterosexual passion. Given the nonconformist (or para-conformist) nature of Anna's desire for Giulia, it is fitting that they should dance alone and that the other couples should surrender the floor to them in curiosity and amusement.

For Giulia, whose conventionality would never allow her seriously to entertain Anna's lesbian advances, the farandole

[20] On this scene and its relationship to that of the radio station, see Britton, "Bertolucci," p. 3.

[21] See "Bertolucci Seminar," p. 19; Mellen, "A Conversation with Bertolucci," p. 21; and Goldin, "Bertolucci on *The Conformist*," p. 66. On the shared class background of Marcello and the Quadris, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 304.

13. *In his reluctance to join the dance led by Giulia (Stefania Sandrelli) and Anna (Dominique Sanda), Marcello (Jean-Louis Trintignant) dramatizes his outsider's relationship to the social order.*

is the true expression of her social being. As a kind of social chameleon, she adapts perfectly to her surroundings, attributing her high spirits now to her Parisian setting. "Ça c'est Paris. Je suis une femme à la page," she says, using French to show how well assimilated she indeed is. With this pronouncement, she begins the farandole in which nearly everyone joins, even the hunchbacked Quadri whose disability does not prevent his entering this rite of social consensus. Among the few who sit out the dance are Marcello and Manganiello, and it is during this interlude that the information required for the assassination plot is exchanged. Since murder, especially the murder of a Resistance leader exiled in France, is the antisocial act par excellence, their abstention from the dance is metaphorically apt. When Marcello is finally forced onto the floor he reacts like a captive, standing alone, moving counterclockwise as the revellers swarm around in the opposite direction. No image could speak more eloquently of his status as social misfit.

What the film's ironies unanimously point to is not the fallacy of its title, but its unexpected referent. Marcello is indeed a conformist, but not to the society whose sanction he so craves. In Moravia's terms, he is a conformist to the fate he sought to escape and in so doing, only hastened to bring about. In Bertolucci's terms he is a conformist to his own psychopathology, ultimately embracing his homosexual leanings, as well as his father's propensity to madness which, though not caused by syphilis, seems nonetheless to have a hereditary source.

Much has been made of Bertolucci's psychosexual explanation for Fascism and this has formed the basis of considerable criticism of the film in the American press.[22] Such objections, however, reflect a serious misinterpretation of Bertolucci's argument, which is not a homophobic one by

[22]See, for example, Jay Cocks, *Time*, 5 April 1971, 86; Kauffmann, review, p. 24; and Kael, *Deeper into Movies*, p. 343.

any means, but which attributes Fascism to the need to deny perceived individual differences of any sort. The etiology of Fascism is not homosexuality—indeed Lino and the male prostitute have nothing in common with the thugs who exterminate the Quadris or the government officials who authorize them to do so. To further vitiate any presumed equivalence between authoritarian and homoerotic tendencies, there is the example of Anna, who is lesbian and anti-Fascist.[23] "Homosexuality is just an element in Marcello's character," Bertolucci explained to Joan Mellen. "Marcello feels different because of his secret homosexuality . . . and when you feel 'different' you have to make a choice: to act with violence against the existing power or, like most people, to ask for the protection of power."[24] Far from insisting that underneath every Fascist lurks a repressed homosexual, Bertolucci presents Marcello's idiosyncratic sexuality as one example of the general need to deny personal differences, which would lead an insecure, threatened individual to identify with an all-powerful state. Upon close analysis, the erotic impulses that subvert Marcello's psychic order are not all homosexual by any means. Of the three characters who arouse his libidinal interest—Lino, the prostitute in Ventimiglia, and Anna—two are women. Though Moravia gives the Anna character the name "Lina," suggesting that it is her homosexuality, or at least her sexual ambiguity, that appeals to Marcello, the writer also associates her with the prostitute in Ventimiglia whose appeal to Marcello is unequivocally feminine. Similarly, in the film, Bertolucci links Marcello's reactions to the prostitute and Anna by having Dominique Sanda

[23] On Anna's lesbianism, see Joan Mellen, *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (New York: The Horizon Press, 1973), pp. 87–91. Mellen errs, however, in seeing Anna as exclusively motivated by her passion for Giulia. I find this reading reductive in its indifference to her political motives, which are to fascinate and confuse Marcello so that he will abandon his homicidal mission.

[24] Mellen, "A Conversation with Bertolucci," p. 21.

play both roles.[25] What Marcello's passions for Lino, harlot, and Anna share is obviously not their homosexual aspects, but their power to disturb his mental balance. Hence his need to destroy them as a way of exorcizing the forbidden impulses they excite in him and of averting the devastating influences these would have on his hard-won self-control. It is no mere coincidence, then, that all three arousers of dangerous passions should have scars on their right cheeks (a wound in Anna's case, for this is where she is fatally shot) and that Lino and Anna should fall in the same positions after being gunned down. Thus the pseudo-murder of Lino shares with the Quadri assassination not the strange logic of atonement that Marcello articulates in the confessional, but the need to exorcize the troubling passions aroused by Lino and Anna—passions that, be they homosexual or otherwise, would destroy his elaborate construct of normalcy and force him to confront the true chaos of his inner psychic state.

Marcello's desire for conformity, therefore, comes less from homosexual anxiety than from fear of any individual difference (or what he would consider deviance) from accepted social practice. Decadent mother, mentally ill father—disruptive passions of any sort—constitute those differences that distinguish Marcello from his compatriots and that prompt his fanatical conformity. Of course, the ultimate irony is that in conforming to a Fascist state, he has simply found on a mass scale the very corruption, psychopathology, and violence that he sought to obliterate in his own soul.

Not surprisingly, the film's title is rich with metacinematic possibilities for so self-conscious a director as Bertolucci. Throughout the film, he revisits the models and influences to which he has conformed during the course of his career and

[25]Sanda also makes a cameo appearance as the mistress of the Fascist minister who approves Marcello's plot. Her ultrafeminine seductiveness in the role underscores the fact that Marcello's sexual preferences are not limited to men.

which have given shape to the present work. Too young to have personal memories of the 1930s, Bertolucci had to rely on cinematic re-creations of those years, so that "my memory was [a] memory of movies."[26] In an interview with Marilyn Goldin, Bertolucci elaborates. "*The Conformist* is lighted like a 1930's studio film, even when we were on location, there were a lot of lights and lighting effects, like that red [during the opening titles] or the rays in Sandrelli's apartment, or the blacks when the professor tells the myth of the Cave."[27] Similarly, in the surrealist moments of the film, Bertolucci is paying his respects to the "most important cultural element during the 20's and 30's."[28] Bertolucci's reconstruction of the Fascist years is thus several removes from any attempt at direct representation and becomes, instead, a personal interpretation of the ways in which Thirties culture saw itself.

In addition to these rather diffuse cinematic references, Bertolucci alludes quite pointedly to two *auteurs*—Godard and Renoir—whose work has had a formative influence on his own.[29] However, these allusions are not offered as homages, but rather as statements of Bertolucci's readiness to challenge and even to reject the cinematic mentors of his past. The in-jokes on Godard are well known: Bertolucci gives Quadri the French filmmaker's phone number, address, and middle name.[30] To further the conceit, he imputes to Quadri a line from Godard's *Le petit soldat*: "The time of reflection is over. Now begins the time of action."[31] The murder of Quadri signifies, on the level of Bertolucci's aesthetic auto-

[26] "Bertolucci Seminar," p. 17.

[27] Goldin, "Bertolucci on *The Conformist*," p. 65.

[28] Mellen, "A Conversation with Bertolucci," p. 22.

[29] On Bertolucci's relationship to Godard and Renoir, see Casetti, *Bertolucci*, pp. 76–77.

[30] See, for example, Lino Micciché, *Il cinema italiano degli anni '70* (Venice: Marsilio, 1980), pp. 98–99, and Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 303.

[31] For this attribution, see Casetti, *Bertolucci*, p. 76.

biography, the end of Godard's influence on his own filmmaking style.[32] With Godard goes the imperative to radical cinema whose limited audience appeal condemned it to total political ineffectuality. (Quadri too was ineffectual in his promulgation of leaflets, not actions, from his expatriate headquarters in France.)

Jean Renoir is invoked twice in the film: once in the farandole, which recalls the renowned dance sequence in *The Rules of the Game*, and once during the opening titles when a neon sign flashes "La vie est à nous" in a reference to the 1936 film made for the French Communist Party.[33] Though Renoir is not symbolically killed, as Godard is, in *The Conformist*, his model for political cinema is nonetheless repudiated in the finale of the film which both recalls and subverts the corresponding scene in *La vie est à nous*. Renoir's film concludes on a choral note as members of all social classes join in singing "L'internationale" while the crowds in *The Conformist* celebrate Mussolini's downfall by singing two separate songs at once—"L'internazionale" and "Bandiera rossa." The addition of this second song is a cynical stroke of genius on Bertolucci's part, for it reveals the failure of that solidarity of the Left which Renoir's film so triumphantly announced and which the Italian Resistance promoted as its postwar revolutionary hope.[34]

Like Marcello, who goes to Paris to kill off his "spiritual father," so Bertolucci revisits his French models in *The Conformist* and announces his departure from them and from

[32] "In that film, 'I kill' Godard," Bertolucci said of *The Conformist*. Quoted in ibid., pp. 9–10.

[33] Bertolucci makes explicit his debt to *The Rules of the Game* in "Bertolucci Seminar," p. 22, while Casetti (*Bertolucci*, p. 76) points out the *La vie est à nous* allusion.

[34] My reading differs from that of Casetti, who sees in the Godard–Renoir allusions Bertolucci's rejection of the former as a model for "marginal" political filmmaking and his embrace of the latter, whose "political cinema" works through "the usual structures" of the film industry. See his *Bertolucci*, pp. 76–77.

their style of political filmmaking.[35] There are no programmatic political solutions, and even if there were, film is not the proper forum for their dissemination. "Cinema rebels against being totally instrumentalized—against being used like a mimeograph," Bertolucci had told Francesco Casetti, and in so saying, had asserted the freedom of his art from bondage to partisan political uses.[36]

Like Marcello, Bertolucci too returns to Rome in search of an alternative to the French model for political filmmaking. And he finds it in Roberto Rossellini, who is never explicitly invoked in *The Conformist*, but whose presence is nonetheless felt in the film's plea for moral accountability. Bertolucci has not been reticent on the subject of Rossellini, and his comments reveal the special importance of the neorealist's filmmaking example. "There is this capacity of having things never too far away and never too close, the ideal distance that his camera has from things and from characters. It is one of the first cases of a truly open cinema."[37] Nor is this notion of an open cinema limited to camera technique alone. "There is an ethic in the style of many directors; for example, for Godard the style is already a way of seeing the world, for Rossellini as well."[38] If film styles have their own built-in morality, then Rossellini's ideal viewing perspective, "never too far away and never too close," suggests an approach that is committed, but not coercive—one that issues an appeal for an activist response without dictating a rigid, ideologically closed program for social change. Rossellini's open cinema asks that we assume responsibility for what we learn from the screen and act according to our own inner

[35] Roud suggests the parallelism of Marcello's and Bertolucci's quests to liberate themselves from their pasts. See his "Fathers and Sons," p. 64.

[36] In Casetti, *Bertolucci*, p. 14.

[37] Quoted in John Bragin, "A Conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci," *Film Quarterly* 20 (Fall 1966), 42.

[38] In ibid., p. 44.

promptings, not to the externally imposed ones of the ideologues.

In *The Conformist*, Bertolucci proves himself an able practitioner of Rossellini's open cinema, accepting full responsibility for the Fascist history he portrays while rejecting programmatic political solutions as inappropriate to the cinema, whose illusionist properties recommend ambiguity rather than didacticism. If Bertolucci's theater is indeed Plato's cave, then the images on the screen will disillusion even as they delude us, calling attention to their shadowy status and admitting their equivocal morality. When Marcello turns to us at the end of the film, he forces us to contemplate our own relationship to the fire and the shadows; in the moviehouse, in the psyche, and in the state. Only then will we be equipped to resist Fascist recurrences—to choose the fire over the shadows, or at least to know that the choice is ours to make.

# Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism

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