

The Conformist: Bertolucci revisited

by Peter T. Melnychuk

The Italian Bernardo Bertolucci is among the widely recognized directors of the so-called "art cinema". His critical reputation was established with the release of his first feature, *Before the Revolution* (1964), which is considered by many film scholars as a seminal avantgarde work. Commercial success and international notoriety were not to come until eight years later, with a much more conventional (albeit powerful) film, *Last Tango In Paris*. The other week (Sept. 9, 10, 11, 13) the National Film Theatre (at the Citadel) provided Edmonton audiences with an opportunity to see one of Bertolucci's less renowned films, *The Conformist* (1970).

The Conformist is the parable of an Italian man whose personal rise and subsequent self-betrayal parallels that of Fascist Italy. Part way through the film Bertolucci shows us the crucial formative event in the life of his protagonist: at age thirteen Marcello Clerici is very nearly coerced into a homosexual encounter with a man in his twenties. Before anything transpires, however, the boy seizes the gun of aggressor and murders him. Later, as an adult, Clerici (well-played by Jean Louis Tritignant) obsessively pursues one goal — normalcy. To this end (in the context of his times) he subordinates his life to *Il Duce's* Italy, and marries, to paraphrase his own words, "an unremarkable, absolutely mediocre petit bourgeois". Clerici, the conformist, is sent on a mission to Paris to assassinate the greatest inspiration of his academic life, the exiled Doctor of Philosophy Cuadri. Although cowardice and his childhood trauma prevent him from participation in the act of killing him, the protagonist nevertheless facilitates and witnesses the murder of the Professor; as well as of the Professor's wife, whom he had fallen in love with while in Paris.

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Five years later, as Mussolini's dictatorship falls, we find Clerici denouncing his best friend — "Here! He's a fascist!" — to the rabble in the streets. In the film's final shot Clerici, homosexually debauched, crumpled, back to the viewer, turns suddenly to look behind him: the camera captures his face between two bars of a bedstead, awash with the dirty orange light of self-betrayal.

It has been said that Bertolucci's preoccupations lie in two spheres, the psychological and the social, and the plot

synopsis above supports this contention. *The Conformist* is a moderately successful excursion into the psychological realm; Tritignant's Clerici is a characterization of some depth, and, despite lapses, the viewer has the feeling that he is watching a man rather than a composite of ideas or prejudices. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the other characters in the film, and it is no fault of the actors involved. Rather the problem is Bertolucci's social conscience. The director's marxist political consciousness undermines his ostensible artistic purpose, i.e., to subvert his audience into sharing his own radical beliefs.

It becomes apparent very quickly that Bertolucci is not a political thinker on the order of, say, a Trotsky. In order to press his convictions he makes the regressive classes (read: the bourgeoisie) the target of his wit. Granted, this wit hits as often as it misses, but the subtler weapon of satire escapes him completely and Bertolucci's sneer renders his characters flat and unable to bear the weight of empathy. Exemplary of this heavy-handedness are the scenes involving the fascist secret agent Mongagnero. Although this man has been an *agent provocateur* for twenty years, the director paints him as the quintessential bumbler; for emphasis, whenever Mongagnero makes an appearance the soundtrack plays a laughable hybrid of cowboy and martial music.

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Despite the somewhat hackneyed social commentary *The Conformist* offers us, Bertolucci's dazzling pictorial sensibility redeems the film. Visually, Bertolucci is a revolutionary in the finest sense of the word. Certain frames in this film disclose (more powerfully) more information to the viewer than a less gifted director might with a quarter hour's dialogue and several scenes.

In a scene shot within the office of a fascist minister the camera is placed close to the wall; the immense room, entirely made of marble, dwarfs a large desk (the only piece of furniture) sitting in the middle of the room; Bertolucci shoots the scene with a deep focus lens and so underlines a non-verbal statement of the empty grandeur and monumental sterility of the Mussolini regime.

One of *The Conformist's* recurring visual motifs is that of blindness. Clerici's best friend, Italo, and fascist propaganda specialist, is physiologically blind. In the scene in which Clerici confesses his mortal

sin to a Catholic priest, the former is shot against a white background, eyes plainly in view; the priest leans forward in the confession box (titillated by hints of sodomy) against a dark background, his face discernible but his eyes totally in shadow. Hence, Bertolucci provides us a visual metaphor: the Church is blind to, divided from the predicament of Modern Man. In yet another scene, Clerici interrupts a discussion of Plato's Cave Analogy to step forward from the scant, diffuse light and forcefully confer to the Professor, "I became a fascist"; at this moment his face is lit in the harshest of chiasmus, cheekbones bleached with overexposure, eyes bathed in darkness. Although it registers at a subconscious level, Bertolucci has signalled to us that Clerici suffers philosophical anopsia.

The other major visual motif of the film is, for lack of a better word, voyeurism. This motif surfaces regularly in *The Conformist*, in a variety of ways. There are moments when a character (as in the conclusion of the synopsis) will look uneasy and then suddenly turn as if to catch someone spying on them. Sometimes they find another character observing them; the viewer becomes uncomfortably aware that he is the intruder. In two other scenes, Bertolucci uses another technique to induce a similar tension in the viewer. The scenes in question are filmed with a tree or bush in the center of the frame; at some point the characters involved walk behind the obstruction, and the scene continues. While the viewer can still hear the characters involved, he becomes anxious at the loss of his principal cinematic sense and thereafter conscious of his own voyeurism. The prime example of this motif occurs in a scene of one extended shot (i.e., no editing) wherein we see the professor's wife (played in polymorphous perverse fashion by Dominique Sanda) stroking the legs of Clerici's petit bourgeois fiancée, Giulia. The camera tilts diagonally to follow the hand of the former further up Giulia's thigh and under her dress; the latter objects briefly, then giggles. Giulia, slightly

frightened, rises to dress, and requests that the *signora* turn her back "because of the way you look at me"; as Sra. Cuadri turns around and towards the camera, a look of horror crosses her face; the camera tracks out to reveal the back of Marcello Clerici. The privacy of the audience, as well as of Sra. Cuadri, has been violated. We watch the conclusion of the scene from behind Clerici, dumbfounded: Bertolucci has doubly discomfited us, simultaneously placing us in the position of spied upon and voyeur.

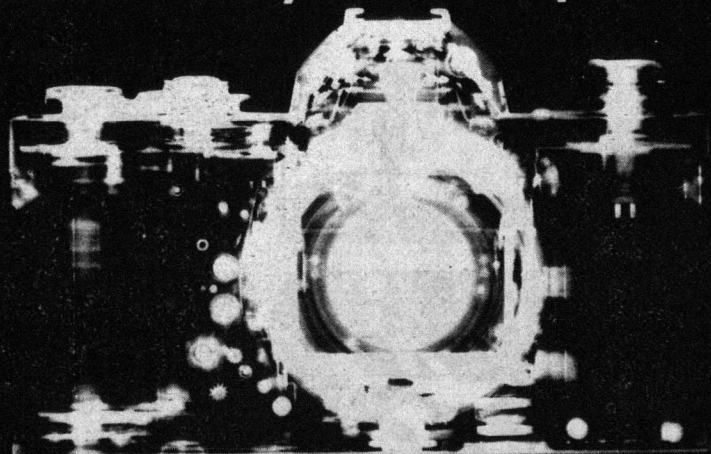
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Considerations of space force a less comprehensive examination of other elements of the visual style of *The Conformist* as regards camera movement. *The Conformist* is rife with it. The definitive movement in the film is a tracking or crane shot that begins in close and then draws back from the subject; this movement — from the specific to the general — is congruent to the parabolic nature of the film. Handheld camera is used sparingly, but to good effect, most remarkably to convey hysterical terror in the murder scene.

continued Thursday



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