

CINEASTE

IL CONFORMISTA

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Source: *Cinéaste*, spring 1971, Vol. 4, No. 4 (spring 1971), pp. 19-23

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43868791>

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by Bill Nichols

THE CONFORMIST, like several other recent films, deals with the complex question of the fascist sensibility. The studies of lunacy and megalomania in high places in DR. STRANGELOVE and THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE were perhaps harbingers of an artistic alienation that has moved from fear of the logical extension of current trends to a fear, sometimes paranoid, of historical reality itself. The past no longer instructs the present; instead it becomes a limpid distillate of the present's (and the artist's) deepest tensions. For example, three characteristics of the fascist sensibility that are evident today have figured in films like Z, JOE, THE CONFESSION, PATTON, INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN, THE DAMNED, and THE CONFORMIST: the tendency to defend established values and myths as inviolable axioms; the tendency to see ideological and even, sometimes, personal conflicts as irresolvable by compromise and, therefore, to accept and apply violent solutions; and the tendency to use allegiance to institutions of power and authority as a psychic crutch. The result is a preoccupation with a hostile, threatening environment in which the hero, by aligning himself for or against the forces of law and order, achieves a sense of purpose. It is, essentially, the quest for identity played out in political terms.

In some cases reference to the fascist sensibility is oblique while in others, like THE DAMNED or THE CONFORMIST, this sensibility becomes part of the film's basic metaphor. The overall style and structure of these films are the very means by which the director deals with his responses to this phenomenon. In any case, the director's control of his responses -- the degree to which they are assimilated into an aesthetic pattern -- becomes a vital test of his work's success. That the director can be a 'dictator' is an old cliché with new implications when his subject matter is related, however peripherally, to the stormy issue of fascism.

Bernardo Bertolucci has a reputation as a Marxist artist, though perhaps a weaker one than Marco Bellocchio. He belongs to the tradition of legal Marxism in Europe which affords an uneasy accommodation between political intent and commodity culture. The detente allows him adequate space to de-

velop his artistry while his political viewpoint often becomes embedded at a depth that must seem obscure to American, if not European, audiences. In fact, his artistry seems capable of absorbing the most intense emotions and stylizing them into patterns of consummate aesthetic design that, from a Marxist, world-transforming viewpoint, have a strangely self-enclosed feel about them.

THE CONFORMIST, adapted by Bertolucci from a Moravia novel, concerns Marcello Clerici, for whom a childhood trauma (involving his murder of a homosexual) has resulted in an compulsive desire for normalcy. His own repressed homosexual drives and quest for 'conformity' lead him, in later life, to a 'normal' marriage and a position with a fascist counter-intelligence organization by which he is assigned to assassinate a former professor of his, now an exiled anti-fascist living in Paris. Despite Marcello's abnormal fascination with the professor's beautiful, lesbian wife, his mission is finally completed although, inadvertently, both the professor and his wife are killed, as Marcello watches, helplessly. Years later, on the day of Il Duce's fall from power, Marcello joins the celebrators in the street and discovers that the homosexual he believed having killed as a boy is actually alive -- and that his conformity has been for nothing.

The praise accorded the film has had an uncommon consistency, suggesting that a major touchstone of the critical sensibility has been courted with deeply resonant overtures. The Leftish political viewpoint is undoubtedly one facet of that touchstone (since its earliest days film criticism has embodied social and humanitarian ideals that are now espoused principally by the Left). The film elaborates on Freud to show repressed homosexuality not only as the unfortunate, sometimes damaging, price of civilization but also as the breeding ground for fascism. It is a restricted version, and hence less valid, of Reich's assertion that the authoritarian family in the middle-classes of Germany was the breeding ground for Hitler's power. Bertolucci offers us the reassurance that tyrannical oppressors are sick men whose symptoms we can clearly recognize (thanks to Trintignant's brilliant, stylized acting).

With historical hindsight, or Marxist awareness, Bertolucci also paints the anti-

fascist forces in a bad light (literally in the ballet studio embrace and an unflattering shot of the herd-like mob celebrating Mussolini's downfall) and makes the black observation that the 'democratic' front features its own brand of sickness (conformity, decadence and 'charming' sentiments). His Marxist inclinations, in fact, may have contributed more directly to this part of the portrait than to its fascist side. But these insights *seem* peripheral, a brief indication of democratic (or capitalistic) aberrations rather than a full-fledged identification of the abnormal with the totality. Bertolucci may be suggesting that Marcello need not give blind allegiance to a dying cause when the opposing order can also accommodate him, but he does not convey this as a central thrust.

The complement to the film's political sentiment is the lyrical, enveloping style, source of its own pleasure, creator of its own milieu. The deeply satisfying joy of watching the film is something that virtually every critic longs for. Bertolucci's structuring does not force an analogous reading of the film as historical, political commentary (unlike *THE CONFESSION*, where the intercut newsreels, the color values and the recurring portraits of actual political leaders remind us of the historical reality to which the film refers). We respond by displacing analysis of the characters and setting from their historical counterparts to the aesthetic structure in which they operate. It is a highly seductive operation and one that undercuts the film's political force. Marcello's alliance with fascism is less a revelatory examination of fascism than a vehicle for putting his latent sexual urges and his desire for physical action onto a collision course. Fascism is peeled away from its historical matrix and stretched across Marcello's psychic persona as a propelling force. It assumes the thin veneer of a convention and loses its power to terrify; a reassurance Bertolucci offers but which is difficult to accept.

Bertolucci's artistry is nonetheless extraordinary. He does not so much recreate the Thirties as the style of Thirties movies. It is less an objective than a uniquely personal recreation. But while the film invites nostalgic reminiscence and recall of earlier film styles, its force is primarily to draw us inward, into the unity and totality of its effortless flow, its easeful design, its reassuring sense of perfection.

Bertolucci is basically a lyricist, a film poet whose political thrust is, at best, only oblique. While the film poet can nonetheless be revolutionary, as Dovzhenko was within his historical context, Bertolucci stands closer to a film poet whose work drew only the thinnest sustenance from his political milieu -- F.W. Murnau. Murnau, like Cocteau, had little interest in poeticizing the stuff of political struggle. Bertolucci, like both of them, draws from the homosexual sensibility of serene lightness, clear, precise gracefulness and open, innocent awareness of the darker forces that turn more virile, aggressive temperaments

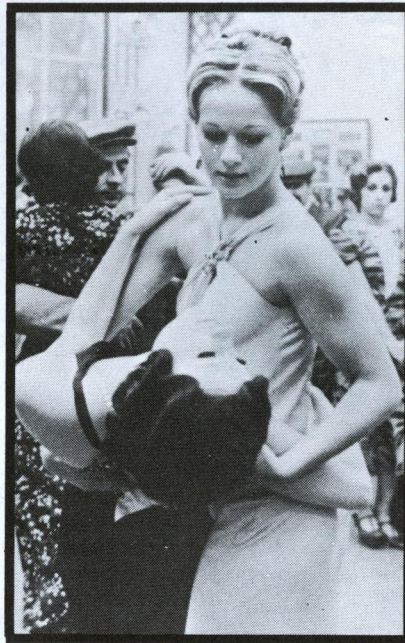
to melodramatic confrontations. In fact, it is this aspect of Bertolucci's style that grants him a cool detachment even from the theme of repressed homosexuality and social violence (unlike the operatic vision of sexual trauma in Visconti's *THE DAMNED*).

Bertolucci's similarity to Murnau goes further than a sharing of poetic sensibility; the actual styles bear close resemblance, especially in the use of light and camera. Like Murnau, Bertolucci uses moving light sources to great advantage. Both the swinging light in the Chinese restaurant and the search lights on the streets of Rome convey a sense of precariousness, of lurching instability that echo the cowardice and uncertainty of allegiance that plague Marcello at these moments. Likewise, shafts of light in Julia's apartment and in the forest resonate with the ambivalence of Marcello's sexual affections and their alignment with forces of interpenetrating darkness -- the possibility of heterosexual love is on both occasions a diversion, an illusion of impossible normalcy that shortcircuits his self-assurance.

Through camera movements Bertolucci, like Murnau, achieves a fluidity and unifying source of energy. The camera's movement in the dance hall sequence is as carefully and meaningfully choreographed as that of the characters: tracking shots that follow a dance of celebration only to end on Manganello, Marcello's political conscience; a static medium shot from a slightly high angle of Marcello caught at the center of concentric circles of dancers he can neither escape nor join (the epitome of the conformist's plight); a tilting shot that discovers an upper tier of onlookers who amuse themselves with the spectacle, unconcerned with the deeper intrigues they cannot see. For while this scene has a loose informality to it, it is also crammed with fateful significance: Marcello sets the assassination plan in motion; Anna, the professor's wife who has flirted with both Marcello and his wife, determines that Julia doesn't like her and therefore decides to leave with her husband, much to Marcello's distress. Meanwhile, Quadri, her husband, tightens the trap by deciding on the basis of some silly spy theatrics that Marcello is not a fascist spy and can be trusted, or at least worth trying to reclaim.

But the informal mood is not ironic counterpoint; it is the *essential* mood, for the political machinations and their rationale are of secondary importance. The motivations behind both Anna and her husband's actions are not elaborated. A fateful inevitability sets to work and the carefree dancing and the graceful, moving camera are the basic responses of the artful lyricist to impending, tragic destiny. The characters hurtle down a darkening tunnel where fascism supplies the locomotion but not the motive and where none emerge redeemed except the artist.

Comparison to Murnau, however, cannot be exhaustive for Bertolucci takes the romantic tradition of Murnau's *SUNRISE*, *CITY GIRL* or *TABU* and inverts it. Romance is not a re-





deeming passion, even when ill-fated, but a friable layer of respectability atop smoldering, guilt-laden tensions. (Notice how Trintignant's fingers always move as a block, how his head, torso, and limbs move with the strict precision of geometrical patterns. The brilliance of this acting captures the surface correlation to repression perfectly.) Both Quadri and Marcello accept marital relationships more convenient than fulfilling; neither is a conjugal relationship of any depth; one is an indulgence, the other a facade, while Marcello's fascination with Anna is a symptom of his own perverted sensibilities.

Bertolucci also runs his metaphor along a political axis from repressed homosexuality to compulsive conformism to fascism rather than along the more psychological axis of Murnau (from 'normal' action, usually love, to threatening super-ego or id projected as unnatural or supernatural forces). Why *this* metaphor appeals to Bertolucci, like Visconti, seems to have less to do with the essential nature of fascism than with the artist's own sexual preoccupations. And it is this dimension of the film that is most disturbing. The lyricism, the effortless beauty and perfect harmony all transfix us and afford a pleasure that is rare in film or any art. But it also twists the film's political axis around itself so that fascism becomes a universalized, general condition that helps extrapolate repressed energy into the arena of social action. And conversely, Bertolucci's treatment of sexuality suggests that the pleasure is not without a price, that there are levels of guilt and judgment in the film that Bertolucci has not been able to subordinate to his style.

Bertolucci has got away with his judgmentalness in large measure; the power of his poetry obscures it. Nonetheless, his basic metaphor does not simply emerge from the characters' own actions but receives unnecessary underscoring from the director. The most notable example is the sickly blue light washing vitality and innocence from the faces of Marcello and Anna in the ballet studio. It is reminiscent of similarly heavy-handed shots in *THE DAMNED* and contrasts sharply with the beautifully chosen succession of colors and scenes that reverberate so well the moods of Marcello and Julia on the train as she recounts her first sexual experience. The deathly blue light neither reflects the characters' mood nor offers ironic comment on it; it simply judges them and pronounces them corrupt. As Brecht demonstrated, didacticism is not incompatible with art, but it needs greater subtlety than this.

The choice of metaphor is, itself, replete with difficulties. The linking of repressed homosexuality with fascism not only limits the origins of the latter too severely but also implies that homosexuality itself may be more liberating. But Anna, whose lesbianism is rendered in detail (and with astounding sensuality by Dominique Sanda) is pronounced decadent, self-indulgent, destructive (Sanda plays three roles as a sort of tragic muse, linking herself to



the corrupting tendencies in those she's with -- something like the Gestapo commander's companion in *OPEN CITY*). And the overt homosexuals, Lino and Italo, are weak characters, opportunists blind to the realities of the social order. Making the film may have served a purgative function for Bertolucci himself but the general association of stylistic and decorative opulence with decadence and fascism suggests that there are elements of conflict yet unresolved. The original tightness of the metaphor begins to weaken; sexuality itself, repressed or otherwise, becomes the source of social disease. A position not exactly Marxist.

Bertolucci's virtue lies far more in his artistic discipline than his political acumen. Romantic notions in general and boy-girl romances in particular do not contradict, undercut or belittle the political context. Bertolucci avoids the melodramatic pitfalls that claim many socially conscious

films (*THE MOLLY MAGUIRES*, *LA GUERRE EST FINIE*, *GETTING STRAIGHT* -- a few that just begin to indicate the range), crafting a work of considerable polish and remarkable unity. The link between *THE CONFORMIST* and the depths and limits of either the homosexual experience or the fascist nightmare, however, is like that of jigsaw piece to puzzle: without the other pieces, its greatest value is in the beauty of its own, unique appearance.

Produced by Maurizio Lodi-Fe; directed by Bernardo Bertolucci; screenplay by Bernardo Bertolucci, based on a novel by Alberto Moravia; photographed by Vittorio Storaro; music by Georges Delerue; edited by Franco Arcalli. With Jean-Louis Trintignant, Stefania Sandrelli, Dominique Sanda, etc. A Paramount Pictures release.