

### 3. CONTESTING NATIONAL MEMORY: MALE DILEMMAS AND OEDIPAL SCENARIOS

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The Oedipal conflict between father and son is a motif that has structured much of Bernardo Bertolucci's cinema.<sup>1</sup> A desire to escape paternal influence is, for example, at the basis of Bertolucci's decision in his early twenties to abandon poetry and choose cinema as his privileged medium of expression (his father, Attilio, was a famous poet).<sup>2</sup> Such a desire anticipates the materialisation of specific anxieties about his artistic influences in his earlier films. The theme of the son's rebellion against the father pervades Bertolucci's love/hate relationship with his two main cinematic mentors, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean-Luc Godard. Influenced by their aesthetic and political preoccupations, his earlier films reveal the extent to which Bertolucci as a young filmmaker was trying to deal with the intellectual authority of his 'fathers' whilst pursuing his quest for an autonomous cinematic language.<sup>3</sup> The Oedipal theme became increasingly central in the films that Bertolucci made after 1968. Vito Zaggarro has pointed out how Bertolucci was only the most radical and consistent representative of a generation of young Italian filmmakers that, in the aftermath of 1968, was obsessed with the figure of the father and the theme of the parricide.<sup>4</sup> Envisaged as a family crisis (where the family stands for the nation), this conflict crystallises a tension between the younger generation of Italians who came out of the post-1968 social movements and the cultural legacy of the previous generation. As Paul Ginsborg has noted, one of the most popular slogans of 1968 was 'I want to be an orphan'.<sup>5</sup> The slogan provocatively highlighted the symbolic rejection of the nuclear family as a site of oppression and social closedness. It suggested a critique of parental authority in the traditional

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family as linked to the repressive workings of the dominant social order. Most importantly, by alluding to a symbolic act of filial rebellion, the slogan reverberated with the more general anti-authoritarian spirit of 1968.

This chapter concentrates on two of the films made by Bertolucci after 1968 that, in harnessing the subject matter of the Oedipal conflict, appear most influenced by the spirit of generational rebellion of these years. Structured around parricidal narratives, *The Conformist* (*Il conformista*: 1970) and *The Spider's Stratagem* (*Strategia del ragno*: 1970) make use of the Oedipal story to develop an investigation into the memory of Italy's fascist past. Bertolucci explains his interest in fascism by referring to his conflictual relation with his father's generation and their cultural legacy: 'My own father was anti-fascist, but obviously I feel that the whole bourgeoisie is my father. And Fascism was invented by the petit bourgeois.'<sup>6</sup> In the highly politicised context of 1970s Italy, the anti-authoritarian rebellion of the 1968 generation against their fathers implies for Bertolucci a confrontation with this problematic legacy. By exploring the memory of Italy's fascist past, Bertolucci's aim is to reconsider the true nature of the anti-fascist stance upon which the national myth of post-war reconstruction has been built.

These two films epitomise a revival of interest in Italy's fascist past and a new critical outlook on this controversial chapter of Italian history, exemplified by the release of films such as *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*: 1979), *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*: 1970), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*: 1975), *Love and Anarchy* (*Film d'amore e d'anarchia, ovvero stamattina alle 10 in via dei Fiori nella nota casa di tolleranza*: 1973) and *A Special Day* (*Una giornata particolare*: 1977). Such a new critical perspective is directly connected to the collapse of the master national narrative that had portrayed the Italian Republic as the natural product of the Resistance (1943–5). According to this narrative, the post-war Republic was cemented together by the common aims of anti-fascism. As intellectuals such as Benedetto Croce influentially argued in order to consolidate this narrative, fascism had only been a tragic parenthesis in the history of the country.<sup>7</sup> The counter-narrative of the 1970s suggested instead that the Italian Republic still maintained a fascist-derived centralised form of government and kept much of the administrative and judicial personnel of the fascist state. The polemical suggestion of the intellectuals who opposed Croce's view was that fascism had not ended in 1945 but was still present in the same old political class, the armed forces and some of the repressive policies of the ruling Christian Democratic Party.<sup>8</sup> This was an argument that was also advanced by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who famously asserted that the Italy that had emerged out of the economic miracle, with its masked networks of repressive power, could still be defined as 'fascist'.<sup>9</sup> The effects of this perception on the filmmakers who decided to turn to memories

of the fascist period during the 1970s are exemplified by Fellini's comments on *Amarcord* (1973). For Fellini, this film was not simply a nostalgic reconstruction of his childhood in Rimini during the fascist regime, but also 'a way of looking at Italy today: Italy has changed but mentally is still much the same'.<sup>10</sup>

By using the Oedipal story to represent the relation between Italy's present and its fascist past, *The Conformist* and *The Spider's Stratagem* make visible their distinctive masculine gendering of the national body politic.<sup>11</sup> Yet, when critics discuss these films, issues concerning masculinity appear to be interpreted as no more than metaphors for the exploration of more complex historical dialectics concerning the nation. Aldo Miceli, for example, understands the private conflicts of *The Conformist* and *The Spider's Stratagem* as representing wider political realities. He asserts: 'In his vision of anti-fascism as an Oedipal struggle against the father, Bertolucci reflects on the Italian society in which he lives.'<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, David Forgacs argues that, by representing the relation with the fascist past through an Oedipal conflict, Bertolucci's films, and particularly *The Conformist*, are open to the objection that they *reduce* the problem of the historical relation with the past to a gendered struggle over male identity.<sup>13</sup> Such views implicitly maintain that questions about male identity, in the light of their distinctive relation to the realm of the personal, fall short when they attempt to express the complexity of the historical questions these films are dealing with, hence the importance of understanding them only as metaphors for wider sociohistorical forces.

In this chapter, I would like to suggest that thinking of these films in terms of specific investigations into some of the dilemmas of masculinity in a patriarchal society may not necessarily reduce or simplify the problem of the historical relation between present and national past, but may actually add an important dimension to understanding their political meaning, their aesthetics and ultimately the specific temporal relation between national present and past at the centre of their narratives. I am not proposing to privilege questions of masculinity and, more generally, gender over history, but to read these two spheres as somehow equally important in the understanding of these films.

A second objective of this chapter is to challenge a prevailing tendency to read the Oedipal theme in *The Conformist* and *The Spider's Stratagem* as a deterministic temporality. By this, I mean a certain insistence on reading the Oedipal conflict as a cycle initiated by the son's rebellion and inevitably leading to repression and the reassertion of the Law of the Father. I wish to contest the weight that such readings seem to give to the allegedly conservative, patriarchal and self-defeatist vision offered by Bertolucci. In challenging these readings, my intention is to consider the discordances that may emerge when we confront this kind of interpretation with the evidence provided by the films. In my analysis, particular attention will be devoted to the disruptive way in which *The Conformist* and *The Spider's Stratagem* disassemble the cyclical

temporality of the Oedipal narrative and the implications that this operation entails in relation to questions of gender and sexuality.

QUESTIONING THE FATHER AS A POINT OF ORIGIN: *THE SPIDER'S STRATAGEM*

*The Spider's Stratagem* follows the son of an anti-fascist martyr, who arrives in his father's town – Tara – to investigate his death. In the initial shots, the film establishes the procedure of following Athos in the urban landscape of Tara.<sup>14</sup> Memories of Athos Magnani haunt the streets, the squares and the arcades. In shot four, the camera zooms behind Athos as he stands in front of a wall, giving the impression that he is reading a sign (Fig. 3.1). A very close pan shot from right to left reveals a street sign with the name of his father (Via Athos Magnani). The movement of the camera runs opposite to the way one would read it. The right-to-left pan underscores the reverse temporal movement by which the son goes back to revisit the memory of the father and the function that Tara plays in connecting these two temporalities. Most importantly, it has the function of conveying the temporal movement of the film itself in tracing back the past of the nation.

The memory of the paternal past is also a cinematic one and is directly connected to Neorealism. Neorealism is a visible point of reference and a basic cinematic source in these initial scenes. In De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*: 1948), the follow shot establishes a connection between the character and the social space in which he moves. This is often accompanied by a balancing movement between characters in the foreground and the background.<sup>15</sup> In the initial shots of *The Spider's Stratagem*, this interconnectedness between the character and his experience of the social space is similarly present but the balancing movement is replaced by a different configuration of the shot focusing on Athos's isolation in the urban landscape. On his arrival, the only other character seen walking is a sailor who gets off the train with him. But



Figure 3.1 *The Spider's Stratagem*, Athos reading the street sign.

in the two shots in which we see him, he walks in the same direction as Athos – they follow almost two parallel lines – until the sailor approaches a bench and sits down. Another visual illustration of Athos’s reverse movement back into the paternal past is conspicuously clear in shot seven, a long take where the camera follows him under a colonnade by panning and tracking on him. The steady longitudinal movement accompanying the son’s symbolic plunging into this paternal past reveals a town populated only by old people and the sign of a youth club commemorating his father’s memory (but without any young people). This longitudinal movement has the function of establishing the apparently homogenous configuration of this past in which the father is positioned as a stable point of historical origin.

A crucial point of the film is to reveal how the homogenous memory of Athos Magnani’s sacrifice for the anti-fascist cause holds together. The town of Tara appears here as the chronotopic depository of an idealised past that needs to be preserved at the cost of obliterating any contradictions and counter-narratives. When it becomes clear that Athos has come to Tara to investigate the mystery of his father’s death and unravel his legend, he is first locked in a stable; then he is hit by a mysterious man in his hotel room; and finally he is kicked off the estate of a fascist landowner called Beccaccia. Such acts of intimidation are a demonstration of the threat that Athos represents to Tara and its memory of Athos Magnani. The film suggests the constructedness of the world that Athos enters through repeated references to René Magritte’s paintings: as, for example, in shot three, a long-distance take of Tara from the countryside, which reprises the interplay between darkness and stark light characteristic of Magritte’s paintings. Similar references are present in the night sequences of the film. Magritte, a painter who was interested in the way the world is conceived through the conventions of representation, provides the film with the ideal pictorial model for the interrogation of the constructedness of Tara’s past. Robert Philip Koolker has shown that the references to Magritte’s paintings contribute to the upending of the initial Neorealist basis of the film by making visible the artifice by which the self-effacing structure of direct observation of the Neorealist film is determined.<sup>16</sup>

These initial sequences are fundamental to establishing how the film is contesting a specific construction of the national past, one that is strongly informed by the anti-fascist historiography of the Resistance and its prevailing handling of Italy’s fascist past. Towards this end, *The Spider’s Stratagem* incorporates references to Neorealism in order to distance itself from them and to assert the constructedness of its cinematic rendering of reality. A brief look at *Rome Open City* (*Roma città aperta*: 1945) as an example of a distinctive Neorealist tendency to deal with Italy’s recent fascist past may be, in this sense, instructive. In the final sequence of the film, the partisan priest, Don Pietro, is put in front of a fascist firing squad by the Nazis. Their chief officer gives the order

to shoot but the fascists fail to kill him. Despite the Nazi commandant's angry demand that they shoot him again, the Italian officer cannot take action and looks at him with an expression that betrays his empathy for Don Pietro. The Nazi takes his gun and kills the prisoner. The fascists' failure to murder Don Pietro is, in a way, a proof of their ineffectiveness as 'killing machines' and implicitly a demonstration of their humanity. This ending is consistent with the way in which the film depicts fascism. *Rome Open City* as a whole does not draw attention to the fascists. It treats them with caricatural tenderness and presents the Germans as the real evil presences in the film. *Rome Open City* does not overlook the moral and political responsibilities of the fascists – it portrays, for example, the police commissioner who collaborates with Bergman as an unscrupulous and loathsome figure – but dilutes our contempt for them by coding them as slightly comic characters in contrast to the cruelty and deathly efficiency of their Nazi counterparts. The film even manipulates historical truth in order to remain consistent with its aim to condone Italians' responsibilities. In this sense, even though in reality it was a fascist officer who killed Don Morosini (the anti-fascist priest to whom the film is dedicated and on whom the character of Don Pietro is based), the film presents a German as the killer. *Rome Open City* exemplifies a certain tendency among Neorealist films to externalise Italians' responsibility for fascism. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat has argued, Neorealism had a sort of purificatory function within the cultural and political context of post-war Italy: 'Both critics and directors conceived of Neorealism as a "return to honesty" after years of fascist rhetoric and a rediscovery and celebration of a "real Italy" that had been suppressed by the dictatorship.'<sup>17</sup> The conciliatory way in which fascists were portrayed in these films was very much dependent on the project of creating a more inclusive national cinematic imagery, in which the opposing political forces that had lacerated the nation at the end of the war could finally be appeased and brought together. Culpability was therefore generally displaced onto foreign figures such as perverse Nazis or Italians, whose embrace of practices such as drug usage and homosexuality (Marina in *Rome Open City*, for example) made them foreign to the national body politic.<sup>18</sup>

Through the story of Athos's investigation into the myth surrounding his father's sacrifice, *The Spider's Stratagem* is implicitly making a commentary on the post-war master narrative for remembering and representing Italy's fascist past. The film questions the coherence of this narrative and the way in which the homogeneous configuration of this past is constructed and preserved. The memory of the father appears here as metonymically representing the post-war memory of fascism and its contribution in shaping the collective consciousness of the nation. By questioning the coherence of this narrative, the film is implicitly inviting us to consider what is generally left out of its homogeneous representation of the past.

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In Tara, with the exception of Draifa and the little girl who works for her, Athos meets only men; the maleness under which Tara presents itself appears to constitute a structuring condition for the maintenance of the narrative of paternal idealisation. In the sequence in which Rasori receives Athos in his flat, the former locks a first door. Behind the door (which has a glass window), we see an old woman approaching. She stops behind the glass whilst Rasori moves to the right and makes a 180-degree turn to face the camera. As Rasori looks at Athos, he emphatically says: 'Your father' ('Tuo padre'). The woman looks in the same direction in silence. Something similar happens when Rasori locks out the second woman. The difference is that he pronounces the words, 'Your father', even more floridly. In both cases, Rasori does not speak before the women have reached the door and look straight at the camera behind the glass. It is a sort of *pas de deux* where the articulation of the narrative of paternal idealisation performed by Rasori implies the parallel closing-down on a female voice. After Rasori and Athos have eaten together, Rasori informs his guest that he needs to lock the women in every time someone comes to visit. He then starts his theatrical account of Athos Magnani's heroic life. This transition from female seclusion to paternal idealisation is crucial not only to showing how Tara silences female knowledge but also to revealing that it is exactly this silencing that allows its citizens to maintain their idealised memory of Athos Magnani.<sup>19</sup>

Like an insect captured in a spider's web, Athos is swallowed up in the plot that his father has conceived and that the town of Tara perpetuates. In a remarkable sequence, Athos walks around his father's statue and stares at it. As he turns around, so does the statue, staring back at the camera (occupying the point of view of the son) almost in defiance (Fig. 3.2). As the statue rotates together with Athos, the father projects his image back on the son in a striking configuration of sameness that articulates the double bind connecting these two figures and the two temporalities they represent. At the end of the point-of-view shot around the statue of Athos Magnani, the camera reveals Draifa, dressed in white and holding a parasol, walking in the background, in soft focus. As the rotating image of Athos Magnani stares at the camera, the female image in the background signals the threat to the coherence of the paternal plot. This image crystallises the crucial role that Draifa performs in the undoing of the official memory of Athos Magnani. At the beginning of the film, she is the one who first summons Athos back to Tara and encourages him to investigate some of the unconvincing truths about his father's killing. Further, she is the only figure who opposes the official narrative of Athos Magnani's death and informs his son that the murderer was not someone from another town, as everybody says, but a local. Most importantly, Draifa provides a reliable account of the facts from which Athos can start his search. She tells him that his father had been shot from behind whilst watching a



Figure 3.2 *The Spider's Stratagem*, Athos Magnani's statue and Draifa, walking with her parasol in the background.

performance of *Rigoletto* at the local theatre and gives him the exact date of the killing. Draifa appears as a source of knowledge that is antagonistic to the male official narrative that is being defended by the citizens of Tara. She represents a kind of female logos that undermines the authority of the father's cult and its seemingly homogenous story. Her role is not to elucidate the truth that may lie behind the official story of Athos Magnani but to provide access for Athos into some of the complexities and contradictions that have been left out of the official paternal story.

By summoning Athos, Draifa propels him into a web of misrecognitions and blurring of identities. When Draifa sees him for the first time, she comments on how similar he looks to his father. The camera pans left to show the son next to a photograph of Athos Magnani and their identical appearance; the same actor, Giulio Brogi, plays both the father and the son.<sup>20</sup> This playful overlapping between past/father and present/son is further played out and translated at the level of the psychic by the use of flashbacks springing up from the memories of Athos Magnani's friends as they meet his son. These montage sequences highlight the entrapment of past and present in the same temporal grid. An example of this entrapment occurs when Athos escapes from Rasori, Gaibazzi and Costa. Athos runs through the woods. Shots of his legs running are intercut with others of his upper body. This frantic parallel cutting gradually introduces images of the father running in the same wood so that the two figures appear to be fused into one.

In capturing the protagonist in a web of identifications with the father, the role of Draifa is to allow Athos to retrace the origins and the intricate workings of the paternal plot. The sequence in the theatre makes explicit the need for direct confrontation with this plot (through a process of doubling) in order to unravel the narrative. Athos sits in the same balcony where his father had been killed. An establishing shot of the theatre is followed by the image of Rasori,



Costa and Gaibazzi sitting in one of the balconies at the theatre. What follows is a sequence of shots in which one friend after another disappears. In revisiting the night of his father's killing, Athos realises that Athos Magnani had seen his murderers in the same way as he now sees Rasori, Costa and Gaibazzi opening the door to his balcony. The re-enactment of the scene of his father's death allows him to understand that Athos Magnani did not turn back to face his murderers and he intentionally let them kill him from behind. He also realises that his father knew his murderers and that his death was part of a plot of which he must have been aware.

Identification with the subject position of the father at the theatre leads the son to the acquisition of the 'repressed' knowledge that he had been prevented from accessing. A flashback springing up from the confession of Rasori, Costa and Gaibazzi to Athos dismantles the myth surrounding Athos Magnani and reveals that he had indeed betrayed his friends by giving the police the details of their plan to kill Mussolini on his visit to Tara. To expiate his crime, Athos Magnani had convinced his friends to stage a farce. They would kill him but his death would appear to be a murder committed by the fascists.

Critics have generally argued that the resolution of the paternal plot, far from marking the fall of the father, follows a distinctly Oedipal paradigm according to which the son 'kills' the father, only to bow to his authority finally. This interpretation stems from a particular reading of one of the final sequences of the film, in which Athos is called by the citizens of Tara to give a speech in memory of his father in the square. The son would not appear to reveal the discovery he has made about his father's betrayal. The implication would be that he is complying with the official memory of the 'hero' Athos Magnani. Lesley Caldwell observes, '[t]he son, once apprised of his father's betrayal, participates in the deception so that the status of the father is publicly preserved.'<sup>21</sup> On a similar note, Robert Philip Kolker argues that this ending illustrates how Athos Magnani

has himself killed, and in turns he kills his son, not literally [. . .] but by preventing him from acting on any other stage but that of the narrative created by the father, woven by him into the web that entangles all the other participants in the spectacle.<sup>22</sup>

According to these interpretations, in its final resolution, the film would suggest an impasse for the son, who has no choice but to stay silent and realise his powerlessness in the face of the father's plot.

These readings suggest that, after having questioned the 'constructedness' of the paternal myth, the film would ultimately re-assert the authority of the father/patriarch. The patriarchal crisis, signalled by the son's interrogation of the father's authority, would appear therefore as a totally recoverable one.

With the son entrapped in the paternal plot, the act of questioning the myth of his father and the masculine idealisation on which it is based would seem to be only a momentary crisis conducive to the passage of patriarchal right from father to son.

These interpretations seem to revolve around the idea that the film follows rather closely the events of the Borges story on which it is based by borrowing its pattern of repeated lines and its circular structure. In *Theme of the Traitor and the Hero* (1944), Ryan, the great-grandson of the Irish martyr Fergus Kilpatrick, discovers that his ancestor was not a hero who sacrificed his life for the independence of his country, but rather a traitor responsible for the failure of a revolt. Like Athos Magnani, Kilpatrick had convinced his comrades to turn his execution into an instrument for the emancipation of Ireland. At the end of the Borges story, Ryan resolves to keep his discovery silent and publishes a book dedicated to the memory of the hero Kilpatrick. Like Ryan, Athos (according to the interpretation of critics such as Kolker, Caldwell and Houston) would appear to be a final victim of the past and its entangling plot; his failure to reveal that his father was a traitor in front of the citizens of Tara would demonstrate as much.

A closer look at the final sequence, however, reveals something slightly different. At the end of the ultimate confrontation with his father's friends, Athos agrees with them that Athos Magnani's stratagem was not perfect; someone had finally managed to dismantle it. Then, he suddenly asserts that maybe 'this' someone felt obliged to keep this discovery secret because it was part of Athos Magnani's plot. This is the point that most clearly authorises the interpretation according to which the son cannot truly break free from his father's plot but has to appreciate his inevitable embeddedness in it.<sup>23</sup> It is a point that is retroactively informed by how the film has thus far highlighted the son's entrapment in his father's past by means of flashbacks and misrecognitions. But then, Athos defiantly says that this was the point about which Athos Magnani was wrong. This is a passage that critics tend to overlook; Athos suggests that there is something that his father had not foreseen. It is a first suggestion that the protagonist will not participate in his father's deception after all. To understand the implications of this passage one needs to look carefully at the following scene.

Athos is giving a speech in front of the old citizens of Tara, who have come together to celebrate his father. His expression betrays distress, the uncomfortable awareness of being drawn once again in the paternal narrative. The voice off intervenes to ask who Athos Magnani really was. Soon after, a flashback shows his father sitting in a shack together with his friends, who excitedly fantasise about the killing of Mussolini; the flashback begins by showing the father's ambiguous expression as he looks at his friends – an anticipation of his betrayal – in contrast to their jovial excitement as they

playfully imitate the noise of the bomb set to kill Mussolini. The camera tracks down and dwells on them whilst leaving Athos Magnani in the background and out of focus. This movement suddenly becomes meaningful as a cut back to the present shows Athos celebrating in front of the citizens of Tara the loyalty and courage of his father's friends. Athos does not waste any words enriching the paternal myth that Tara has endorsed. Instead, he breaks its one-dimensional articulation by avowing other narratives of anti-fascist courage and resistance, as exemplified by men such as Gaibazzi, Costa and Rasori. In another flashback, his father is seen running in the wood whilst the voiceover emphatically utters 'A traitor!?!'<sup>24</sup> This speech is intercut with the sequence of his statue rotating with the camera. His words intermingle with the present as we return to the square where Athos is giving his speech. This intertwining of flashbacks would appear to show once more the power of the father's past over the present.<sup>25</sup> But then, a young boy wearing a red shirt walks across the square, followed by a group of young men. He smiles. At this point, Athos says 'There's a sentence that . . . A man is made of all men. He is worth all of them and each one of them is worth the same as him.'<sup>26</sup> These are the last words of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Les Mots* (1964): 'Un homme, fait de tous les hommes et qui les vaut tous [ . . . ]'. In an unpredictable change of mood, Athos then takes his leave, saying that he has left his suitcase at the station.

Through his speech, the younger Athos has made no contribution to the perpetuation of the official memory of his father. At the same time, he has not substituted a narrative of paternal grandeur with one of paternal betrayal. The flashbacks springing up during the speech and the voiceover repeatedly wondering who Athos Magnani really was invite us to think that a coherent hold on the father and his past is perhaps impossible. Athos Magnani may be both a hero and a traitor. The ending of the film frees the incoherencies of that past to redefine a history that has refused to include anything else but the cult of the father. In his speech, Athos mentions the valuable contribution of Rasori, Gaibazzi and Costa to the anti-fascist resistance. Following this recognition, the arrival of the young boy and the other men during his speech seems to mark another symbolic opening of this one-dimensional narrative. Throughout the film, the exclusion of young people from the public space of Tara has signified the static enclosure of the present in the past. The arrival of the young people and particularly the smile of the young boy reveal a certain intention to mobilise this temporality by opening its linear articulation. Before the arrival of the young boy and the other men, all the old people in the square hold on to identical black umbrellas. The arrival of the young men disrupts this monochromatic ensemble. Significantly, the young boy wears a striking red shirt – an allusion to communist resistance – while the others wear multi-coloured clothes. Through the use of colour, their arrival underscores

the undermining of this coherent memory of paternal idealisation. The smile of the child, rather than suggesting the entrapment of new generations in the webs of the past, appears to be a smile of hope that points to the possible reconfiguring of that past under more diversified and inclusive narratives. If the past cannot be changed, its relation to the present can, and this possibility is clearly articulated here. By saying that every man is made of all men at the end of this speech, Athos celebrates the shift from a one-man story of heroism towards a multiple narrative of collective endeavour against fascism. In contrast to how Tara has thus far unified itself in the cult of Athos Magnani, the slogan provides an alternative articulation of anti-fascist resistance in which it is precisely the collective endeavour of many heroes that may provide a much more inspiring paradigm for the future.

At the end of the film, Athos reaches the station with the intention of leaving Tara. The loudspeakers announce that the train is late; he sits down on the platform. The camera moves along the rail track to show some grass growing. Athos looks puzzled, as though he is coming to a moment of realisation. The extended strings of the soundtrack add a sense of thrilling anguish; something is dawning on the protagonist. A short shot of Tara intercutting this sequence constitutes a chilling reminder that no train will arrive; no train will allow him to escape the paternal past that Tara honours. It is a realisation, however, in the light of what we have seen, that does not mean scepticism about the possibility of contesting that past, but rather articulates the understanding that any breaking with that authority will have to imply confrontation with its power over the present. With this ending, the film does not avow the cyclical workings of history but highlights the necessity of redefining the relationship with that past and deconstructing its absolute authority over the present.

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The ending of the film also contributes to redefining the heroic masculinity with which Athos Magnani has been presented in the official memory of Tara. The short flashback in which Draifa accuses him of being a coward is, in this sense, a reminder of the role that an idealised male identity has played in this official memory. This flashback is a shorter version of a previous one that emerges out of Draifa's personal memory of Athos Magnani when the son had asked her to recall what it was like to be with him. It illustrates a moment of playful intimacy between the two lovers as she helps him apply a bandage to support his aching back. This is a moment in which Draifa also conveys her frustrations and sadness about the illicit nature of their affair.

In this flashback, Athos Magnani appears unable to respond to her need for more love and commitment on his part. The focus of this scene is very much on Draifa uttering the word 'coward' ('codardo'), a comment on his inability to confess their affair to his wife but also on his egocentrism and inabil-

ity to empathise with her suffering. It is implicitly a comment about Athos Magnani's masculinity too. Draifa's accusation in this short flashback follows the image of Athos Magnani running in the woods while the voiceover says 'a traitor'. An implicit link is created here between the possibility that the hero Athos Magnani might not be so heroic after all and that the idealised masculinity celebrated by the people of Tara may similarly be untrue. The spectacle that Athos Magnani has staged to perpetuate the illusion of his heroism encompasses in this sense the illusion of a romanticised male identity that, in the gap that separates its public performance from its private enactment, reveals its fragility.

Through the Oedipal motif of the son questioning the authoritative myth of the father, the film explores the conflict between two masculinities. On the one hand, the father stands for an essentially patriarchal figure of authority, defending its hegemonic position through the silencing and marginalisation of the subordinate knowledges that threaten its authority. On the other, the son represents a new masculine position that, in contesting the father as a univocal point of origin and authority, establishes a space for the fragmentation of knowledge. It is still a male-dominated vision that undoubtedly excludes women as active participants in the national body politic. Yet, it is also a vision that suggests women's disruptive role in mobilising the coherent national narrative of anti-fascism inherited from the Resistance. In the context of post-1968 Italy, the film is actively contributing to a shift towards a re-opening of the national past that is ready to welcome a conglomeration of different voices. It is a redefinition of national history that takes into account the new interpersonal and political realities of post-1968 Italy. By challenging the notion of a past that speaks only through a univocal, authoritative voice, this is a vision that is also now ready to render visible different axes of sexual difference. *The Spider's Stratagem* does not directly incorporate these different voices; nor does it decentralise the dominant position of men from the discursive practices through which the nation is envisaged. Yet, it presents a critical viewpoint on the exclusion of marginal social subjects such as women and the repression of the voices that contradict the 'imagined' coherence of the national past.

The film ultimately questions forms of masculinity that are organised around fantasies of identification with an idealised paternal figure, together with the denials, prohibitions and privileges that this kind of identification implies. Whilst *The Spider's Stratagem* is most explicitly concerned with how a consistent national narrative holds together (and how it can be questioned), it is certainly also evocative of the repression required by the Oedipal journey of male subject formation. To think about masculinity as simply a metaphor for the representation of more complex social and political dynamics about the nation is, then, reductive and misleading. Such a view frames masculinity as an empty rhetorical figure within the film, a vector for the exploration of what

should indeed be its true higher concerns (i.e. the dilemmas of the nation). It is a view that overlooks the way in which *The Spider's Stratagem* defines the relation between son (Athos) and father (Athos Magnani) as both a social and an individual paradigm for representing the dialectic between repression and liberation. The film envisages the unravelling of this relation as a journey populated by desires (for knowledge, for freedom, for libidinal chaos, for a plurality of voices and experiences to be told and shared) that can hardly be contained despite the paternal imperative to silence. It is a journey that speaks to the libidinal disavowals imposed on the male subject in exchange for the stable inhabiting of a socially acceptable masculinity and for the preservation of men's privileged status and their control over women's freedoms in patriarchy.

THE OEDIPAL JOURNEY AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED IN  
*THE CONFORMIST*

Made only a few months after *The Spider's Stratagem*, *The Conformist* adopts the distinctly Oedipal mould of the novel written by Alberto Moravia, entitled *Il conformista* (1951), on which it is based. The novel is a modern Greek tragedy where destiny and cyclical inevitability are crucial to the story of the protagonist. Constructed upon a rigorously linear and deterministic chronology, the novel follows Marcello's life from childhood to adulthood by showing the sadistic acts of violence he perpetrated as a child as signals of his impending murderous instincts. Moravia's novel links Marcello's increasing sense of his own deviancy to his father's abnormality, as a kind of legacy that the son has inherited and from which he cannot escape. In the novel, Marcello is predestined to become a fascist murderer through what Moravia describes as a cruel and unfathomable mechanism.<sup>27</sup> Marcello's fascist allegiance therefore not only is a part of the process by which he turns to a life of total conformity, but also responds to the deterministic logic of Fate in Moravia's novel.

The theme of Oedipal inevitability is partly still present in the film. The past returns to torment the protagonist, Marcello Clerici, when an anonymous letter reaches his fiancée Giulia and her mother. This letter claims that Marcello has inherited a disease from his father and that he is unsuitable as a husband for Giulia. Even though this is a false claim made by Giulia's jealous uncle to prevent their union, it is a gesture that marks the weight that the past will have exert on Marcello throughout the film. Marcello has joined the fascist secret service to kill Quadri, his ex-university professor. Believing that this gesture is the consequence of an original paternal sin that now weighs on him, Marcello goes to visit his father in the asylum where he has been hospitalised; he reminds the older man of the stories he used to tell him as a child, when he proudly recounted the murders and tortures he carried out as a member of the fascist secret police. In recalling these memories, Marcello abdicates personal

responsibility for the crime he will commit by blaming his father for the chain reaction he has initiated. It is a symbolic event that emphasises the inescapable connectedness between the destiny of father and son within Marcello's logic. Further, it is an event that marks Marcello's initial perception of the inevitability of his actions and their consequences.

*The Conformist* reverberates with Bertolucci's concurrent discovery of psychoanalysis.<sup>28</sup> One effect of this discovery is seen in how *The Conformist* further develops, at the level of the 'psychosexual', the dramaturgy of Oedipal conflict already present in *The Spider's Stratagem*. In order to see the implications of this operation, it is crucial to consider the scene set in the asylum as part of a duo. The paternal space of the asylum is all straight lines, order and cleanliness and comes after a sequence set at the mother's house that is instead all leaves, decay and disorder (Fig. 3.3). It is a contrast that reflects the psychosexual conflict experienced by the film's protagonist and his struggle between two opposing poles: on the one hand, Marcello's childhood memory of homosexual seduction by a chauffeur called Lino, whom he thinks he has killed; and on the other hand, the repression of this memory, his pursuit of a life of conformity and his attempt to find atonement by having Professor Quadri killed in the name of the fascist cause. Marcello feels that his childhood encounter with Lino has marked his 'difference' in the eyes of society. Metonymically representing the process of sexual normalisation of the child during the Oedipal stage, the contrast between paternal and maternal spaces stands for the conflict between the sexual confusion and polymorphous desires associated with this memory (Id) and the repressive power of the paternal order (Superego). Distinctly linked to the memory of the child's seduction by Lino, the mother's



Figure 3.3 *The Conformist*, Marcello's father in the asylum.

decaying mansion conjures up not only her licentious lifestyle – her affair with a young Japanese chauffeur (other reference to Lino) and her drug usage – but also, most importantly, the multiple libidinal possibilities preceding the paternal repression. By contrast, the father's entrapment in the asylum reflects the power of the socialisation that Marcello aspires to in order to repress the sense of his abnormality. The strait-jacket that his father is made to wear at the end of the sequence symbolically projects the kind of restraint to which Marcello submits in order to repress the intolerable memory of his seduction at the hands of Lino. This scene visually conveys the containment of the drives that threaten the stability of his 'Oedipalised' male identity while also alluding to the costs entailed in their repression.

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Marcello's masculinity appears to be the result of a carefully negotiated compromise with society. When Italo, his blind friend, asks him why he is marrying Giulia, he asserts that he is doing so in order to acquire a sense of security and stability, the impression of being exactly like the majority of people. As Marcello tells the priest during confession, by marrying Giulia, a mediocre bourgeois girl with petty aspirations, he is constructing his normality.

Public acts of recognition such as marriage grant Marcello the social mask he needs to cover up his difference and the past that he is so desperately trying to hide. During a stag party organised by Italo and his blind friends in honour of Marcello, the protagonist asks Italo what a normal man should look like, in his opinion.<sup>29</sup> Marcello is facing the camera, whereas we only see Italo from behind. Both are positioned low in the frame; in the upper half of the frame we see a window looking on to a pavement where some people are walking (Fig. 3.4). To answer Marcello's question, Italo executes a 180-degree turn and stands next to him. Italo says that a normal man is one that turns his head to look at the backside of a beautiful woman walking on the streets, a man that, in doing so, realises that other men have also done the same thing at the same time. As Italo formulates his theory of normality, we realise that the people who are walking in the upper frame of the screen are, in fact, prostitutes. As we see a streetwalker being approached by a man with whom she then leaves, we also realise that the camera is providing a visual commentary on what Italo is saying. That man, in the act of picking up a streetwalker, has performed the social gesture that defines his heterosexuality – and implicitly his normality – in the eyes of society. While Italo continues to speak, the camera slowly tilts down. Italo keeps on arguing that the normal man loves those who are similar to him and distrusts those who look different. Mutual social recognition is what defines and gives social existence to this normality. As Marcello sits down, Italo says that they are different from other people and that this is why they are friends. It is a self-deluding argument, one that is inadvertently





Figure 3.4 *The Conformist*, Marcello and Italo talking; the streetwalkers are visible above.

alluding to the homoerotic nature of their bond whilst obliterating the possibility of making their homosexuality openly visible in the light of what Italo has previously said. Italo wonders whether Marcello agrees with him. As the latter remains silent, Italo says that he is never wrong in such matters. The camera immediately tilts down to show that he is wearing two different types of shoes, a visual proof of Italo's self-deluding argument; Italo is sometimes wrong too. This is implicitly also the moment that betrays the fragility of the public acts that guarantee the construction and validation of a socially acceptable male role for Marcello.

As this sequence shows, a crucial problem in the film is the impossible stability of the male identity that Marcello has constructed for himself. This impossible stability mirrors the similarly deceptive logic by which fascism holds on to the illusion of a stable and unitary national body politic. The insertion into the story of the myth of Plato's cave is, in this sense, a particularly persuasive illustration of the limits of the illusion that the protagonist is pursuing. Marcello goes to visit his ex-university professor, Quadri. Soon after he enters his study, he closes the shutters of one of the windows to recount the Platonic tale from *The Republic*. The story describes a cave, in which enchained prisoners have been forced to live in front of a wall since their childhood. On this wall, these prisoners see the shadows of some statues being carried behind them, which they mistake for real people. Marcello stands in front of the only window whose shutters have not been closed; his figure, like Plato's statues, reflects his own shadow against the wall. Quadri excitedly points out the parallel between Plato's myth and what happens in fascist Italy, where people confuse the shadows of things with reality. Marcello contemplates the shadow of his own

body on the wall, the visual materialisation of the illusory identity that he has chosen to live. Their conversation continues in the semi-darkness as Marcello blames Quadri for leaving Italy and implicitly holds him responsible for his own conversion to fascism. Quadri justifies his choice as the most sensible decision to take at the time. Standing between the only open window and the wall, Marcello responds by saying, ‘Nice words. You left and I became a fascist.’<sup>30</sup> In so doing, he tries to abdicate responsibility for his actions. As Quadri suggests that a true fascist would not speak like him, he suddenly opens the shutters of the other window. The camera cuts to show Marcello’s shadow dissipating on the wall. This is not only a visual exemplification of the moment of Platonic enlightenment speaking for the illusion on which fascism has been constructed, but also a demonstration of the self-defeating process by which Marcello is trying to keep together his seemingly coherent heterosexual identity.

In its unmasking of fascism’s illusory quest for a stable world view and the parallel uncovering of Marcello’s self-deluding trajectory of masculine normalisation, the film reveals the close affiliations between the contradictory processes by which ‘nation’ (in this case a coherent fascist identity) and ‘gender’ are conventionally thought of as natural entities. Benedict Anderson’s study of the origins of nationalism and Judith Butler’s work on gender are particularly useful for clarifying these similarities. A central tenet of Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* is the idea that the nation is an ideological construction based on the forging of fixed boundaries and a sense of wholeness. For Anderson, this idea is indeed only illusory. In looking at the ‘self-naturalisation’ of Europe’s dynasties as nations since the mid-nineteenth century, he argues that their process of nation formation was the result of fundamental contradictions between the identification of coherent national communities on the one hand, and the myths, historical origins and linguistic borders that were often conjured up to support their validity on the other. National identity was created and maintained through a circuitous process in which the present was seen to be the logical continuation of an originary past. Despite being celebrated as ancient and ‘natural’, on closer scrutiny, Anderson shows, nations appear as artificial, contingent and temporary entities. It is precisely the main objective of nationalistic discourse to hide the traces of their artificiality and make them appear natural.<sup>31</sup>

A similar constructivist approach underlies Judith Butler’s work on gender. Butler argues that the naturalised knowledge of clear-cut gender identities for men and women is not only a linguistic – and therefore cultural and political – operation but also a changeable and revisable kind of knowledge. For Butler, the ‘unity’ imposed by the normative categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’, and the compulsory heterosexual division on which it is based, are not natural but instead fabricated. This process sees the body as the site of a cultural inscription based on regulatory norms that establish specific limits, prohibi-

tions and denials to that same body. It is precisely through these regulatory norms that the impression of coherence is achieved. Butler provides a framework for conceptualising gender as a process of becoming, as an incessant and repeated action taking place through gestures, acts and enactments that create the illusion of an essential gender core. Butler is certainly not arguing that gender is like a dress that one can wear or change all the time. She demonstrates, however, the powerfulness of some of the discursive practices and knowledges that seek to impose on sexed bodies a binary fixity that is clearly contradicted by the discontinuous and diverse set of gender attributes deployed by subjects.<sup>32</sup>

The crucial link that allows us to see the similarities between Butler's and Anderson's work on gender and nation is their common emphasis on reiterative and citational practices. Such practices, as Butler explicitly asserts in *Gender Trouble*, produce the effects that they purport to name.<sup>33</sup> Both Butler and Anderson show that the coherence which nationalistic discourse and essentialist understandings of gender claim to express is an impossible one but is repeatedly constructed as 'natural' through such practices. This understanding also provides a way of thinking gender and nation as 'processes of becoming' that 'always fail' to effectively incarnate the essence that they claim to express.

The illusory effectiveness of these processes is strikingly visible in *The Conformist* in relation to the demands for homogeneity of fascist nationalist ideology and the similar demands for consistency implicit in the process of sexual normalisation pursued by Marcello. At the beginning of the film, Marcello goes for lunch with Giulia and her mother at their flat. The couple enter the reception room to talk about their impending wedding. Both Marcello and Giulia initially maintain a certain physical distance between each other (Fig. 3.5). They avoid kissing in front of the maid; Marcello sits on a sofa on the right, whereas Giulia takes a seat on an armchair on the left. This is a carefully maintained distance, but also a fragile one, which Giulia breaks as soon as her maid leaves and she throws herself into Marcello's arms. It is a first demonstration of the game of appearances that bourgeois society requires from them: a game through which Marcello is persistently seeking the social validation of his own normality. The shortcomings of this logic are unintentionally uncovered by Giulia a few moments later, when she starts talking about their wedding and tells Marcello that the priest will not marry them if he will not go to confession. Marcello points out to Giulia that he is not a believer and that such an act would have no value. For Giulia this has no importance and she points out that almost all the people who go to church do not really believe in God. It is enough to convince Marcello. Here, Giulia is involuntarily pointing to the empty meaning of a confession made without any firm conviction. She is also highlighting the great social weight it carries. This



Figure 3.5 *The Conformist*, Marcello with Giulia in her apartment. Giulia's mother walks along the corridor.

is an implicit allusion to the illusory validity of acts of social recognition upon which the world that Marcello wants to inhabit is constructed. It is also a reference to their authoritative value. By getting married, Marcello does not obviously become the 'normal man' he aspires to be. Yet, this social act confers the status of normality on Marcello by means of its performative power. Yet, as I will show in the following section, even though these acts of social validation give Marcello the kind of armour that allows him to disavow his homosexual instincts and his sense of abnormality, the film is primarily concerned with the points where this logic breaks down.

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In *The Body in the Mirror*, Angela Dalle Vacche argues that if *The Conformist* is about the Oedipal crisis of a coherent heterosexual masculinity and the uncovering of the illusion on which it is constructed, this crisis appears in the film to be perfectly recoverable so that the Father (the Oedipal repression) may finally re-assert his authority. At the end of the film, she argues, when Marcello is confronted with the choice of whether or not to save Anna, Quadri's wife, as she stands in front of him screaming before fleeing through the woods of Savoy, the protagonist is indeed on the edge of slipping dangerously away from his consolidated male heterosexual identity towards a feminine homosexual one. In remaining immobile in the car and letting Anna die, he ultimately stifles the latter. It is a position of compromise, Dalle Vacche seems to suggest: one that does not deny the ambiguity of Marcello's masculinity but that, at the same time, entraps him in his 'constructed' identity. As history is reduced to a

father–son/man-to-man dialectic, the dominant term of reference in the film, despite its critical interrogation, would still remain hegemonic heterosexual masculinity.<sup>34</sup>

In reading *The Conformist* through the lens of the Oedipus story, Angela Dalle Vacche's study appears to fall victim to its premise: to demonstrate the authority of a historicist tradition in Italy and its influence on the continuous preoccupation of Italian cinema with the past. Dalle Vacche's focus on Oedipal plots and recuperations of the national past surely substantiates the nature of her scholarly concern with historical origins, their authority over the present and the circuitous temporality that her study aims to demonstrate. However, the problem, I think, lies in the application of the Oedipal logic as a closed circle that inevitably re-asserts nothing but the power of the past and the impossibility of breaking free from it. As I read it, Dalle Vacche's study seems to be colluding with the historicist intellectual tradition that she is so keen to discuss rather than pointing to the evidence presented by the film and its potential for resisting the circular temporality of the Oedipal plot. In a way, it is precisely her reading that performs the temporal deadlock between present and past that her study should demonstrate. Whilst Dalle Vacche points out that the conceptual logic of the Oedipus complex is what marks Marcello's subjection to the inescapable oppressive paternal law, I would argue that it is precisely in the way Bertolucci deals with the deterministic temporal dimension of the Oedipal narrative that the film breaks free from Moravia's novel and the cyclical logic of the Oedipus story.

In this sense, Bertolucci's decision to substitute the role of Fate in Moravia's novel with that of the Unconscious is of fundamental importance. The most significant consequence is that the film rejects the dramatic determinism of the novel and shows instead the breaking down of Marcello's illusion. Interestingly, Bertolucci declared that transforming Destiny into the Unconscious also affected the way in which the rapport between sexuality and politics was organised.<sup>35</sup> If we consider this contention together with Bertolucci's point that *The Conformist* is really a film about the present, we may well understand the way in which the function of the Unconscious is to bring to the surface those memories and suggestions that threaten the ideal coherence upon which Marcello's identity is constructed. This is mainly done by the unfolding of events through an oneiric structure based on flashbacks, doublings, condensations and associations. The car journey to Savoy that Marcello and Manganiello undertake to save Professor Quadri's wife constitutes the film's present, the point to which the narrative keeps coming back in flashback after flashback. It functions as the central segment of the narrative over which memories of the past are brought to the surface. Christopher Wagstaff has noted that, in the car journey, the post-dubbed sound and the significant use of the voice-off give the impression that this journey may function

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as a sort of psychoanalytic session, an argument that reinforces the function of this section as a narrative 'couch' for the re-emergence of 'repressed' memories.<sup>36</sup> In the first section showing the car journey through the streets of Paris, Marcello seems, in fact, to be in a sort of reverie. We hear Manganiello's voice but we do not see him, whilst the camera cuts frenetically between a frontal close-up of Marcello in the car and different shots of Parisian buildings outside. I will not dwell on this sequence any further, as it has already been meticulously examined by Christopher Wagstaff.<sup>37</sup> Suffice to say how sinister and almost dream-like the sequence is, despite its function as a platform from which the flashbacks depart.

The eerie function of the car sequences in liberating memories of the past is made more explicit in another flashback showing the first encounter between Marcello and Manganiello, which confirms the role of cars in the film in resuscitating the repressed memory of Marcello's seduction by Lino. The sequence is filmed with the camera tilted sideways so that the frame is canted. The effect is to convey the anguish felt by Marcello as he walks towards his mother's house, but above all the oneiric memory of Lino and the seduction coming back to haunt Marcello. We do not realise this until later, when the narrative takes us back to the journey to Savoy and Marcello asks Manganiello to stop the car. Marcello gets out and hysterically asserts that he does not wish to follow Quadri and his wife. He walks along the side of the road whilst Manganiello follows him at a distance. The countryside is covered with snow and the fog makes it impossible to see anything round about. This *mise-en-scène* creates an ideal oneiric setting for the re-emergence of the memory of Marcello's encounter with the chauffeur, Lino. The flashback intersects this sequence by means of doubling. We see Marcello being followed by Manganiello and this sequence soon reproduces the memory of the young Marcello being followed by Lino.

The flashback is important because it establishes for what episode from his childhood Marcello is trying to atone. It is also significant because it confronts Marcello with the memory of his 'difference'. The film visually translates Moravia's description of Marcello's ambiguously candid femininity<sup>38</sup> by showing a young boy with delicate features and long fair hair, who is picked up and then seduced by the chauffeur. The flashback continues by intersecting with another episode from the past: the protagonist's confession to a priest. During this confession, the flashback, showing Lino seducing the boy in his bedroom, distinctly exposes the latter's early attraction to the chauffeur's strange mixture of masculine and feminine traits. Revealing a combination of anguish and desire, the young Marcello moves towards Lino to touch his long hair and is then suddenly recoiling and shooting him. Marcello's attraction is made explicit as he confesses to the priest years later that Lino looked exactly like a woman. In the recollection of this memory, Lino's gender ambiguity

constitutes a strange object of attraction, also indirectly reflecting Marcello's own gender ambiguity as an effeminate young boy.

Flashbacks and oneiric techniques such as doubling and condensation re-emerge at various points of the film to disrupt Marcello's mental balance and confront him with that part of himself that he is so incessantly trying to disavow. Anna Quadri's first appearance, when Giulia and Marcello go to visit Professor Quadri at his Parisian flat, is certainly one of the most uncanny moments of the film. The scene gives a dream-like quality to Anna's presence primarily by means of lighting. Anna emerges from the dark at the far end of the hall. A very low lamp positioned between her and the camera accentuates the contrast between light and darkness as she walks towards the middle of the hall, by looking down on her. The camera cuts to Marcello, who is now playing in front of the door with Anna's dog. Marcello suddenly looks over to Anna and seems petrified. The following reverse shot justifies his reaction. Anna has raised her face and now stands next to the lamp that eerily illuminates her right side. The camera cuts to reveal a close-up of Marcello, still with the same shocked expression, and then cuts again to show a subjective medium-distance shot of Anna, who is now looking ambiguously straight into Marcello's eyes.

The eerie quality of this scene introduces the role that Anna Quadri will play in the film in bringing to the surface the 'wound' that Marcello is so desperately trying to repress. Anna's function in the film is to visualise the repressed memory of Marcello's difference. Interestingly, in this scene, she appears as the doubled image of the young Marcello during the seduction episode with Lino. She wears a similar sailor uniform, and has his delicate features, his white complexion and fair hair (Fig. 3.6). Whilst Christopher Wagstaff has noted



Figure 3.6 *The Conformist*, Anna in the Parisian apartment that she shares with Professor Quadri.

that Anna Quadri is a projection of Marcello's fantasy, I would argue that she is also a visual materialisation of that part of his unconscious that Marcello needs to disavow in order to preserve the sense of his normality.<sup>39</sup> If the film uses techniques similar to dream-work to precipitate the 'repressed' into Marcello's present and upset his laboriously constructed normality, doubling is certainly the most effective means. The clearest example is the mysterious appearances of the actress who plays Anna, Dominique Sanda, in two other roles: as a prostitute in a brothel in Ventimiglia and as a mysterious lady at the ministry. These earlier appearances in the narrative articulate similar dynamics of shock and recognition in Marcello, distinctly expressed by reverse-shot sequences that link Marcello's stunned expression to the images of these two women who are ambiguously looking back at him.

The film reaches a climactic moment when Professor Quadri and Anna are ambushed by the fascists. Quadri is repeatedly stabbed; Anna runs towards the car, where Manganiello and Marcello Clerici are observing the scene (Fig. 3.7). Her plea for help leaves Marcello immobile and passive. If *The Conformist*, as Dalle Vacche argues, is about the tension between regimentation and loss of control experienced by the protagonist, this scene would be the moment in which Marcello finally manages to suppress the 'homosexual/feminine' and keeps hold of his stable male heterosexual identity.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the film, the feminine has been for Marcello an object of attraction and anxiety, a reminder of his encounter with Lino and the illicit desires that this encounter entails. However, Anna's death does not put an end to Marcello's sexual turmoil. On the contrary, the scene is precisely a re-enactment of the anguish and torment that Marcello feels in relation to his memory of the seduction. The whole



Figure 3.7 *The Conformist*, Anna, about to be murdered by the fascists, pleads for help, whilst Marcello sits immobile inside the car.



sequence is indeed staged as an oneiric ritual: from the mist shrouding the wood, to the sun's rays infiltrating the trees, Quadri's balletic fall when he is killed and the hand-held camera following Anna's flight. Its purpose is clearly to restage the 'repressed' memory of Lino's killing and the previous seduction. To achieve this objective, the film violates cinematic codes of realism. In the woods, Anna is repeatedly shot in the back by the fascists. When she finally surrenders, her clothes reveal no signs of blood; instead it is her face that is exaggeratedly covered with red paint. Bertolucci admits that the exaggerated blood on Anna's face had the purpose of showing her death as a symbolic fantasy.<sup>41</sup> As she finally collapses, the red paint on her face inevitably reminds us of Lino's bleeding face at the end of the earlier seduction scene. Interestingly, her supine position on her death is also very similar to Lino's posture after Marcello shot him. Like a dream, Anna's death doubles another death that Marcello wants to forget whilst also condensing the image of the sin with the one that would bring its atonement. (Significantly, in the novel, Anna's name is Lina.)

The elusiveness of Marcello's attempt to escape his 'abnormality' is clear in the final sequence of the film, when Italo and the protagonist overhear a man flirting with a young boy under one of the arches of the Colosseum. Their enthrallment with this scene of seduction replays the mixture of attraction and disavowal through which both characters have lived their homosexuality throughout the story. Marcello recognises his seducer Lino and realises that the killing for which he had sought atonement had never occurred. The logic through which Marcello has been trying to escape his abnormality crumbles. Lino had never been killed and the murder of the Quadris has not brought him the expiation he had sought. In the final shot of the film, Marcello peeks through the bars of one of the niches in which a young boy lies naked. In this voyeuristic scene, the protagonist finally comes face to face with his homosexual desire. His face betrays the anguish of a man who realises the impossibility of obliterating a memory that continues to re-emerge, regardless of the strength and tenacity with which it is rejected. This confrontation removes the shadow on which he has based his existence. Like one of Plato's prisoners finally being freed, Marcello looks back and sees what lies beyond the false illusions he has lived. Far from maintaining 'heterosexual masculinity' as the dominant term of reference of the film, this ending reveals its final collapse. It is an ending that also speaks for his final confrontation with the illusions of fascism and its authoritative hold on reality. The last shot of the film shows that Marcello's attempts to cover up one thing have only resulted in the further uncovering of the thing to be covered. It is an image that conjures up Marcello's covering of his wife's backside in the initial sequence. The act of covering works as a metaphor for the self-deluding logic that Marcello has endorsed throughout the film and which fascism promoted in order to preserve the normative notion of a stable and homogenous body politic.

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*The Conformist* utilises the Oedipal story as both a psychic and a socially shared experience, one in which historical conditions surface in individually held desires, obsessions and anxieties. Influenced by the cultural ferment of the post-1968 social movements and by reading Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich and Freudian psychoanalysis, Bertolucci develops a sophisticated exploration of the dialectic between libidinal freedoms and repression that is at the basis of the formation of male subjectivity by borrowing the appropriate narrative possibilities intrinsic to the Oedipal story. In *The Conformist*, Bertolucci problematises the role of sexuality in relation to the consolidation of male identity by denaturalising the normative relation between heterosexuality and masculinity and by exposing the illusion by which this naturalisation is achieved. By rejecting a dramatisation of the Oedipal story based on closure and the power of repression, *The Conformist* sheds light instead on the contradictions and inconsistencies that cannot be successfully resolved by the imposition of the Law of the Father. Laura Mulvey notes that the Oedipal story reveals a journey populated by desires, anxieties and contradictions, which is then followed by closure around the symbolic order of the Father. Yet, she argues that this terrain in which desire finds expression should be taken more seriously, as it provides an imagery of revolt against a patriarchal order as well as an imagery of change, transformation and liberation.<sup>42</sup> This is a space that emerges powerfully in *The Conformist* through Bertolucci's intention to voice the transgressive desires and libidinal chaos that cannot be successfully contained within the paternal order. It is a space in which the feminine, irremediably excluded from the deterministic linearity of the Oedipus complex, may re-emerge and suggest the possibility of resistance and disruption.