

The Construction of Point of View in Bertolucci's *Il Conformista*

Christopher Wagstaff

To cite this article: Christopher Wagstaff (1983) The Construction of Point of View in Bertolucci's *Il Conformista*, *The Italianist*, 3:1, 64-71, DOI: [10.1179/ita.1983.3.1.64](https://doi.org/10.1179/ita.1983.3.1.64)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/ita.1983.3.1.64>



Published online: 18 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 41



View related articles [↗](#)

Christopher Wagstaff

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF POINT OF VIEW IN BERTOLUCCI'S
IL CONFORMISTA**

A characteristic of Alberto Moravia's narrative technique in a novel like *Gli indifferenti* is the absence of a consistent narrative perspective. This allows Moravia to comment on and judge his characters at great length and at any moment. In *Il conformista* he has refined his technique, limiting the narrative perspective to the point of view of Marcello, the protagonist. Nevertheless, Marcello is by no means the narrator, for the real narrator, while purporting to relate Marcello's thoughts, continually comments on and judges the protagonist from a point of view that is incompatible with that of the character at a given moment (for example, in the scene where Giulia confesses her sexual experiences with the family lawyer: 'Ma doveva prima di tutto rassicurarla; e questo gli era facile, perchè, quella famosa verginità, che ci fosse o non ci fosse, in realtà non gli importava nulla'.¹). The reader's task, if the novel is to be successful, is to superimpose the narrator's statements *about* Marcello onto the point of view of the character Marcello, and then identify with the resulting compound. If once the reader fails to accept this identification, then Moravia looms so large in the novel that the narrative ceases to convince, and the identification fails to take effect.

The task Moravia sets his readers is not a complicated one; they must identify with a chilling character and his pedestrian narrator, somehow seeing them as one. It should in all fairness be pointed out that though the narrative technique is primitive, the intellectual light that the narrator throws onto the story is often quite sophisticated (including echoes of psychoanalysis and classical tragedy in both *Gli indifferenti* and *Il conformista*). When Bertolucci set himself the task of rendering the novel into a film narrative, he had to decide where to put the viewer, so that the viewer would not find comments or judgements *about* Marcello pedestrian interventions in the narrative. This essay will attempt to identify some of Bertolucci's solutions to the problem. They will be seen to be solutions not very far from Moravia's narrative technique. The difference is that while Moravia pushes home his narrator's judgements relentlessly and repetitively, giving them a spurious place in the protagonist's thoughts, Bertolucci deliberately subverts the viewer's identification with the protagonist's point of view. Moravia's is a 'thesis' weighing down a good story, Bertolucci's is a brilliantly and elegantly told story that hints at enormous depths beneath the glittering surface. In an earlier article,² I have tried to show what these depths are, and how Bertolucci uses what he calls 'technique' to hint at them. Here I should like to examine the place that the viewer is assigned in the construction of the narrative.

Two theoretical formulations of the viewer's activity are in widespread use at the moment, one dealing more with the viewer's cognition, the other primarily with his erotic

1. A. Moravia, *Il conformista* (Milano, 1976), p. 147.

2. C. Wagstaff, 'Forty-seven Shots of Bertolucci's *Il conformista*', *The Italianist*, 2 (1982), 76-101.

satisfaction; one concerns what the viewer knows, the other concerns the viewer's pleasure.³ I wish to apply the first of these to begin with. Edward Branigan takes issue with critics who treat the 'shot' as an indivisible unit which is, for example, either subjective (i.e., the camera looks from the viewpoint of one of the characters in the story, and sees what that character sees) or not. Such a critic, faced with a shot that appears to be subjective, but where during the shot either the camera or the character move so that the character with whose eyes the viewer thought he was looking appears in the picture, would say that the viewer discovers that he has been in error all the way through the shot. Branigan opposes to this what he calls a more empirical theory, and insists that a shot can start by being subjective and then, as the camera moves slightly to show all or part of the person whose point of view we thought we were seeing, we 'revise' our assumptions, and the shot becomes, for the viewer, less and less subjective, until it is no longer subjective at all.

Similarly with sound: and here we can move straight to *Il conformista* to illustrate the point. Marcello is being driven to Savoy by Manganiello, to catch and kill Quadri. The story will flashback to an episode in the EIAR radio studio. The shots I am referring to are numbered 13 and 14 in *The Italianist* (1982). In shot 13, the camera has a viewpoint which it is difficult for the viewer to imagine himself taking; it is on the bonnet of a moving car, looking through the windscreen. Moreover, the camera is facing Marcello head-on, so it is difficult for the viewer to adopt Marcello's viewpoint. However, the soundtrack carries sounds as they would be heard from inside the car (the voices talk quietly, the sound of the engine and the wind are very subdued, artificially so), not as they would be heard if the listener were riding on the bonnet. Branigan calls 'diegetic' sound that which is accessible to the characters in the scene that is being photographed, and 'non-diegetic' sound that which is heard by the viewer but not by the characters (a typical example of the latter is 'background music'). So, in shot 13, the sound is diegetic all right, and it is not what the viewer would hear if he or she were in the position from which the scene is being photographed. (We shall later examine a scene where exactly the reverse is the case.) However, as the two occupants of the car end their dialogue, music starts up on the soundtrack, functioning as a 'sound bridge' to shot 14, where a trio and orchestra are performing a song. That music is not *obviously* diegetic in shot 13, but it becomes diegetic in shot 14. The reason why it might not appear to be diegetic in shot 13 is that we are looking straight at Marcello, and therefore we are not obviously invited to adopt his point of view, and to interpret the sound bridge as part of a private reverie 'inside' his head, so to speak. However, the fact that the sound of Marcello and Manganiello talking, and of the car's engine are an idealized version of what they would sound like from inside the car, rather than from outside, where the camera is, means that the shot is ambiguous and could very easily be interpreted as semi-subjective – the viewer is acoustically inside the car with Marcello, and the sound bridge to the radio station is diegetic *both* in shot 13 and in shot 14; in the first shot it is in Marcello's memory, and the viewer, as it were, plunges through the windscreen into Marcello's psyche.

3. E. Branigan, 'The Spectator and Film Space – Two Theories', *Screen*, 22, i, (1981), 55-78. Articles by J.-A. Miller, J.-P. Oudart, S. Heath, *Screen*, 18, iv, (1977/78), 23-76; D. Dayan, 'The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema', in *Movies and Methods*, edited by B. Nichols (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1976), pp. 438-51. L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, iii, (1975), 6-18.

This ambiguity permits the viewer to adopt Marcello's viewpoint *and* to stand apart from him and watch him at the same time. Hence, though the viewer, in shot 13, does not see what Marcello sees (indeed, if the viewer tried to, he would be forced to imagine Marcello's view through the windscreen blocked by a large film camera on the car's bonnet), the soundtrack, by feeding the listener what Marcello hears in his memory, makes it a subjective shot, of a sort. The viewer is then carried *with* Marcello into the radio studio, which is first seen over Marcello's shoulder (a type of shot that could be called 'semi-subjective'). For completeness, it will be noticed that shot 14, a shot both *of* Marcello and of what he sees, is revealed to be (in the reverse angle of shot 15) from the point of view of a blind man who sees nothing at all, and to further complicate matters, the camera is tracking towards Marcello, which is a movement that cannot be attributed to any of the characters.

The point I wish to illustrate is that we need to be able to see the position of the viewer as mediated by so many things, often working in contrary directions, that theoretical formulations like 'suture', and simple deductions from reverse angle sequences give us little help in understanding the process of reading a film like *Il conformista*.⁴ It may, however, be possible to elaborate the concept of suture to include the sound bridge between shots 13 and 14, and see this as absorbing the viewer into the story, and hence absorbing the cause of the images and sounds into the story. It is a little harder to cope with a device to which I referred earlier when I said that exactly the reverse of the relationship of diegesis between the sound and the characters in shot 13 can be seen later in the film. In shot 13 the sound is diegetic, but not bound to the camera; in the example to be discussed the sound is bound to the camera, but is not diegetic. In Quadri's flat, Anna has gone to call Quadri and his retinue of students into the drawing room to have coffee, leaving Marcello and Giulia in the room, the camera looking at them from the archway through which Anna has just left. The camera cuts to a reverse angle, with the lens tilted down to the floor of the corridor. As the voices of the students rapidly become louder, the camera tilts upwards, catching their feet, legs, bodies, and finally head and shoulders. The figures approach the camera and pass either side of it, the voices reaching a crescendo as they pass the 'ears' of the camera, and then fading as the students proceed into the drawing room and sit down beside Marcello and Giulia. The camera is evidently in the doorway, more or less. No characters are there. If it were Marcello's viewpoint (with 'cinematic licence' in having the camera a little closer to the objects than the point of view strictly allowed) then there would be no point in making the point of view of the *sound* that of the doorway, rather than of Marcello. But the shot is not over because, after the students, Anna slowly, provocatively, and mockingly walks towards the camera, and addresses Giulia. Here there is a cut to a reverse angle of the drawing room

4. A drastically simplified explanation of how Lacanian 'suture' is applied to point of view in film narrative: (a) shot of character X, looking more or less towards the camera, which leads the viewer to attribute the cause of that image to an Absent Other (camera, film-maker, etc.); this shot is followed by (b) reverse angle shot of character Y looking more or less towards the camera, which leads the viewer to attribute shot (a) to the *look* of character Y whom we see in shot (b). Thus the 'hole' in the narrative opened by shot (a) is 'sutured' by shot (b), and the images the viewer is offered appear to be 'caused' by the 'looks' of the characters in the story: the camera is effaced, and the film appears to be a record of reality. See Dayan (1976) and Screen (1977/78).

seen through the archway. The viewer has been offered what appears to be a sequence of reverse angle shots, alternating between shots of Marcello and shots of what he sees, 'associating' the viewer with his viewpoint. But one of the shots from 'his' viewpoint is aurally 'dissociated' from Marcello. This is just as Anna has dissociated herself from him by keeping her back towards him and by failing to offer him any coffee, and in the same way that she mocks him with her physical gestures, while languidly trying to 'seduce' Giulia off to a dance in the evening. The viewer stands in a different place from Marcello, and hears with different ears than Marcello's, and yet clearly perceives Marcello's point of view on all that is shown. Anna's gestures are directed towards the camera and towards Marcello, even though the two are different. Here the sound is certainly not diegetic, in the sense that none of the characters heard the students' voices swell and fade as the viewer did, and yet the sound is exactly fitted to what the camera sees. One could rather force a distinction by saying that on the cognitive level, the viewer does not share Marcello's viewpoint because camera and soundtrack make this impossible, whereas on the erotic level the viewer does share Marcello's viewpoint, especially since Anna is looking more or less at the camera as she walks towards it (her 'rhetorical' walk has no meaning when addressed to the viewer; it is full of meaning when addressed to Marcello, or when seen by him). If I may tentatively draw a conclusion at this point, and one that is full of implications for analysis of point of view in film narrative, it is that the camera does not establish the viewer's point of view, nor does it determine his or her identifications with characters in the story. These things are determined by a complex interplay between many factors, the most important for the present discussion being narration and narrative, camera, sound, and desire (the desires of the characters and the desires of the viewer). For instance, here is a cameraman talking, Vittorio Storaro: 'Bernardo . . . mi disse che per lui la parte sonora aveva lo stesso peso di quella visiva'.⁵

It must, however, be admitted that Bertolucci uses the camera a great deal to create, disrupt, and modify the viewer's point of view and his or her identifications in the narrative – the movements of the camera (for example, the complex crane shot when Manganiello gets out of the car to pee during the killing of Anna), rack focussing (which has the function of producing a movement of the viewer's attention), camera position (in the flashback to the Ministry following the Colonnello's words in the studio, 'mi fate una proposta precisa' [shot 33 in *The Italianist*, 1982], does the camera high above Marcello's head signify that we are seeing him from the point of view of the Colonnello?), and such like. When Marcello goes to visit his mother, the camera is rolled (Branigan [*Screen*, 1981, 60] calls it 'lateral tilt', and says that it 'is virtually confined to the representation of disturbed, subjective states'). Marcello, in this sequence, thinks he is being followed (it comes from Moravia's novel), and the rolled camera is a signifier of this suspicion and fear. Marcello takes refuge behind the bars of the main gate to his mother's house, and these vertical bars appearing tilted on the screen draw attention to the fact that the camera is rolled. But when Manganiello identifies himself, the camera rolls straight during the shot, so that the viewer, who can clearly see Marcello in the picture, can also identify with the relief of his fear. However, the viewer has also had the camera so

5. Interview with Vittorio Storaro (the cameraman on *Il conformista*) in *Cinema e Cinema*, 24, vii, (1980), 77-89 (p. 86).

brutally emphasized in this shot that he or she does not mind the fact that the furniture, architecture, and vegetation of Marcello's mother's house now become the point of view from which we view Marcello (from behind columns or trees, through doors or walls, under beds, down passages, and, famously, from the point of view of the leaves blowing up from the ground in the wind). Here the camera judges Marcello's neuroticism, but it has done so via a delicate process of shifting identifications away from Marcello and onto the external viewpoint of the camera. Moreover, the camera rolling straight behind the bars of the gate once Manganiello has identified himself produces a 'straightening up' of the viewer's perceptions of the narrative. Hitherto, shots of Marcello in the car on the road to Savoy have contained Manganiello only on the soundtrack. Henceforth, they will contain Manganiello on camera too, and later, during the series of interlocking flashbacks proceeding from Marcello's confession to the 'murder' of Lino, the camera will withdraw enough to reveal the whole car. In other words, rather than a narration that proceeds from establishing shots to detail, as does the novel, in its literary way, and as does traditional Hollywood and television narrative, Bertolucci's film proceeds via a gradual drawing back from that windscreen, as the viewer, paradoxically, penetrates further and further into Marcello's psyche. The next major stages in this process of drawing back are when Marcello recounts his dream to Manganiello ('riacquistavo la vista' – note), and when, in the film's final shot, Marcello turns to look at the camera, which has just tracked over the prone naked body of a male prostitute, with, on the soundtrack, the sound of footsteps entering the niche. Marcello is turning to look at the knowledge of himself that the camera and the viewer have in the course of the film been endowed with.

I have referred to pleasure and desire as determinants of point of view. At the present stage of theorizing about the cinema we assume that one of the dynamic forces that ties the viewer to the film is the pleasure he or she gets from viewing it, and psychoanalysis offers one of the major theoretical models for analyzing this pleasure (though psychoanalysis suffers from an enormous lack in its inability adequately to theorize the pleasure of the female viewer). Psychoanalysis offers three main concepts: scopophilia (the pleasure gained from looking at things), voyeurism (the pleasure derived from watching erotic activity from an unseen vantage point), and fetishism (a complex process of projecting libido energy onto things and idealizing them). For the purposes of this article, I shall have to leave to one side the whole question of the pleasure the viewer gets from looking at the film, except to use certain rather obvious examples where they advance my other concern. Instead, we can look at how Marcello's pleasure or displeasure functions as part of the mechanism conditioning the place assigned to the viewer, from where he or she gains knowledge about the narrative.

Looking is central to cinema, and doubly so to *Il conformista*, where Marcello does not so much *do* things as *watch* things, and where the viewer watches Marcello watch. Take feminine beauty. Laura Mulvey has put it succinctly: 'Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen'. (*Screen*, 1975, 11). One can immediately see examples in *Il conformista* where the look of characters and viewers coincide both in pleasure and pain, with

the exception, of course, of Marcello – on whom this anomaly constitutes a judgement. Anna and Giulia, dressed revealingly in expensive gowns, dance together at Joinville, and when Marcello tells Quadri 'le faccia smettere', the latter replies 'Perchè? Sono così belle'. The viewer's erotic look concides with Quadri's, and that of the other dancers, not with Marcello's, even though the viewer holds in his or her mind an element of Marcello's viewpoint that finds Anna's lesbianism disturbing. The viewer's standpoint is not objective, nor is it Marcello's, nor is it that of the other characters on the screen; it is a compound of many viewpoints, though primarily sharing Quadri's erotic pleasure. In the sequence when Quadri is killed, Bertolucci has said that he intended the viewpoint to approximate that of a fantasy of Marcello's, whereas the killing of Anna was 'more realistic'.⁶ There are implications to this, and we examined one or two in *The Italianist* (1982). But the nearest to a character's point of view the camera gives us is to that of Anna. The camera never actually watches the stabbing from a location that coincides with Anna's, but the stabbing is shown in a reverse angle sequence, showing Anna watching the murder take place. Shots of Anna show her exhibiting pain and horror at what she sees. I think it safe to say that the viewer's look shares this 'erotic viewpoint' of pain. The viewer, however, also shares Marcello's Oedipal fantasy of seeing the erotic object (Anna) passively submit to the killing of his rival (father/Quadri). If Bertolucci can bring about judgements and identifications by offering the viewer the pleasure of the characters, he can do something similar by offering the viewer his or her own pain identified by that of one of the characters. What, from the point of view of the story, remains far more problematic is the case of the killing of Anna herself, where the hand held camera joins in the hunt, where the death is built up out of a lyrical montage of moving, hand-held shots, and where the camera follows the killers wearily back down the slope – the whole experience approximating to nothing so closely as an orgasm. Quite apart from the ideological implications of making the killing of a man unpleasant, and the killing of a woman erotically stimulating, it is not at all clear what purpose would be being served by inviting the viewer to identify with the sado-eroticism of a killer who is never even seen except fleetingly from behind. Presumably the viewer transfers this perverse pleasure to Marcello, who has been so often the source of the viewer's point of view: the camera shows him frozen in fear, Manganiello denounces him as 'vigliacco, pervertito', and the viewer experiences his pleasure, which is Bertolucci's rendering of the first section of the novel, concerning Marcello's boyhood sadism. The point of the view is, once more, a compound.

Both Bertolucci's treatment of the erotic look, and the ambiguity deriving from his use of reverse angle shots emerge most forcefully from the real or imagined exchanges of looks between Marcello and the three different women played in the film by the actress Dominique Sanda. Marcello is twice a voyeur: once when he watches 'Sanda' embracing the Minister, and once when he watches Anna trying to seduce Giulia in their hotel room. In the first example (shots 42-46 in *The Italianist*, 1982) we start with a detail shot of a female's calf

6. 'Bernardo Bertolucci', *Dialogue on Film*, 3 (1974), 14-28: 'The murder of the father is a fantasy' (p. 25); 'the murder of the woman was, I think, more realistic' (p. 26).

swinging beneath a table. We cut to Marcello peering through the curtains, a reverse angle, in other words, of Marcello's look. Since the previous shot only showed a leg, we cannot attribute the reverse angle of Marcello looking to the point of view of the leg. Hence the viewer deduces that he or she is looking *with* Marcello at the leg, in a segmentation of the female body that is characteristic of photographic fetishism. The next shot is a reverse angle, from Marcello's viewpoint, it would appear, of 'Sanda's' face turning and looking at a point the canonical 30° to one side of the camera. The face is in tight close-up, and the brim of 'Sanda's' hat and the fur over her shoulder mask much of her face, so that little is visible of it except for her left eye; this is a close-up of 'Sanda' *looking* at Marcello. The next shot is a reverse angle of Marcello in close-up looking straight at the camera – in other words, we see what 'Sanda' sees, we share her look at the voyeur. The next shot, however, shows 'Sanda' and the Minister kissing, and ends with a fast zoom back, from Marcello's point of view, establishing him as being at a great distance from 'Sanda', and so obliging the viewer to revise completely his or her identifications in the previous sequence of reverse angle shots. The viewer's look has participated in Marcello's desire – it was the erotic look of two people looking at each other in close proximity; the fast zoom back reasserts the cognitive look, and puts at least fifty metres between the two lookers. Both looks are from Marcello's point of view, but they are not compatible, except in a narrative where it is possible to superimpose one look upon another.

The most ambiguous voyeuristic scene in the film is where Marcello watches Anna seduce Giulia, as should become clear from a description of a sequence of nine shots. One: the camera looks into the room through a slightly opened door, to see Giulia lying on the bed and Anna on the ground to her left, with her head against Giulia's leg and her hand resting on her upper thigh. Two: reverse angle from about Anna's point of view of the door ajar (no one visible in the open space, which is dark). Three: close-up of first shot, Anna's face looking almost directly at the camera. Four: close-up of Giulia's head from Marcello's point of view. Five: same as Three, but this time the detail is of Anna's hand moving up Giulia's thigh, and of Giulia's hand pushing it away again. Six: same as Four. Seven: same as Two, still no one visible in the door, even though that is where we have been looking from. Eight: Head and shoulders of Giulia as she sits up, from Marcello's point of view. Nine: same as One, but a trifle closer; the camera rises as Anna gets up and walks into the background to get Giulia's dress (the door frame is out of focus in the edge of the picture). Giulia gets up and goes round behind Anna and takes off her gown, saying to Anna: 'Ti prego, non guardarmi. Mi vergogno.' Anna: 'Che c'è di male? Sono una donna. Come te.' Giulia: 'Sì, ma mi guardi in un modo . . . Voltati.' Anna turns her back on Giulia, and looks straight at the camera/Marcello – which, however, as we have seen in shots two and seven, are not visible from her point of view. The camera at this point starts to track backwards away from the door, so that the door frame fills more and more of the sides of the picture. The camera then pans a little to the left and begins to rack focus off the people in the bedroom, who go out of focus on the right of the picture, while Marcello's head, seen from behind, appears in the left of the frame, in focus. Viewers, when asked, unanimously agree that they feel that Anna is looking at and seeing them/Marcello in shot nine, even though it is clear, from what she says

later, that Anna has not seen Marcello looking in. The scene is erotically charged: Giulia is naked in part of shot nine, and in shot five Anna is attempting to caress her groin. It offers, therefore, potential voyeuristic and/or scopophilic pleasure to the male viewer. Such a viewer is looking with Marcello's eyes, for whom, however, the revelation of Anna's homosexuality, and its reminders of his own, are disturbing, rather than pleasurable. The viewer perceives that ambiguity through the fact of one of the erotic objects' looking at the voyeur. On the level of the story, Anna does not see Marcello; on the level of the viewer's experience, Anna is definitely looking back at the viewer. The voyeur's erotic pleasure is spoilt by being seen by the object, by being stared at.⁷ The character who looks straight at the camera, and draws attention to his knowledge of the presence of the viewer, disturbs the viewer, and is a device frequently used by experimental film-makers to demystify the spurious realism of cinematography. The track back, the pan, and the rack focus re-establish distance between us and Marcello, and re-establish the viewer's cognitive viewpoint over the erotic one.

The more one watches *Il conformista*, the more one finds it concentrating around the concept of the look. In a footnote to the previous article I pointed out how Bertolucci put things between looker and looked at in order to show their difference, in order to disturb the subject-object relationship, or to accentuate its problematic nature. Here, I have brought up a few examples illustrating how he adds a problematic element to the relationship between the viewer, the camera, and the protagonist whose point of view the camera and the viewer partly share. Bertolucci does not hide the camera; he does not efface it. The cause of the images before the viewer is made manifest; it is a camera, very often in movement. The camera is narrator, the source of the viewer's experiences, which can at will distance itself from the viewpoint of the narrative, which is Marcello. Bertolucci takes to heart the prescriptions of *Cinéthique* in the late sixties to demystify realist cinema,⁸ and uses the means of production of the narrative itself as the source of disturbance in the narrative, deploying the devices of experimental cinema to create this disturbance, but not doing it just from the outside. His disturbing devices are motivated by the narrative, in the superimposition of different viewpoints on Marcello, with whom the viewer is at one moment identified, and from whom he is at another distanced. Moreover, Marcello's desperate search for norms disorients the viewer, who is then himself or herself engaged in a search for norms, as well as being in a continual search for points of view (the viewer as conformist?). The norms and the points of view superimpose themselves on each other, and the 'narrator' thereby comments and judges, without constituting a separate, intrusive narrator-figure coming between Marcello and the viewer.

University of Reading

7. See C. Metz, *Le Signifiant imaginaire* (Paris, 1977).

8. F. Casetti, *Teorie del cinema* (Milano, 1978) sums up *Cinéthique's* position: 'Quindi esibire e valorizzare il lavoro necessario alla fabbricazione di un film significa intervenire direttamente sulle determinazioni ad esempio economiche (il meccanismo del plusvalore) o simboliche (l'illusione di vedere direttamente il mondo)' (p. 49). The scenes in *Il conformista* in the ELAR radio studio and in Quadri's study also serve to unveil the process of fabrication of 'images'.