

The Conformist - Il Conformista

Duration: 111 minutes

Genre: Drama

Cast: Jean-Louis Trintignant, Stefania Sandrelli, Enzo Tarascio, Dominique Sanda

Year: 1970

Critique by Corin Depper

Viewed alongside Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) and Pasolini's *Saló* (1975), Bertolucci's *Il conformista* (1970) can be seen as part of a trend of 1970s films to explore the psycho-sexual underpinnings of Italian Fascism. Protagonist Marcello Clerici, played by French actor Jean-Louis Trintignant, aspires to be a model citizen of the Fascist state, hiding earlier transgressions behind a façade of normality that leads him to become an agent for the state.

Clerici's youthful - and apparently murderous - infatuation with Lino, a young chauffeur who seems to have strayed from one of Caravaggio's more lubricious paintings, comes to embody everything that he seeks to repress in his adult existence. In contrasting Clerici's early sexual non-conformity with his later, doomed, attempt at bourgeois respectability, the film evokes both the oppressive nature of Fascism, and the perversions to which it seems, inevitably, to give rise.

This is a film whose characters are haunted by their pasts - be it Marcello himself, Manganiello, his secret service handler, plagued by memories of past atrocities in Abyssinia, or even Giulia, Marcello's apparently carefree young wife, with her recollection of past sexual abuse - but who are moving towards a far greater catastrophe that they are powerless to prevent. The film is notable for its highly complex interwoven flashback structure, with Clerici's character revealed gradually to the audience as he travels from Paris on the journey that will become the defining event of his life, and for its extremely elaborate production design, with Vittorio Storaro's camerawork discovering startling chiaroscuro effects amongst the fascist kitsch of Ferdinando Scarfiotti's designs.

This visual opulence suggests a departure for Bertolucci, away from the twin influences on his early films of Italian neorealism - his first job had been as an assistant to Pasolini on his neorealist-inspired *Accattone* (1961) - and the French New Wave, and towards the high style that would come to define his mature work. However, the genius of this film stems precisely from the tensions with its patriarchal influences, most significantly that of Jean-Luc Godard, whose debut feature, *À bout de souffle/Breathless* (1959), first inspired Bertolucci to become a film-maker. As Bertolucci himself has noted, Clerici's former mentor Professor Quadri is given the Parisian address of Jean-Luc Godard at the time, and it is possible to view *Il conformista* as an extended dialogue with Godard's 1963 film *Le Mépris*, both being adapted from works by the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia, only one amidst a range of intertextual references between the two films.

Godard, however, somewhat loftily dismissed his source as a good book for a train journey, and proceeded to strip most of the psychological nuance from Moravia's tale of a screenwriter's estrangement from his wife, replacing it with a characteristically modernist reflection on the interconnections between cinema, sex, and commerce.

Bertolucci, by contrast, reinforces the psychological complexity of his central character, using a flashback structure not present in the novel as a way of emphasising the development of Clerici's psyche. Although dressed in a manner reminiscent of one of Godard's louche antiheroes and engaging in the same unconvincing gunplay, Trintignant imbues Clerici with an altogether more tragic demeanour.

The cool flatness of Godard's images - created with his key collaborator of the New Wave period, cinematographer Raoul Coutard - is in similarly marked contrast to the depth of Storaro's work here, suggestive of Bertolucci's attempt to forge a fresh mode of psychological realism in a post-New Wave cinema.

In this endeavour, one is reminded rather of Gilles Deleuze's characterisation of the painter Francis Bacon's attempt to discover a new type of representational art in a world that had been changed forever by abstraction.

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