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# SR Goes to the Movies

Hollis Alpert

## Politics as Perversion

OF THE FILMS that have opened here this season, only three, it seems to me, are required viewing. They are, in order of appearance, *Claire's Knee*, *Taking Off*, and *The Conformist*. Note that only one was made in this country (*Taking Off*), but that all three are the work of European directors. The first was by Eric Rohmer, a Frenchman; the second by Miloš Forman, a transplanted Czech; and the third by Bernardo Bertolucci, a thirty-year-old Italian. This makes me, I suppose, one of those critical snobs that Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association, often inveighs against, but no amount of drum-beating from on high (Valenti, after all, is well paid to publicize his industry) is going to persuade me that Americans, at the moment, are doing much of importance.

Europeans, after all, are in the same bind as Americans when it comes to finding financing for their films. The more remarkable, then, when a film as splendid and baroque as *The Con-*

*formist* arrives. Why it has taken so long is a mystery, for when it was first shown at the New York Film Festival last September, Vincent Canby gave Paramount about all it needed in the way of critical encouragement. However, the film is doubly welcome in a dry season.

Bertolucci's adaptation of the Moravia novel succeeds most notably when it evokes that period of Italian Fascism just prior to the onset of World War II. He sees it as a time of political decay nigh on to putrescence, its primary symbol being an Italian of aristocratic family who "conforms" by doing what his Fascist superiors command him to do and who eventually flounders in a bog of moral and sexual perversion. At the root of his slavish devotion to the dictatorial state is a guilt that derives from a homosexual encounter in his adolescence. From then on, he strives to make his lifestyle give the appearance of normality, even to the taking of a dull, respectable girl for his wife. But this supposedly virginal young lady also lives a lie, for

she had been seduced early on by an aged uncle and had been his secret mistress thereafter. Not that her new husband is in any way bothered after her postmarital confession.

Scene by vivid scene, Bertolucci reveals the baneful moral climate in each aspect of the man's life. His mother is a morphine addict (the supplier is her chauffeur lover); his father is in a mental asylum, possibly due to advanced syphilis. Visiting a Fascist headquarters, he comes upon a woman in considerable disarray on an official's desk. And during his honeymoon, in Paris, he willingly accepts a commission to spy on and assist in the assassination of his former philosophy professor, now an anti-Fascist émigré. Bertolucci's structuring of the story is complex and often ambiguous, as though incidents and events must be equated with the hero's totally muddled feelings.

The man's young wife is beautiful and passionate, but no sooner does he meet the wife of the professor he has come to doom than he is smitten by her. She, in turn, is sapphically attracted to *his* wife, and so it goes. The parallel to Visconti's *The Damned* has already been noticed; both are mordant, but Bertolucci's style is the more intriguing, for he infuses his scenes, drenches them almost, with nostalgia. I haven't seen any recent picture that so beautifully captures the sense of a period (1938), and it isn't merely a matter of the clothes, the cars, and the décor—although details are exquisite in their painful accuracy—but rather a total use of the cinematic medium, which includes the choice and playing of the actors.

Once again, Jean Louis Trintignant gives an impeccable performance, turning himself into a born and bred Italian and one locked into his political climate. The women are just about perfect: Stefania Sandrelli is the vacuous, voluptuous young wife, and Dominique Sanda is the woman with lesbian tendencies. When the two dance together a now outmoded tango in a Parisian nightclub, the moment is so outrageously and decadently amusing that a lesser director might have let it go on longer just for the effect. But Bertolucci has more to say and to show—a horrifying climactic double murder for one, an eerie epilogue for another. Here, though, Bertolucci pounds home the message too hard. Rome has been liberated, the Fascists are in disgrace, and the conformist's life is in shreds. There is a boy selling his favors, and the conformist, it appears, is ready to face his final degradation. The circle has turned too neatly and completely. So full and rich a film hardly needed the coda.



"He's on a scholarship from Paramount."