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Hauntings: Athos Magnani, the son who cannot face the past, left; Draifa, below, the father's mistress who summons the present to lay the ghosts



With 'The Spider's Stratagem', Bertolucci found a way of reconciling pleasure and politics, argues Chris Wagstaff

Theatre of memory

In the reign of Augustus, Horace admonished poets to seek a judicious balance between edifying and pleasing their readers. In 1970, Bernardo Bertolucci (born into a family of poets) came to the end of a painful search for that balance, and shot two films in the same year, *Strategia del ragno* (*The Spider's Stratagem*) and *Il conformista* (*The Conformist*). Both films tell of the assassination of a prominent anti-fascist in the 30s; in both films the surface level of that story covers a 'latent' Oedipal rivalry, in which a son figure comes to doubt the political integrity of the anti-fascist father figure; in both films the relationship of the son figure and the wife/mistress of the father figure is pivotal. And then both films are uncannily pleasurable to watch.

But the achievements of this fruitful year did not come easily to Bertolucci. After a precocious start as Pasolini's assistant on *Accattone* (1961), and a literary prize for his volume of verse, *In cerca del mistero* (*In Search of the Mystery*, 1962), his first film as director had been *La commare secca* (*The Grim Reaper*) in 1962, followed by his much admired *Prima della rivoluzione* (*Before the Revolution*) in 1964. Then had come a period of self-questioning, in which he had made documentaries and shorts, and written the subject for Sergio Leone's *C'era una volta il West* (*Once upon a Time in the West*), before making *Partner* in 1968. No one seemed to like *Partner* – even friends would avoid discussing it with him – and Bertolucci describes himself as having been confused in this period.

Nowadays, Bertolucci is fluent on the nature and cause of his confusion. But we need to hear him closer to the time, in answers to questions put to him by Amos Vogel at the 1970 New York Film Festival, where his two latest films were showing. Vogel says that *Before the Revolution* is a cult film for the few, while *The Conformist* is acceptable to a wider audience, to which Bertolucci responds: "I like that very much". Vogel: "That it has become a cult film?" Bertolucci: "No, that with *The Conformist* I can now speak to a wider audience... In this sense, Victor Fleming was a very fortunate person... he made *Gone with the Wind*... [laughs] Fleming communicates with everybody".

The town in which the action of *The Spider's Stratagem* is set is called Tara, named after the river Taro that flows near Sabbioneta, the ►

Based on Borges' story, 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero', 'The Spider's Stratagem' shows Athos Magnani arriving in the present at the town of Tara, summoned by Draifa, his father's mistress, to find out who had murdered her lover, a revered anti-fascist, in 1936. The son meets his father's old friends, who explain in a rehearsed way how the father and they had planned to assassinate Mussolini during a performance of 'Rigoletto'. But someone had betrayed the plan to the police, Mussolini had not turned up, and the father instead had been slain by a fascist assassin. The son feels he is being lied to, and tries to leave the town, but on the anniversary of his father's death, a performance of 'Rigoletto' draws him in and he discovers that his father, in a moment of weakness, had betrayed the plot, that his friends had uncovered his treachery and the father had arranged for them to shoot him. The next morning, the son has to give a speech to commemorate the heroic death of his father, and decides that he cannot reveal the truth; he, too, is caught in the web spun thirty-five years before by his father. When he goes to take a train home it never comes, and grass is seen growing over the tracks...

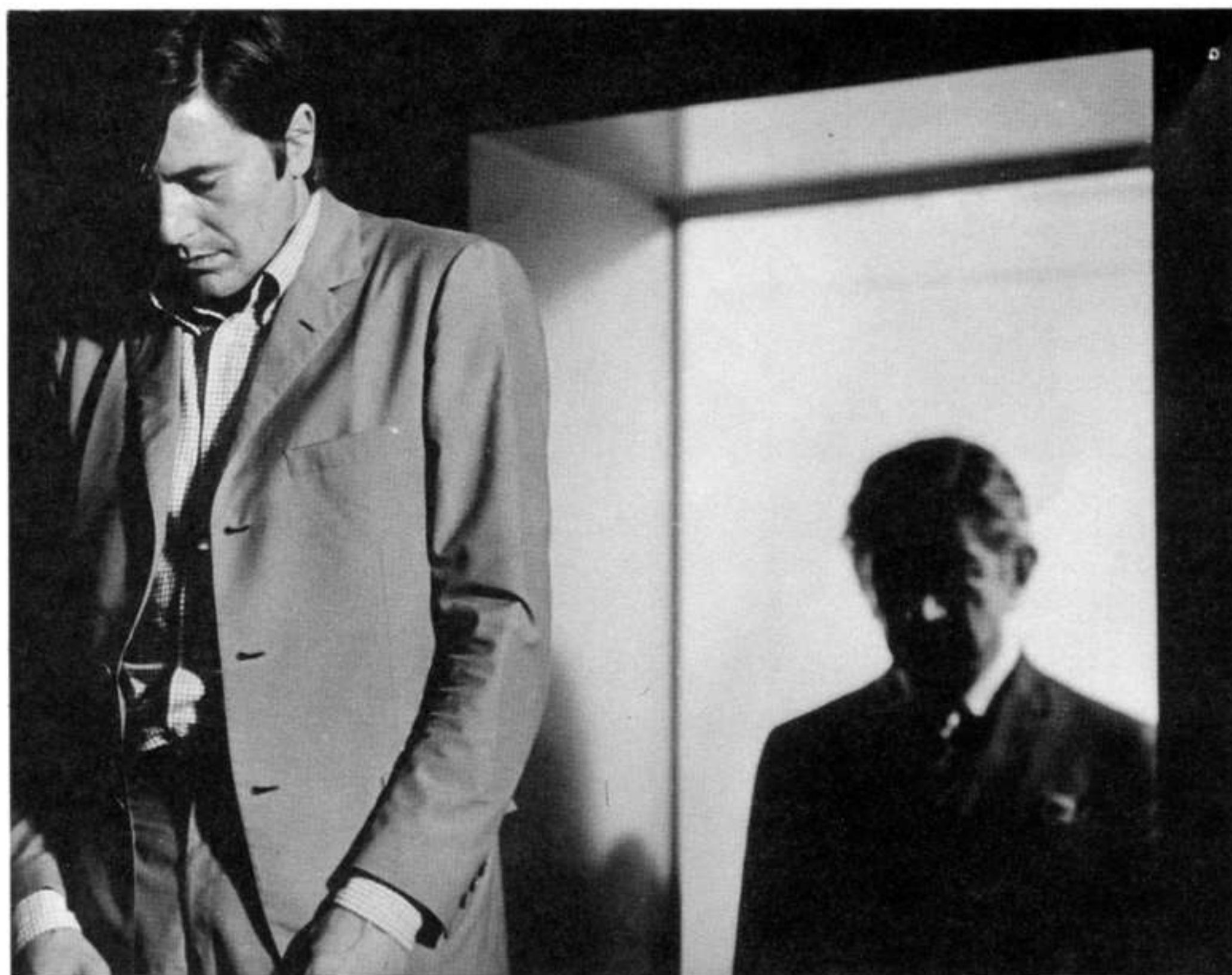
● Made in Italy, 1970. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Screenplay: Mamilù Parolini, Eduardo De Gregorio, Bernardo Bertolucci. Director of photography: Vittorio Storaro. Editor: Roberto Perpignani. Production: RAI-Red Film, Giovanni Bertolucci. With Giulio Brogi (Athos Magnani), Alida Valli (Draifa), Tino Scotti (Costa), Pippo Campanini (Gaibazzi), Franco Giovannelli (Rasori)
● Suggested reading: Donald Ranvaud and Enzo Ungari, 'Bertolucci by Bertolucci' [interviews] (1987); T. Jefferson Kline, 'Bertolucci's Dream Loom' (1987); Robert Phillip Kolker, 'Bernardo Bertolucci' (1985); Andrew Britton, 'Thinking about Father', in 'Movie', 23 (1976-7)

◀ town in which the film was shot. But of course, Tara is most of all the name of the plantation to which a character in *Gone with the Wind* yearns to return – “Tara is the cinema, Tara is *Gone with the Wind*”, says Bertolucci. He was delighted when an American academic pointed out that these were also the initial syllables of the name of a well-known spider. Pressed further by Vogel, Bertolucci says he fears the bourgeois aestheticism of the avant-garde, “because I know very well that I can make a film about the quality of the wind... the essence of wind which is nothing... and it will make festival audiences happy”.

Until *The Spider's Stratagem*, Jean-Luc Godard had been Bertolucci's mentor. In later years, he would talk about how the influence of Godard led young film-makers to believe that audiences ought to kneel in sackcloth and ashes before their films; how this sadistic attitude towards the viewer began to make him feel uncomfortable; and how he grew to desire “a dialogue with the public, communication”. Indeed in *The Conformist*, the Professor Quadri who is assassinated lives at Godard's Paris address and telephone number – Bertolucci ‘kills’ one of his many artistic father figures (the others are, in this period, his actual father, the poet Attilio Bertolucci, and the poet, political writer and film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini). The influence of Godard had entailed a strong tilt towards the Horatian *utile*, with scant concern for the public's *dilectum*. It was didactic cinema: “I understood that the cinema I had been involved in up to then was gratifying and protective, a cinema of defence, ungenerous”.

There was no obvious solution. *Partner* had deployed theatrical procedures learned from Artaud and Brecht to insist that the film is a representation, and to deter the viewer from any illusions about its continuity with reality – all in the Godardian cause of politicising representation (as opposed to making realist films with political messages). In some ways, however, an uncompromising stance against such features of mainstream cinematic communication as projection, identification and fantasy went against Bertolucci's personal grain, and already in *The Grim Reaper* and *Before the Revolution* his elegiac lyricism was apparent (for example, in the latter, the episode by the river with the aristocrat Puck).

Self-mockingly, but only just, he has the executive producer of *Before the Revolution*, playing a walk-on role, say: “*Une Femme est une femme* is far more *engagé* than all the films of De Santis and Lizzani, in a certain sense even of Franco [Francesco] Rosi, I insist. Cinema is a matter of style, and style is a matter of morality”. Bertolucci himself said, in disappointment at the achievements of his political documentaries: “There is no effective alternative distribution circuit. The cinema rebels against being treated as a mouthpiece, against being used like a mimeograph machine; a more intense political charge is carried by certain commercial films than by films made in a rigorous, politically ‘correct’ manner”. How was he to retain the honest admission of theatricality



Oedipus: can the son slay the father?

(that a film constructs a spectacle), to continue his analysis of the confused political identity of the Marxist Italian bourgeoisie of his generation, and to communicate and give pleasure to a wider audience, all at the same time? Where was he to find the financial input and the distributional outlet that would enable him to reconcile these goals? *Partner* had been made with state subsidy, and had done poorly at the box office (as had the earlier two features).

In 1964, the Italian state broadcasting corporation, RAI, had received figures that showed that together with news broadcasts, films were what viewers most appreciated on television. So they started a systematic programme of film-making at a number of levels: serials, telefilms, experimental films, and full-length feature films directed by new talents (Ermanno Olmi, the Taviani brothers, Liliana Cavani, Gianni Amelio, Miklos Jancso, Jean-Marie Straub, Marco Leto). The feature film programme really took off in 1970, and Bertolucci was one of the first directors they approached: “Once they had accepted the screenplay [of *The Spider's Stratagem*], which they did straight away with the first version, the RAI never interfered in the production. So I must say that so far [1970] it is the best producer I have ever had: a producer present economically and absent physically: hence complete freedom”.

At exactly the same time, he entered psychoanalysis (in February 1970; the film was shot in July and August). It is important to understand how his enthusiastic embracing of the dream

as a representation of psychic reality offered Bertolucci at least a partial solution to his formal problems. For him, watching films was like dreaming: the viewer desires, gazes upon what is desired, and watches himself or herself desire. As a director, he no longer needed to fear that he might mystify the audience by passing off constructed images as reality, if his theatrical representations were a *mise en sc  ne* of fantasies. The spectacle offered the viewer was not just the “essence of wind”, but could be grounded in the psychic reality of the unconscious – our desires acquiring form in dreams. He could reconcile his portrayal of the ambiguities of the Italian bourgeois left with the pleasure of *Gone with the Wind*.

More than that, he could almost remake *Partner* in another key. For example, the concern with the artificiality of representation and with the theatre was amply met in *The Spider's Stratagem* by the location he selected to represent the realm of the Freudian unconscious, and of memory: the town of Tara. Sabbioneta is an extraordinary piece of planning, built 500 years ago in just over eighteen months by Vespasiano Gonzaga. The director and the lighting cameraman (Vittorio Storaro) lit it to look like a theatre, and posed figures in it to look like extras. The whole town at the end is wired for sound, and broadcasts Verdi's *Rigoletto*; the whole town is the theatre in which Athos senior performs his script in order to preserve the memory of the anti-fascist struggle.

The story and location of *The Spider's Stratagem* offered Bertolucci further scope for portraying the psychological splitting of the protagonist. In *Partner* it had been an alter-ego double, bringing about a splitting apart of the impotent thinker and the anarchical man of action; in *The Spider's Stratagem*, father and son (played by the same actor) are fused into one,

‘The cinema rebels against being treated as a mouthpiece, being used as a mimeograph’

the father an ambiguous anti-fascist of the 30s catching in his web a son who is striving to achieve adulthood in the inaction and confusion of middle-class Italy in the 60s.

So whereas Bertolucci and many of his critics have depicted *The Spider's Stratagem* as a complete turning point in the director's artistic career, and a rejection of the past, we can better understand it in terms of a continuity with the past, but made possible by a new approach to the material conditions of film-making, and a new formal freedom offered by a surrender to the eroticism of cinema. Before, Bertolucci edified his viewers by denying them pleasure; now he gives his viewers pleasure by means of the images he uses to edify them.

There is a stubborn integrity in Bertolucci's position. He rejected the category of art cinema as being meaningless for an artist whose job was to please and instruct his public, and for an Italian film-maker who wanted to confront Hollywood on its own terms, rather than to carve out a protected European art house corner for himself. He made *The Conformist* with Paramount's money, *Last Tango in Paris* with Paramount and eventually United Artists, and *1900* with Paramount, Fox and United Artists... Perhaps he has now got himself into another impasse, but we need not doubt that it will be worth waiting to see how he breaks out of it.

The RAI had no coherent scheme in which to frame the relations between television and the cinema; it simply co-opted film-makers to feed its screen. It had no plans for theatrically distributing its films after broadcasting them, and it did not impress upon film-makers any particular approach to the television medium. In approaching *The Spider's Stratagem*, Bertolucci and Storaro adopted a strange, but perhaps prescient, attitude. Bertolucci accepted the implications of the television public, but director and cameraman rejected at least partially the technical implications of the medium.

Television requires close shots, with figures prominent in the foreground; they photographed everything from a distance, with small figures moving slowly through large architectural compositions. Italy at the time broadcast only in black and white; they made the film in colour, and refused to hold contrast levels low, as required for the cathode ray tube, but rather made sharp tonal contrasts the leitmotiv of the film. *The Spider's Stratagem* was Storaro's first colour film, and Bertolucci conveyed to him the dreamlike atmosphere he wanted by showing him Magritte's painting *L'Empire des lumières*, where a warm yellow light shines from the centre of a blue landscape at dusk: the contrasts are those of the intensity of the light, and of the 'temperature' of the colours. This tonal quality pervades the film, and one of its characteristics is echoed in the composition: shots frame characters in or against buildings, with windows and doors that give on to other windows and doors, so that we are always looking right through buildings, just as at one moment we see 'through' an outdoor cinema screen to the landscape behind it. Everything has mysterious, but per-

'The knowledge my film was watched by millions gave me a new sense of responsibility'

haps vacuous, depths, which is in tune with Bertolucci's aim to create with Tara a "realm of the dead", the world of the unconscious, the memory of the past and the suggestion of the future. The present, active, adult world is excluded; the town is populated only by old men, some of whom act like little girls, and by children of ambiguous gender.

Yet some sequences have the warm intimacy of the televisual, as when the witch-like Draifa (played by Alida Valli, star of the late 30s and part, therefore, of the 'memory' that the film evokes) is shot just in head and shoulders while she strains to manoeuvre the drugged Athos' deckchair on the veranda, while in the background plays a 30s-style sentimental ballad.

Perhaps the slow-moving camera makes good television too – what Bertolucci has called the "tracking shot that works like a rural milk train", stopping here and there and then catching up with the protagonist who has moved on meanwhile, or else discovering someone or something we were not expecting. The long sequence shots (Athos' farewell to Draifa is a shot lasting three minutes and eleven seconds) and the frequent 360 degree pans are also effective. The sound is recorded direct (not dubbed, as is usual with Italian films), and the intensity of the green foliage combines with the swelling chant of the crickets and the occasional zap of a mosquito hitting the microphone to bring even to the small screen the sensual tranquillity of what Bertolucci recalls as an enchanted summer, in which he relived the rural Parma in which he had grown up.

The Spider's Stratagem was broadcast on RAI's first channel on Sunday evening, 25 October 1970, after the main news, and again (such a repetition was almost unheard of) on the following Friday. The Sunday audience was assessed at 4.5 million, and audience approval at 49 per cent, which is relatively low. (The film was not theatrically released in Italy, to the best of my knowledge, until 1972.) Bertolucci watched it: "For a cineaste like myself, used to making films for a restricted audience of intellectuals, it raised new problems. Together with the awareness of the fact that my language was still not perfectly clear, the knowledge that my film was watched by millions of people gave me a sense of responsibility that I had never had before". He had chosen a fairly straightforward 'mystery' narrative, and he had tried to make a transparent parable out of it. Nevertheless, he took the film in hand once more, and re-edited the final sequence.

Originally, the ending had just been the close-up of Athos junior delivering his speech at his father's commemoration. Bertolucci altered it by inserting scenes from the story we had just followed, together with four of those ubiquitous inserts of the town seen from out-

side across a cornfield, like an oasis in a desert. "While I was doing it, I said to myself: good heavens, it looks like a trailer for the film; but finally I realised that if it had in the end come out a little didactically, on the other hand I seemed to have made a generous gesture towards the television public, unused to a rather elliptical, mysterious film like this... The ending of the film seemed, and still seems, to me to help people to understand the central problem of the traitor and the hero".

Parma, and so Tara, is the world of his father, the poet before him, who reviewed films for the local paper and took his son to see them. The cinematic dream is Oedipal, as the son unmasks the father. Bertolucci fuses his representation of a personal past, and of a universal Oedipal conflict between generations and between artists, with a representation of the politically ambiguous identity that history has thrust upon the bourgeois, Marxist, intellectual, male Italian of the 60s. He achieves this with montage, with that ability to play with time that the cinema confers upon the artist.

Athos junior is gradually fused with the past and with his father, as the montage progressively becomes more audacious. Bertolucci uses film to manipulate time: with the tracking and the panning of the camera; with the pulling of focus (from foreground to background, as in the re-enactment of the murder in the theatre); with parallel editing; with illogical continuity (Beccaccia, the old fascist, rediscovered in an ever-changing theatre box); and with a *mise en scène* that juxtaposes past and present in the same shot (Draifa addressing the son in the present by looking towards the camera, in a shot that has the 1936 father standing in the background).

Borges' story plays with, and rejects, time; Bertolucci plays with and adores time. But this Oedipal shock has its own historical punch. Bertolucci's bourgeois Marxist generation is defined, and rendered impotent, by its historical conditioning, and by the 'memory' of the past: the myth of the Resistance, of its heroism and of its political purity. "In so many bourgeois Italians the decision to oppose fascism came about for libertarian, individualistic, cultural, anarchical reasons: even for reasons of good taste... Hence the fragilities, the compromises... In the figures of bourgeois anti-fascism there is always an element of ambiguity".

In *The Spider's Stratagem* Bertolucci makes this point sweetly and lyrically; in *The Conformist* he makes it surgically and ferociously. In all his films, he is analysing his own identity and that of his generation, trying to find out what space there is for effective action. *The Spider's Stratagem* marks the discovery of a space and an artistic form in which it was possible for him to communicate with a cinematic audience, and ushers in one of the most glorious 'middle periods' an artist could hope for.

● *The Spider's Stratagem* will play in Cardiff and Bristol in late August; in Brighton, Richmond, Derby, Manchester and Edinburgh in September; and in Hull, Poole, London and Nottingham in October

