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Author(s)	Michael Atkinson Michael Atkinson
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A revived masterpiece is this summer's finest Roman holiday

THE CONFORMIST

Written and directed by
Bernardo Bertolucci

Paramount, July 29 through August 11
Film Forum

Now can begin my summer of love: Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) arrives at Film Forum in a torrent of silk and shadow, an eye-watering testimony to the erstwhile dash of international cinema. As with few other films, I envy the newcomer as I envy David Niven for having made love to Merle Oberon; that Bertolucci's masterpiece—made when he was all of 29—will be the most revelatory experience a fortunate pilgrim will have in a theater this year is a foregone conclusion. And that's going *leggermente*. Fleshing out novelist Alberto Moravia's shadow-box between political compliance and personal shame with arguably the most arresting mise-en-scène ever concocted for any movie, Bertolucci has created cinema that red-inks your inner calendar. Set entirely on rainy city afternoons and indigo evenings, you can hardly help corresponding the film to seminal mood moments in your own life.

Told in timeline flea leaps, the story follows Marcello (Jean-Louis Trintignant), a would-be sophisticate lining up with Mussolini's Fascists in the '30s for his own, very private reasons—as the title



Film Forum

An orgasm of coolness

makes clear, this is participatory politics seen as psychosocial dysfunction. Being "normal" is an ideal the fiercely closeted Marcello talks about a lot, his desire to belong spiraling out to include marriage (to the fabulously pliable and obnoxious Stefania Sandrelli) and insinuating himself into the Party by framing his old university mentor (Enzo Tarascio) and, by extension, the prof's sexy, testy trophy wife (Dominique Sanda). The motor for Marcello's lost ping-ponging between allegiances and whims (his toss-it-all yen for Sanda's bisexual flirt moves to the heart of the film, and then, terribly, seems to have never been there) is an innocuous childhood accident of illegal sex and blood crime, from which spills a lifetime of

searching and emptiness.

All at once, *The Conformist* is a bludgeoning indictment of fascistic follow-the-leader and an orgasm of coolness, ravishing compositions, camera gymnastics (the frame virtually squirms around, like Marcello), and atmospheric resonance—as if its decadent, twilit-art deco-noir style is itself a refutation of dictatorial social norms. The actors vogue; Vittorio Storaro's lens transforms every street and room into a catalytic baroque; the clothes grip the characters like iconic mantles—to a large degree, the film is an immaculate puppet play about the tension between pleasure (stylistic, sexual, etc.) and imposed duty. If all Bertolucci did was sit Storaro (again, his accomplishment may be the apex of color cinematography) and ironic-heartbreaking composer Georges Delerue at a table and give them drinks, he might've done enough. But there's a fire underneath the tailored rump of *The Conformist* that begs the question of Bertolucci's subsequent career—what happens? Had he shot his load, thereafter only thinking to undress his actresses?

Not our problem, but the movie is ours: the streetlight-burnished Roman streets, the leaves blowing on Marcello's mother's seedy estate, the continental train ride with a sunset movie playing outside and casting its glow on the honeymooners, the dance hall dyke waltz cum Brueghel wedding party, the assassination on the Alpine mountain road. Count your blessings. MICHAEL ATKINSON

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