Document Citation

Title	**Sex and politics**
Author(s)	Stephen Farber
Source	*Hudson Review, The*
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	301-308
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Il conformista (The conformist), Bertolucci, Bernardo, 1970

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Sex and Politics

ELIO PETRI's *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* begins with a pleasingly simple, provocative premise: on the very day that he is to be promoted from head of the homicide division to head of the political intelligence division, a deranged Roman police officer murders his mistress, leaves clues that will clearly incriminate him, and sits back waiting to be exonerated; his grisly experiment is designed to prove that the man in authority transcends the law. It is an outrageous premise for a parable, yet it touches just close enough to the news in yesterday's headlines to tease our imaginations. Through exaggeration and abstraction the film has the opportunity to raise some important philosophical questions about the relationship between law and justice, order and despotism. We expect to see Petri follow his premise to its logical, grotesque conclusion—a stinging demonstration of the invulnerability of the police in an increasingly repressive and intolerant society. A parable can be effective as long as it builds steadily in intensity; simplicity and clarity, not subtlety or complexity, are the qualities essential to the form. But the film is convoluted instead of straightforward. Petri does try for depth, even for psychological realism. Unfortunately, this makes hash of the allegory. What remains is one of the most confused films of the year.

At the start the chief seems to be in complete control of what he is doing. He may be insane, but his insanity is that of the fanatic or the demagogue; he is a *rational* madman, and remarkably intelligent. Every detail has been carefully worked out in his mind, made to fit his perverse master plan. For example, he deliberately allows himself to be observed at the scene of the crime by a young student revolutionary; he hopes that the revolutionary will later accuse him of the murder, for then his experiment will have a perfectly symmetrical conclusion—the evidence of the radical will automatically be discounted, for society will not allow the forces of anarchy to restrain the guardians of order. The scenes in which the chief harangues his colleagues about the need for greater political repression are wittily and ingeniously written, and Gian Maria Volonte plays them with great relish and power; the chief seems possessed, but, at the same time, such a brilliant strategist that we can imagine him taking command of his entire society. He is a classic movie villain, a sort of evil genius; and if the film had respected its own conceits, it might have been a disturbing melodrama about the evolution of a fascist dictatorship.

But something unexpected happens to the character of the chief. As the film goes on, instead of becoming more and more fanatical, he

begins to lose control of himself, until he seems a victim of his own plot. While he plants more evidence that will point to his guilt, he also destroys evidence that is too incriminating, as if he is frightened of his scheme. At other moments he seems too anxious to be caught, punished and humiliated, more masochist than megalomaniac. And through a series of flashbacks that tell us more and more about his relationship with the woman he has murdered, we learn of insecurities that are hidden beneath his brutal facade.

Instead of extending its fantasy level, sharpening its metaphorical portrait of the invincibility of the police, the film turns into a clinical dissection of the chief's psychosis. For the metaphor to be effective, it isn't nesessary that we know a great deal about the chief's motivation for the murder. His obvious motive is disturbing enough; as he says, "I wanted to reaffirm in all its purity the concept of authority." He aims to convince his department that the policeman must have absolute power if he is to control political subversion within his society. In the fantasy that ends the film, he imagines himself presenting evidence of his own guilt to his superiors, and they tear it up before his eyes; encouraged by their duplicity, he gratefully declares his innocence, his supreme, *absolute* innocence.

This much of the film is clear and satisfying. But the flashbacks that detail the chief's relationship with his mistress are designed to expose an additional, *private* motive for the murder: he killed Augusta because she taunted his masculinity and made him feel inadequate. Unfortunately, all of Petri's emphasis on the background to the chief's crime calls attention to the outlandish, fantastic quality of the basic premise and makes us uncomfortable about accepting it. Psychological realism and fantasy don't mix; the case study and the parable undermine each other.

Petri doesn't seem to know quite what he's doing, and at times he resorts to glib Freudian cliches to hold the film together. The final flashback, in which Augusta enrages the chief by telling him that the young student radical is a better lover than he, represents the most facile kind of liberal daydreaming: the revolutionary is more potent than the fascist, and it is the fascist's envy of the revolutionary's virility that stimulates his repression. But in most of the other scenes of the film, the chief doesn't seem sexually inadequate: on the contrary, his virility and brutality are clearly what excite Augusta, the decadent, phony liberal aesthete. The film goes to pieces in the scene of the chief's interrogation of the revolutionary Pace. Pace stays aloof and superior, impervious to the chief's bullying. Shaken by Pace's contempt, the chief breaks down before him, turns into a whimpering child. But this destroys the characterization. For if the chief is such a pathetic, snivelling neurotic, desperately trying to reassert his wounded masculinity, he can't *also* be a threatening demagogue. And it is no longer possible to accept that bitter allegorical premise about the terrifying power of the police in a reactionary society.

In a way, it's easy to understand and sympathize with Petri's dilemma. If he really followed his premise to its natural conclusion, the chief might seem too formidable a villain. In drama a diabolical character has genuine stature; one may hate and fear him, but one has to respect him too. Petri doesn't want to give the chief this kind of dignity; he cannot resist deflating him by dwelling on his sexual insecurities. Perhaps many of us have similarly mixed feelings about the police—we are simultaneously frightened of them and contemptuous of them, uncertain whether to regard them as deadly tyrants or ludicrous, hung-up bullies. But in an artistic work, especially one with the rigid requirements of allegory, this kind of ambivalence is apt to be crippling; a parable *demands* clarity, even if it necessarily sacrifices complexity. In trying for a more complicated and realistic point of view, Petri only makes us excruciatingly aware of the superficiality of his ideas. A narrower approach might actually have given the film more dimension.

It is not only the portrait of the chief that suffers from this ambivalence. Some of the images of the sleek, streamlined police station of tomorrow—for example, a gigantic basement filled with clerks monitoring the telephone calls of "subversives" with the latest electronic equipment, the myth of privacy mocked in this deafening, incoherent babble of voices—evoke an Orwellian nightmare world that seems only a subtle extension of the present. At other moments, however, the police are presented as such incredible bunglers that they can't even solve a simple murder case. It may be possible for an artist to deal with these contradictions and make them seem part of a coherent vision, but Petri has not found the right genre or the right tone; the contradictions in his film simply tear it apart.

But there are other evasions that make *Investigation* a peculiarly slippery movie. Petri is a film-maker who has always been drawn to kinky, perverse sexual relationships and to the chic style of aristocratic decadence. His last film, *A Quiet Place in the Country,* was an overripe sadomasochistic fantasy of a painter's fall into madness. In *Investigation* Petri revels in the visual details of Augusta's sybaritic apartment—the black sheets, the maroon gauzy draperies, the colored lamps and mosaics and screens. He cannot resist the thrill of her twisted relationship with the chief; he lingers over the scenes in which they play at reenacting famous murders, the chief propping her up on a toilet seat and stuffing money between her legs, or covering her body with phonograph records. I don't object to the glamorization of sadomasochism, only to the film's dishonesty: Petri tries to use his own love of opulence and decadence to expose the chief's sickness; the comment seems hollow because Petri is having too much fun with the scenes of perversion. The tension between his instinctive love of luxury and his sense of social responsibility makes him turn very moralistic. In *The Tenth Victim,* arguably Petri's best film (and coincidentally his most popular), he did find a way to use pop art decor and perverse sexual

games as part of an incisive comment on the world of the future. But that film was a *satirical* fantasy; the light, insolent touch kept things in perspective. *Investigation* is too somber and shrill; humor alone could not have saved the film, but more of it might have helped. Since Petri is a skillful and talented director, the film is always absorbing and even, at odd moments, brilliant, but it just hasn't been thought out; trying to put it in order makes you dizzy.

Petri's private obsessions may account for some of the convolutions in *Investigation,* but it cannot be coincidental that so many other recent Italian films exhibit many of the same confusions. *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion,* Visconti's *The Damned,* Pasolini's *Teorema,* and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* are all movies by Marxist film-makers that are more notable for their lush decor and their twisted sexual relationships than for their political ideas. One expects Marxist movies to be spare and austere, but these are florid. The paradox that throws them out of control is that although they mean to condemn Fascist tyranny and celebrate the communal spirit of the working class, they are all obsessed with the luxury and decadence of aristocratic life. Even a much more meticulous theoretician like Pontecorvo shows, in his fascinating, underrated film *Burn!,* an infatuation with sensuous visual compositions that a more single-minded revolutionary film-maker might find self-indulgent.

The shared confusions in these movies probably reflect shared cultural influences—for example, a rich, decorative artistic heritage (closely tied to the upper classes), and the pervasive, enduring power of the Catholic Church—that Americans can appreciate only in a very superficial way. Over the years the work of older Italian film-makers has displayed some of the same tensions that we find in the newer films. The development of Fellini, one of the key figures in Italian cinema, and an influence on both Petri and Bertolucci, is particularly suggestive. From the early neorealist films, with their sympathy for the waifs and clowns of ordinary life, to the increasingly lavish, spectacular pageants of recent years, Fellini's work seems to summarize many of the contradictions inherent in Italian movies: the responsibility to populism, but the secret, then defiant attraction to aristocratic opulence and decadence; the ambivalence toward the Church, and the correspondent ambivalence toward sexual dissipation. (Bertolucci has said that he considers Rossellini the greatest of the older Italian directors, and it is fascinating that Rossellini too, though a more austere director than many of his contemporaries, has moved from the rawness and urgency of *Open City* to the loving recreation of seventeenth-century courtly style in *The Rise of Louis XIV.*)

We can recognize the contradictions in all of these films without really understanding them as instinctively as Italian audiences must; we don't *feel* the conflicting loyalties to aristocratic lavishness and

Marxism that may make *Investigation* or *The Conformist* a very highly charged experience for Italians. In addition, Italian Marxism and Fascism have peculiarities that distinguish them from the textbook models of those ideologies we may have read about. We inevitably miss some of the nuances—and not just verbal nuances. Sophisticated Italian audiences probably apprehend subtleties in scenes that seem flat to us, and they may well find *Medium Cool* more bewildering than *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion.*

One of the things that distinguishes Bertolucci's *The Conformist* from some of these other films is that Bertolucci is more aware of his doubts and ambivalences, and he is able to make them function in a *conscious* way in his work—at least much of the time. The film is not entirely clear in its intentions. Some heavy didactic moments call attention to themselves—a Parisian flower seller singing the "Internationale" directly to the camera, the paid Fascist assassin muttering about the expendability of all "cowards, pederasts, and Jews" while he urinates. The film is much more than a stern anti-Fascist treatise, but moments like these are misleading and offputting. In addition, the Alberto Moravia novel that Bertolucci adapted—very loosely—sometimes imposes moral connotations that are almost the opposite of what Bertolucci is aiming for.

The Moravia book was a fairly straightforward case history of a Fascist counter-espionage agent. Although the film places less weight on the traumatic childhood experience that triggered Marcello's desperate hunger for normality—a seduction by a homosexual chauffeur that ended (apparently) with his shooting the chauffeur—that trauma still seems meant to clarify our understanding of the character, and it leads directly into the overly schematic conclusion. On the eve of Mussolini's fall, Marcello is walking through the streets of liberated Rome, and is startled and horrified to meet the homosexual chauffeur he thought he had murdered some twenty years earlier. Disoriented by the simultaneous collapse of his personal and political life, his respectable veneer cracks; at the final fadeout he is preparing to bed down with a young homosexual gypsy right out in the street. This loaded conclusion seems to suggest a neat equation between Fascism and repressed homosexuality that makes little historical sense. I don't think Bertolucci wanted this scene to be taken moralistically or even given disproportionate significance, but he has miscalculated its impact. Audiences have trouble keeping some subjects—like homosexuality—in perspective, and Bertolucci's slightly uncomfortable staging of this final seduction may add to the feeling that it is a lurid, melodramatic revelation. Perhaps a case can be made for the super-masculine militaristic ethos of Fascism as a mask for homosexuality, but Bertolucci hasn't even tackled that subject in *The Conformist* (Marcello is an intellectual and a bureaucrat, not a soldier), so the link between homosexuality and Fascism makes us uneasy.

Though the ending contains a false symmetry, there is a good deal in the film to suggest that Bertolucci recognizes the complexity of the relationship between sex and politics. For one thing, the most sympathetic character in the film—the beautiful wife of the anti-Fascist professor Marcello is ordered to kill in Paris—is both a political radical *and* a lesbian. And even the final scene cannot be reduced to a simple message. When Marcello recognizes the homosexual chauffeur, he loses control of himself and accuses the chauffeur of being a Fascist agent; he even projects onto the chauffeur the murder that he had engineered for the state five years earlier. Marcello's urge to be "normal," to belong, is stronger than any specific political commitment. Once the dictatorship has fallen, he must repudiate Fascism if he is to survive in normal society; he now identifies the Fascist with the homosexual, for in 1943 the Fascist has become the social outcast. Homosexuality is not the key to Marcello's life, but simply the most striking *example* of his individuality, a defiance of the regulations of a well-ordered society. Homosexuality works as a metaphor for unconventionality. In the novel Marcello actually shot the chauffeur, but the film is ambiguous on this point, implying that he merely *fantasized* the murder as a way of camouflaging the homosexual experience; even as a child he intuitively understood that in his society murder was less of a stigma than sexual deviation. The film makes most sense neither as a dissection of Fascism nor as a case study of the Fascist as closet queen, but as an examination of the way in which *any* civilization demands the suppression of private impulses in return for the safety of normality and anonymity.

Marcello is an unusually complex Fascist, because although he is frightened of his abnormality, he is not comfortable with ordinary people either. In crowds he feels suffocated, and he is most often clumsy and unconvincing when he tries to play at respectable life. What gives the film its distinctive point of view—utterly different from Moravia's—is Bertolucci's voluptuous stylization of Marcello's abnormality. In contrast to Petri, Bertolucci is not hypocritical about his attraction to opulence and decadence; his love of visual luxury becomes part of the film's meaning, a way of expressing his commitment to art and imagination. Bertolucci intensifies and glamourizes all the bizarre, eccentric experiences of Marcello's life, and his baroque style makes even the relatively routine moments seem extraordinary. *The Conformist* is not really a political film at all; it is a poetic celebration of the romantic extravagances and idiosyncrasies of *private* life.

People who know the novel may think Bertolucci's elaborate high style cheapens Moravia's austere moral study; Stanley Kauffmann has already chided Bertolucci for obscuring Moravia's tale with his "stultifying pyrotechnics." But far from overwhelming the material, Bertolucci's self-conscious, luxurious style *transforms* the material into something richer, more complex and suggestive. *The Conformist* is a

remarkable experiment in subjective filmmaking. The style unifies the work, even when the ideas are not fully controlled. It is a film of memory, beginning at dawn on the morning of the assassination. As Marcello drives with the assassin to the spot where the professor and his wife are to be murdered, he recalls some of the experiences that led to this climax. The memories are not in straight chronological order; the associations are freer than in conventional flashback-structured films. One memory will often touch off another, sometimes of an event that happened earlier, sometimes even of one that happened later. For example, during a flashback in which a friend promises to introduce Marcello to a high-ranking Fascist official, Bertolucci flashes forward to Marcello's subsequent meeting with the Minister. Scenes are broken off at illogical places; the transitions imply the *impatience* of memory, the ease with which one races over time in introspection.

Even more intriguing are the disorienting traces of fantasy within the individual memory images. At first we are only subliminally conscious of these distortions, but at the very end of the film, when Marcello meets the chauffeur we thought we saw him murder, we recognize that we have not been seeing a literal view of reality. This conclusion is shocking and dramatic, because it forces us to revaluate *everything* that has come before. The past recaptured is the past transfigured in imagination. The subtle, surrealistic distortions and exaggerations—for instance, the operatic way in which the murders in the forest are filmed—give unnatural significance to the past, convert it into a magical, fantastical dream. Bertolucci uses his camera subjectively, with great inventiveness. There are virtuoso shots in the movie that recall the wizardry of the young Orson Welles: a shot in which the camera moves up from the ground with the swirling dead leaves of Marcello's family estate capsulizes the sense of voluptuous decay that he now identifies with his upper class upbringing; another bewitching shot, moving slowly and imperceptibly out from the center of an expanding circle of dancers in a Paris dance hall, makes us *participate* in the growing exuberance of the dance and the sense of freedom and community that it represents.

There are original experiments with point of view. Anna, the lesbian (or bisexual) wife of his former professor, who hypnotizes Marcello while he is on his honeymoon in Paris, does not appear until the second half of the film; but Dominique Sanda, who plays the part, appears in two other minor roles earlier in the film—as a well-dressed woman whom Marcello discovers in the Fascist Minister's office, and as a prostitute he meets on the Riviera. Dominique Sanda is slightly disguised in these two scenes, and they are so brief that her face hardly registers on a first viewing of the film; but when Marcello meets Anna in Paris and tells her she reminds him of a woman he has seen before, we share the vague sensation of *déjà vu*. But there is another purpose to this casting trick. Marcello knows that Anna must die; he cannot

offer her the future, but he *can,* in recollection, give her a little extra life in the past. Imagination frees Anna and Marcello from time. This is why when Marcello sees the prostitute on the Riviera he embraces her passionately and longingly; obviously this never happened, but Marcello cherishes his memory of this woman who foreshadowed Anna, and so he imagines their meeting with a dramatic significance it never had. When he does meet Anna, the two of them hardly exchange any words of greeting. From almost their first moment together they talk like bickering lovers. Again this is not a literal flashback of the meeting; Marcello is drawing out his courtship of Anna by intensifying even casual moments so that they count more in memory than they did in reality.

What makes the film exhilarating is the *pertinence* of all this breathtaking invention. *The Conformist* is a lyric that could not have been conceived in quite this way for any other artistic medium. The cinematic devices that Bertolucci employs so masterfully create a gossamer interior landscape, and heighten the sense of elegiac sadness. The film is a romantic lament for the extraordinary, privileged, irreducible moments of a man's life. After the murder of the professor and Anna, which Marcello watches from inside his car, there is an abrupt flash forward to the night of Mussolini's fall five years later. Marcello, his wife and daughter are listening to the radio in their dark, rather seedy apartment. Suddenly Marcello's life has been drained of mystery and poetry; the drab, colorless images of the family moving around the shabby apartment effectively illustrate the anonymity that Marcello has struggled so hard to achieve. The contrast between this scene and the rest of the film is sharp and disturbing. This abrupt, undramatic transition makes the scenes from the past—the charmed moments of Marcello's life—seem even more poignant. In spite of Marcello's compulsive desire to be ordinary, his mellow memories of his marriage and honeymoon show that he cannot quite suppress a sense of wonder at the marvelous, "abnormal" experiences of his life. Everything he is ashamed of—his mother's decadence, his father's insanity, his wife dancing a sexy tango with Anna, even that childhood seduction—seems enchanted and beautiful to us. Bertolucci's lyrical style—his painterly images and free form cutting, the romantic Georges Delerue music—exalt the richness and strangeness of interior life, the idiosyncrasies that defy any social or political theory of human behavior.

Some confusions remain, perhaps because of the very different emphasis of the Moravia novel, perhaps because of Bertolucci's own divided loyalties. The commitment he feels to the revolution works against his instinctive responsiveness to all the details of a man's experience that complicate his political identity. Without greater intellectual clarity and greater discipline, Bertolucci's work will be rough and imperfect; but the warmth and passion of *The Conformist,* added to its technical audacity, already place him in the very front rank of contemporary film-makers.