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A TOO SIMPLE ANSWER TO A COMPLEX QUESTION: THE CONFORMIST

by Matt Bass

It could have been worthwhile. *The Conformist*, the 1970's film by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci about an assassin for the Italian government under Mussolini in the 1930's, tries to answer the question, "Why do people become fascists?" A worthy goal. It's a question we've all asked ourselves when thinking about World War II, but Bertolucci's answer doesn't get much deeper than the title. We become fascists because we want to conform.

Dr. Marcello Clerici, an Italian professor of philosophy, is the fascist in question. He wants so much to feel a part of his world that, despite his homosexual leanings, he marries a boring, silly, middle-class woman (that's what average men are supposed to do, right?) and then applies to work for the gov-

ernment as a counter-espionage agent so that he can track and eliminate Professor Quadri, a political subversive living in Paris.

Dr. Clerici seems like a smart enough guy. So what is it in his soul that allows him to commit atrocities in the name of Fascism? Just a desire to conform? That human need to feel that he's a part of society? I don't buy it, and apparently the film doesn't either. So instead of examining why conformity is such a strong human drive, the film gives us a series of explanatory flashbacks in which we see that Marcello's father is in an insane asylum and that his mother is a morphine addict. Then, in a flashback within a flashback, we see how a young Marcello shoots a male chauffeur who tries to seduce him.

Okay, so maybe after that we can understand why Marcello might want to conform. But by making Marcello's situation so off the wall, the film avoids the question it wants to answer. Not every fascist was a repressed homosexual who saw his father get dragged away in a straightjacket. Professor Quadri gives the movie's anti-Fascist intellectual arguments while the professor's wife plays the left wing seductress. Why isn't Marcello convinced? We don't expect films to provide all of the answers, but we'd like at least an honest look at the problem, and that is where *The Conformist* fails.