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Il conformista 1994 (The Conformist)

Italy/France/Germany 1970

Director: Bernardo Bertolucci

Certificate

18

Distributor

Contemporary

Production Companies

Mars Film (Rome)/

Marianne (Paris)/

Maran (Munich)

Producer

Maurizio Lodi-Fè

Associate Producer

Giovanni Bertolucci

Assistant Director

Aldo Lado

Screenplay

Bernardo Bertolucci

Based on the novel

by Alberto Moravia

Director of Photography

Vittorio Storaro

Colour

Technicolor

Editor

Franco Arcalli

Art Director

Nedo Azzini

Music/Music Director

Georges Delerue

Costume Design

Gitt Magrini

Cast

Jean-Louis Trintignant

Marcello Clerici

Stefania Sandrelli

Giulia

Gastone Moschin

Manganiello

Enzo Tarascio

Luca Quadri

Pierre Clémenti

Lino Seminara

Dominique Sanda

Anna Quadri

Christian Alegny

Raoul

José Quaglio

Italo

Milly

Marcello's Mother

Giuseppe Addobbati

Marcello's Father

Yvonne Sanson

Giulia's Mother

Fosco Giachetti

Colonel

Benedetto Benedetti

Minister

Antonio Maestri

Confessor

Alessandro Haber

Drunk Blind Man

Massimo Sarchielli

Blind Man

Pierangelo Civera

Franz

Pasquale Fortunato

Marcello as a boy

Gino Vagni Luca

Marta Lado

Carlo Gaddi

Franco Pellarani

Claudio Carrelli

Umberto Silvestri

10,185feet

113 minutes

Subtitles

Originally reviewed:

MFB December 1971

1938. Marcello Clerici is driven by an Italian political police agent, Manganiello, to supervise the assassination of his former philosophy professor, Luca Quadri, who directs anti-fascist missions from Paris. The journey is punctuated by flashbacks... Marcello is in a radio studio, discussing his impending marriage to Giulia with Italo, his blind, gay friend who broadcasts fascist sermons. Marcello offers to spy on Quadri for the political police while on his honeymoon in Paris. He visits Giulia to discuss the wedding, and then his mother, who takes drugs procured for her by her Japanese chauffeur, who is also her lover. On the way to his mother's house he is accosted by Manganiello, who informs him that they must contact another agent in Ventimiglia for further orders. Marcello has Manganiello beat up the chauffeur and order him to leave. He goes with his mother to see his father, who is in a lunatic asylum. When Marcello asks his father about his fascist past, the old man demands to be put in a straitjacket. Before the wedding, Marcello goes to confession, and remembers his boyhood seduction by a chauffeur, Lino, after which the latter was shot by Marcello, who believes he killed him. Next, Marcello is at a pre-nuptial party thrown for him by Italo and his blind friends. The two discuss the way fascism offers people an antidote to the anxiety of feeling 'different'.



Outside looking out: Jean-Louis Trintignant, Dominique Sanda

On the way to Paris by train, Giulia recounts to Marcello her seduction at the age of 16 by an elderly family lawyer, and he makes love to her. In Ventimiglia, Marcello is told that Quadri is to be killed. In Paris, he visits Quadri and his wife Anna. He falls for the latter, but she is contemptuous of him. Marcello goes to see Anna at the ballet school where she teaches and learns that she knows he is in Paris to kill her husband. He returns to his hotel room to find Anna seducing Giulia. The Clericis and the Quadris go dancing at Joinville, followed by Manganiello. Anna and Quadri plan to spend the weekend in Savoy, and when Anna decides to stay behind in Paris with the Clericis, Marcello tells Manganiello Quadri's route, so that the assassination can take place during the journey without harming Anna. The next morning, Marcello receives a telephone call from Manganiello to say that Anna has left with her husband after all. He follows them with Manganiello, hoping to save Anna. They catch up with the Quadris' car, whereupon the assassins, emerging from the trees, stab Quadri and chase Anna, shooting her.

September 1943. Mussolini is deposed, and Marcello goes into the streets of Rome with Italo, where he encounters Lino picking up a male prostitute. Marcello denounces Lino as the murderer of Quadri and his wife in 1938. A crowd of anti-fascist revellers sweeps Italo away, and Marcello is left looking at the male prostitute.

Few people can resist considering *Il conformista* Bertolucci's masterpiece. He has constructed from Alberto Moravia's novel an Oedipal story of enormous complexity, both thematically and stylistically, reordering a chronological narrative into a dream, in which Marcello's psyche is gradually penetrated as though in a psychotherapy session during the cocooned car journey to Savoy. Marcello is driven by anxiety about his sexuality, by his sense of having been betrayed by his 'fathers' and by a fruitless search for a position of 'normality' in the social order. Quadri is an idealist living a hedonistic life in Paris while

the struggle against fascism in Italy is the material one of the class struggle. A young man in 1970, Bertolucci questioned the credentials of middle-class anti-fascism, and killed his own father figures. The address and phone number at Quadri's apartment were in fact those of Jean-Luc Godard, and Quadri's account of Plato's myth of the cave can be understood as an expression of Godardian cinematic asceticism, in which images must be unmasked as purely images. Bertolucci opened on a sign advertising Renoir's *La vie est à nous* to manifest the need to make films that were accessible to a wide cinema-going public. To hide behind an austere idealism was to fail to engage with the real cinema audience. In the figure of Quadri, generational, political and cinematic issues are fused.

How well has *Il conformista* achieved its task of communication? The sheer mastery of the telling, the beauty of the images and of the camerawork, the control of the soundtrack, and the intensity with which the characters convey powerful psychic energies have all mesmerised audiences. Though much admired it remains slightly obscure. The title offers an interpretation: conformism. Marcello is an example of conformity, and the destruction it wreaks; fascism is conformism. The extent to which the film develops much more subtle themes than that can be overlooked. At the Berlin film festival in 1970, Bertolucci was persuaded to remove a four-minute episode, that of the pre-nuptial party, and the film has hitherto been distributed without this sequence. In this scene, Italo, blind and gay, says that he and Marcello share a sense of being 'different' from others. Normality is to enjoy the sight of a woman's behind. People need to feel part of a group. Marcello butts in: "Like a true fascist". This scene has now been restored. It may confirm viewers in the 'conformist' interpretation. But Marcello says "Like a true fascist" with an expression of disdain, and then removes himself from Italo's reach; the scene is shot with a basement window in the background, through which we see the legs of female prostitutes soliciting outside. Every time Marcello is

confronted with reality, it turns out to be other than the 'normality' he seeks: the minister is a philanderer, Giulia the mistress of an old man, his mother a junkie, Anna a lesbian, the secret police a collection of neurotic bunglers, anti-fascism a bourgeois confidence trick.... The way in which the film depicts fascist ideology as just a prolongation of bourgeois idealist fantasising is only comprehensible when you conceive of a materialist, marxist alternative to that middle-class ideology. Communists in 1970 could call upon a whole culture, for example that mixture of Freud and Marx that we find in Marcuse and the Frankfurt school, that would offer a devastating critique of Quadri's complicity in an ideology he shared in part with fascism. So is it the repressed, conformist Marcello wiping out the relaxed, freedom-loving Quadri? Is this how today's post-communist audiences will view the film? Will the restoration of the pre-nuptial party scene clarify matters, or will it reassure viewers in a banal interpretation of a film whose ambiguity previously forced them to work for a less simple interpretation?

Thematically, the scene offers plenty: blind people dancing and arguing about politics. The whole film plays on seeing what is not there, not seeing what is there, looking for what you want to see, having to see what you don't want to look at, looking at your own desire, trying not to see your own desire, screens, windows and objects that obstruct one's vision.... And the dialogue between Marcello and Italo with the prostitutes behind them is visually powerful and full of suggestion. But the dialogue itself clumsily brings out into rational discourse, and therefore reduces, what is elsewhere expressed by movement, sound, gesture and suggestion. Part of the scene is cluttered in a way that no other scene is; and it appears in the film without the subtle threads of transition - words, puns, sounds, images - which so effectively weld together the mosaic-like fragments of which the rest is constructed. Perhaps they were not so misguided at the 1970 Berlin film festival.

Chris Wagstaff