

Style and Narrative

in Bertolucci's *The Conformist*



Marcello (Jean-Louis Trintignant) denies Anna (Dominique Sanda) help.

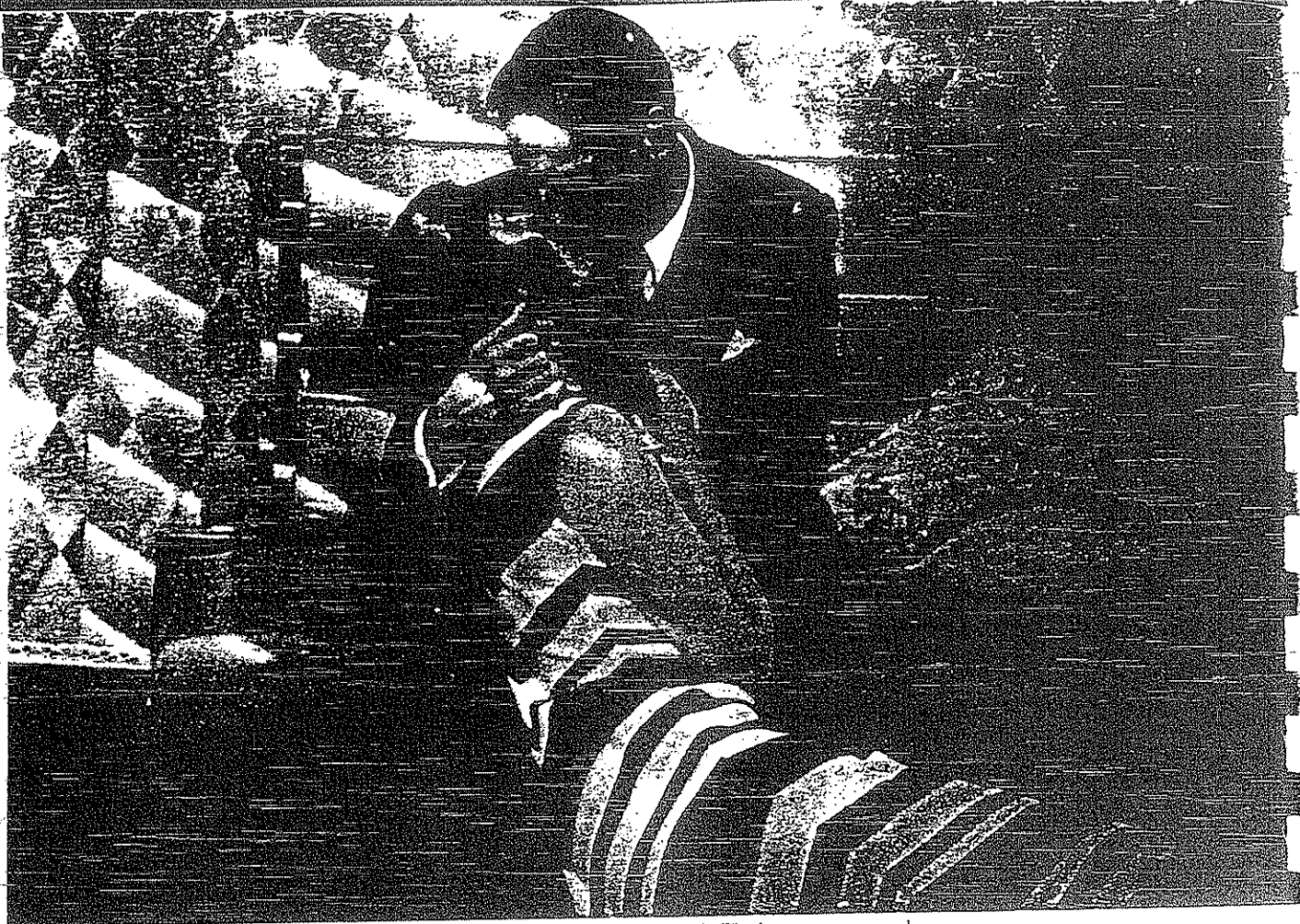
IN CINEACTION 41 (1996)

by Michael Walker

In part, this essay is a continuation of my article 'Melodramatic Narrative' in *CineAction* 31 (Spring/Summer 1993). Using Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) and Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) as my main examples, I argued there that a past 'traumatic event' in a film — usually but not always in someone's childhood — tends to generate a certain sort of narrative, in which the event is echoed, in different ways, within the text of the film, until the trauma which initiated the action could be 'healed' by a changed set of circumstances. I am going to argue that *The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970) has a similar structure but, in order to do this, I will need to refer much more than in my earlier examples to the film's visual style (*mise-en-scène* and editing) as well as its narrative. As has been frequently noted, *The Conformist* is a very stylish film indeed, and this style fuses with the film's similarly richly-textured narrative to provide an unusually powerful and complex whole.

At the time of the film's release in the UK, Bertolucci himself referred to its style in terms of influence: "One could say the point of departure (of the film) was the cinema, and the cinema I like is Sternberg, Ophuls and Welles"¹. In summary, this refers to a highly elaborate and sensuous visual style: Sternbergian lighting, Opulsiian camera movements, Wellesian cranes. Nevertheless, whereas certain elements of the film's style — e.g. the different visual allusions to the metaphor of Plato's cave — are features of a conscious aesthetic discourse, there are other elements which seem unconscious. As T. Jefferson Kline among others has noted², the film is peculiarly oneiric in feel, providing material for psychoanalytical readings which explore beyond Bertolucci's conscious design.

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Marcello and Giulia (Stefania Sandrelli): the engagement embrace

The Conformist is based, in terms of plot quite closely, on Alberto Moravia's 1951 novel of the same name. But the narrative of the two works is radically different. Most of the film has a complex flashback structure, with past events recalled by Marcello Clerici (Jean-Louis Trintignant) during a long car journey from Paris to the South of France. Moravia's novel, by contrast, has a linear narrative, beginning with Marcello as a boy and ending at the time of Mussolini's downfall in 1943. Most of the film's key events are nevertheless from the novel: the incident in which the 13 year-old Marcello thinks he's killed the chauffeur, Lino, who tried to seduce him; his becoming a Fascist; his marriage to the petite bourgeois Giulia; his plan to use his honeymoon to visit his old professor, Luca Quadri, now an anti-fascist exile in Paris, to spy on him; the change of orders, with Marcello now being told that Quadri is to be murdered; Marcello's attraction to Quadri's young wife (here called — rather pointedly — Lina); her unexpected departure with her husband which results in her being assassinated as well. The major plot difference is in the ending. Although the miraculous reappearance of a live Lino is introduced at the same point in the story (the day of Mussolini's downfall), Marcello in the novel is then killed, along with his wife and child, in a plane attack on his car as

he flees Rome. As Bertolucci has pointed out, this ending continues Moravia's preoccupation with 'the forces of destiny', whereas he himself sought to substitute a more psychoanalytical pattern on the events in Marcello's life³. Kline's article includes a detailed discussion of the process of adaptation from novel to film.

On *The Conformist*, Bertolucci used Franco Arcalli as his editor for the first time. He has spoken enthusiastically of Arcalli's contribution: "In a matter of days he assembled the first few sequences of *The Conformist* and I immediately fell in love with it. Kim (Arcalli) is the person who is responsible for having made me discover what editing can really be. He led me by the hand into a world I had always perceived as a necessary evil. It turned out to be an exhilarating discovery"⁴. The excitement of Bertolucci's discovery of the power of editing is apparent in the film's extraordinary first half hour, as the narrative flashes back from the car in which Marcello is being driven by Manganiello (Gastone Moschin) to catch up with Quadri (Enzo Tarascio) and his wife Anna (Dominique Sanda). During these early flashbacks, Bertolucci cuts repeatedly back to Marcello in the car — sometimes several times during an individual flashback scene — as well as intercutting two separate flashback scenes together. Although these are evidently events Marcello is remem-

bering — some are, indeed, recalled in stages — the effect, in Yosefa Loshitzky's words, is like "the Freudian concept of free association, in which ideas occur to one spontaneously, without straining"⁵. As a consequence of Bertolucci's psychoanalytical restructuring of the novel, the flashbacks are overtly subjective/oneiric which explains, for example, why Dominique Sanda should play three different roles: Marcello remembers the three women as alike because he psychically links them (I'll suggest why later).

In its opening shots, *The Conformist* evokes two contrasting cinematic traditions: *film noir* (the flashing neon sign outside the hotel where Marcello sits in the dark) and *La Vie est à Nous*, Renoir's 1936 film about the Popular Front in '30s France (what it actually says on the sign). From the former comes stylisation, expressionist lighting, a complex flashback structure and a corrupted hero caught up in a *noir* world of duplicity and betrayal. From the latter comes politics: not the left-wing, working-class politics of solidarity of the Renoir movie, but an examination of its opposite: the politics of '30s Fascism.

The story of Plato's prisoners in the cave provides the dominant political metaphor for the film. The essence of the myth of the cave is that the prisoners mistake the shadows of reality for reality itself. The film relates this to the experience of people under Fascism: when Marcello tells the story back to Professor Quadri, the latter immediately connects it to Fascist Italy: "Shadows — the reflections of things — as you experience in Italy today". At the same time, the way Bertolucci stages this scene — described in detail by Robert Phillip Kolker in his book on Bertolucci⁶ — implicates Quadri himself in the mistaken perception. When Marcello enters Quadri's study and closes the shutters, he explains his action in terms of recreating the conditions under which Quadri used to deliver his lectures. But he has another purpose. Quadri has just asked him a searching question: "I'm curious: you've come all the way here to see me?" By closing the shutters, Marcello is not only avoiding the question, but hiding his insincerity in the darkness. He then goes on to use the darkened room as a dramatic setting for his evocation of Plato's cave. At first, he remains in the darkness; only when he receives a positive response from Quadri does he move into the light to continue the story. By judiciously inserting his own duplicitous gloss — "How like them (the prisoners) we are" — Marcello wins Quadri over. He concludes his story with a lament "You left (Italy) and I became a Fascist", and Quadri immediately objects: "A convinced Fascist does not talk like that". In effect, Quadri here is responding to the 'shadows of reality' Marcello has created before him.

The ways in which the film uses Plato's myth as a metaphor is discussed by Andrew Britton⁷ and

analysed in detail by Millicent Marcus⁸. Andrew Britton cites the broadcast at the beginning of the flashbacks — which includes a 'talk' by Marcello's friend Italo (Jose Quaglio) which is pure Fascist propaganda — as one such example. "The radio broadcast conveys an 'impression of normalcy' to its listeners, and the essence of their experience of it is their blindness — they cannot see what they hear. A link is at once established both with Italo's literal blindness, and with the film's central image of Plato's cave... The glass partition here becomes an analogue of the wall, and of the cinema screen, on which we 'see only the shadows projected on the back of the cave...' The image allows us to experience more than the radio listeners, and simultaneously gives us a figure of that extra experience through Marcello, who wishes to be absorbed into the normalcy on which the scene beyond the glass gives us a (critical) perspective." Andrew Britton goes on to analyse the stages of the broadcast: three female singers in identical dresses singing "Who is happier than I?"; a man doing imitations of bird calls and Italo's talk itself, in which "he speaks, not of a political, but of a spiritual alliance, a mystical union authorised by Nature... between two images — 'the Prussian image of Mussolini, the Latin images of Hitler'. The progress of the broadcast may be summarised thus: unsurpassable happiness (the song) and Nature (the bird imitations) can reach their mutual zenith in a preordained spiritual union (the Axis)" (pp. 9-10).

Millicent Marcus cites examples in the film which develop the metaphor further. As Marcello waits in the Ministry hall-way for an audience with the Minister, men carry Fascist emblems past him: a large bronze eagle; a large bust. These are the equivalents of the "statues of wood and stone" which Marcello says were carved along the top of the wall in the story of the cave, and they are examples of the monumental symbols of power used by Fascism to give an inflated sense of the state. This thread in the film is then completed when, on the day in 1943 when Mussolini falls, his bust is dragged through the streets of Rome by men on a motorcycle.

¹ Bertolucci on *The Conformist*. An interview with Marilyn Goldin in *Sight & Sound*. Spring 1971, pp. 65-66.

² T. Jefferson Kline, "The Unconformist" in *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation*, eds Andrew S. Horton & Joan Magretta (Frederick Ungar, 1981).

³ Goldin interview, p. 66.

⁴ Donald Ranvaud & Enzo Ungari, *Bertolucci by Bertolucci* (Plexus, 1987), p. 72.

⁵ Yosefa Loshitzky, *The Radical faces of Godard and Bertolucci* (Wayne State UP, 1995).

⁶ Robert Phillip Kolker, *Bernardo Bertolucci* (BFI, 1985).

⁷ Andrew Britton, "Bertolucci: Thinking about father" in *Movie* 23 (Winter 1976/77).

⁸ Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton UP, 1986).

Immediately before this penultimate sequence, we see Marcello, Giulia (Stephanía Sandrelli) and their young daughter in their Rome apartment. It is, in fact, the apartment where Giulia used to live with her mother (Yvonne Sanson) (now presumed dead — we see her photograph on a dresser), but it looks completely different. Not only are they having to share it with at least one other family, but it is very dark, as if Fascism has taken the whole country into darkness. And the effect of the latter is to suggest that Marcello and his family are now living in the darkness of Plato's cave. But this is also a reflection of the psychology of the hero. Throughout the film, Marcello is consistently more comfortable in the dark than the light. The scene in Quadri's study is only one example: the film begins with him sitting in the darkness, just as it will end with him in the semi-darkness. In the radio studio, he remains in the darkened room overlooking the broadcast studio itself; on the train he suddenly draws down the blind when Giulia starts to confess her past sexual relationship; when he interrupts Anna's ballet class, he abruptly drags her into a darkened adjacent dressing-room. These and other examples suggest that Marcello's 'conformity' extends to his being like one of Plato's prisoners, at home in the dark.

This is re-emphasised when Marcello leaves the apartment to go and meet Italo. As the people celebrating the downfall of Mussolini shine searchlights, headlights, etc., in the darkness, Marcello is uneasy, hiding his eyes from the lights, as if they threaten to expose him. Then, after meeting Italo, Marcello experiences a genuine return of the repressed: a live Lino (Pierre Clementi), who, at this point, is propositioning a young male prostitute. In a stunning example of projection, Marcello starts accusing Lino of having committed the Quadri murders: as if, psychically, he feels that he only became a Fascist assassin because of the childhood incident with Lino. (In other words, the incident drove him to a hysterical need to assert normality that made him embrace Fascism to the point of murder.) This sends Lino fleeing into the darkness, whereupon Marcello turns on Italo, accusing him of being a Fascist and striking him. As if summoned up by Marcello's unconscious, a crowd singing in the celebration of the end of Fascism pass by and spirit Italo away.

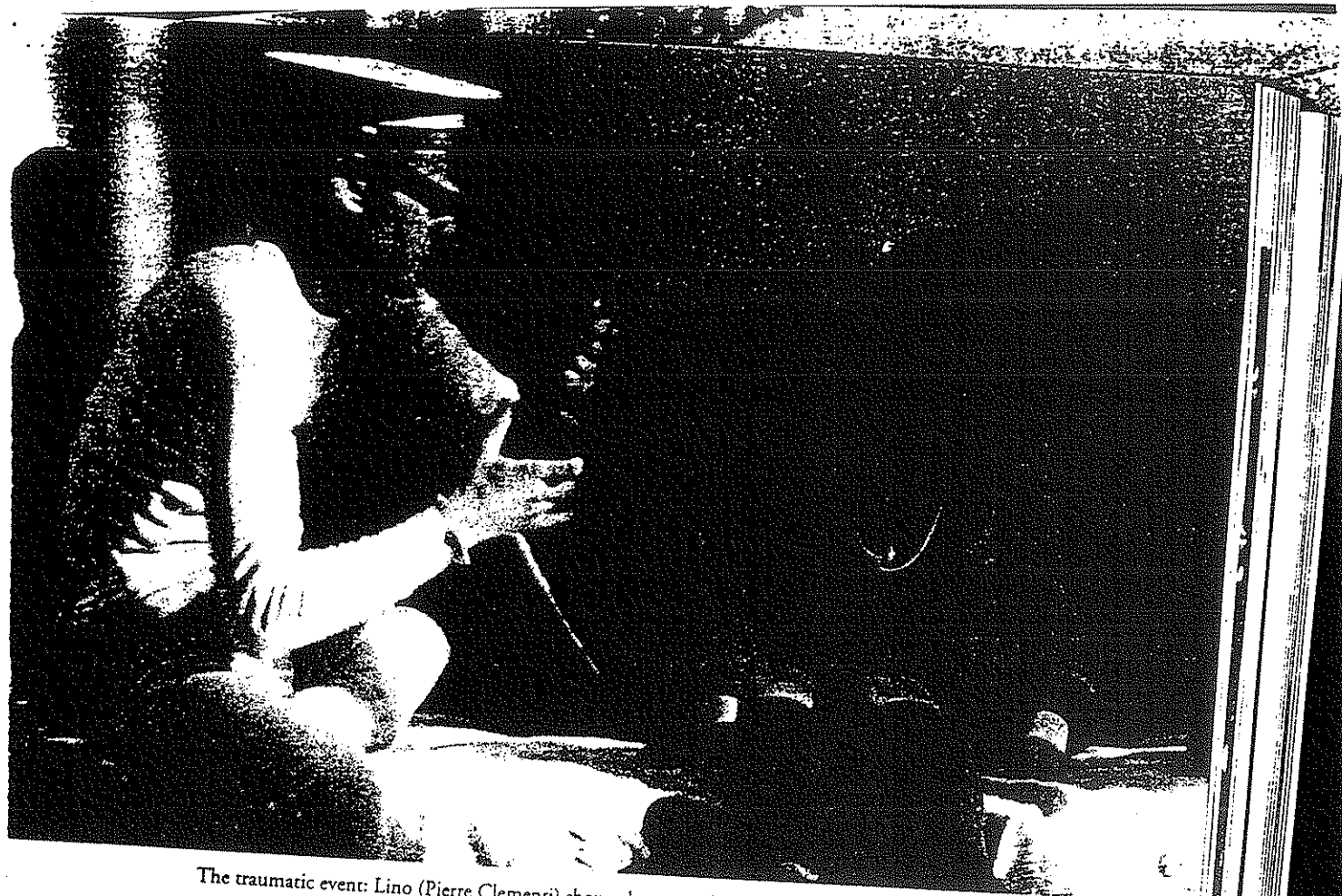
This leaves Marcello alone with the prostitute. In the film's final shot, he turns to look towards the boy, who is now waiting naked on a bed. Marcus once more invokes the metaphor of the cave: "The young man lives in a niche in the Colosseum whose source of light and heat is a fire just outside the iron grating that serves as his door. When Marcello gazes upon the young man, fire, niche and bars provide the equivalents of the setting for Plato's prisoners enchained in the cave". But, since Marcello turns to look towards the back of the

cave — the location, in the story, of the deceptive shadows — Marcus is obliged to note the ambiguity: "Is Marcello embracing the shadows or the light in accepting his latent sexual inclinations?" (p. 301).

My feeling is, if we have a coherent discourse here, then with the collapse of the political manifestations of 'shadows of reality', Marcello is cast adrift. The crowd of singing people who sweep past — and spirit away his one close Fascist friend — emphasises this. He turns, as a consequence, inwards, but now the cave contains not shadows, but a real, live, object of desire. The cave is used symbolically in many ways in literature and film, but one of the strongest associations is with the repressed, the unconscious — like the Malabar caves in *A Passage to India*. That I think is what we have here: Marcello's turning towards the boy indicates his confronting of his repressed, his homosexuality.

As stated, this thread in the film seems quite consciously worked through by Bertolucci. However, the aspects of the film which enable it to be linked into my argument about 'melodramatic narrative' seem to function at a deeper, more intuitive level. In contrast to the past traumatic events in the Hollywood films I cited, all of which where either pre-narrative or at the beginning of the films, here the equivalent event is narrated about 25 minutes into the film, sometimes held to be the point at which a film narrative typically takes a new turn. In it, we see the 13-year-old Marcello (Pasquale Fortunato) molested by a group of boys whilst adults, including Lino, a chauffeur, look on. Lino follows Marcello in his car, Marcello allows himself to be picked up, and goes with Lino — who promises him a gun — to Lino's room at the top of a large, seemingly deserted, mansion. Lino starts to seduce Marcello, Marcello starts to respond, then suddenly picks up the gun and shoots, hitting Lino (blood on his right cheek) and, he thinks, killing him. He escapes through the window.

As with the Hollywood examples, the narrative registers the trauma in the way the material returns. In *The Conformist*, the main example of this is the scene when Marcello visits the brothel at Ventimiglia. Bertolucci signals the 'otherness' of this scene visually: as Marcello arrives at the brothel, a dissolve makes him seem to enter it through a painting, as if entering a different diegetic space. We then have a series of echoes of the traumatic event. First, at the gate he meets and is saluted by three sailors: for his encounter with Lino, he wore a sailor-suit, i.e. just as he is now an adult, these are like adult versions of his childhood self. Second, Manganiello as Lino's replacement as chauffeur (who has come from nowhere) offers him a scarred prostitute, whose scar on her right cheek marks her as Lino's replacement as object of desire. This is Dominique Sanda's second appearance (earlier she played a woman being ravished by the Minister) and clearly Bertolucci



The traumatic event: Lino (Pierre Clementi) shows the young Marcello his gun.

cast her in the role as a bridge to Anna, making the link between Lino and Anna more overt. Just as Marcello will say to Anna when he meets her that he saw a prostitute who looked just like her, so here his sudden, intense embrace suggests she (maybe unconsciously) reminds him of Lino. (This becomes clearer when he re-meets Lino and finds he's scarred on his right cheek.) The embrace is interrupted by Raoul Christian Alegny), summoning him to hear the change of plans: now Quadri is to be murdered. The third is the way Marcello picks up the gun he's offered by Raoul: he puts on his glove, as, to shoot Lino, he puts it on Lino's chauffeur gloves. The fourth is when he seems about to shoot Raoul, and histrionically spins the gun around the room, as he had when he shot Lino. The fifth is when he realises he's somehow slaid his hat: when he left Lino's room, he left his or boy's hat on Lino's bed.

The pattern of events here is that Marcello goes into the brothel and emerges as a man with a gun and orders a kill, i.e. murder has supplanted sex. This is quite close to the childhood version of going to Lino's room and the promise of getting a gun, finding this means sex, emerging — as he thinks — a murderer. And there is a final, structural, link between the two scenes. At the point in the car journey when Marcello recalls the incident, the narrative structure of the film changes. Up to this point, Bertolucci has continually

cut back and forth between Marcello in the car 'remembering' and the images of the past. As the Lino incident unfolds, the cutting back to Marcello in the present ceases: from this point the narrative remains 'in flashback' until the flashbacks end. This obviously privileges the incident — as if, once it has forced itself back into Marcello's consciousness, other memories flow more readily — but it also enables Bertolucci to structure the incident in a distinctive way. He intercuts it with Marcello's cynical confession to a priest on the eve of his wedding; in effect, the incident — the satirical content of which greatly excites the priest — becomes the focus of the confession. And the Ventimiglia sequence is similarly 'framed' by Giulia's confession to Marcello. She begins it in the train journey before the Ventimiglia stop, and continues it during the resumed journey. And her confession, too, concerns sexual transgression, with herself — like young Marcello — allowing it to happen.

What does all this mean? I argued in my earlier article that this sort of compulsive re-enacting of the original material leads to a *melodramatic* narrative, in which events are driven by an unconscious pressure on the narrative, forcing it in certain directions and, specifically, to certain climaxes and crises. But, since the films themselves were generically melodramas, this was essentially a way of 'making sense' of their narrative climaxes. As an 'art' movie, *The Conformist* is

clearly quite different. Although the echoes may still be read as a narrative form of the return of the repressed, they are much more the product of Bertolucci's introduction of a psychoanalytical slant on his material, together with the characteristic art movie features of overt stylisation, aesthetic self-consciousness, thematic density and introspective narration. Here the echoes privilege the childhood 'traumatic event' in a similar way to the Hollywood examples, but they need to be read in more specifically Freudian terms. Kline mentions the "repetition-compulsion" pattern to the novel⁹, and the film translates this into a more overtly Freudian form; as if Marcello is caught up in events which compulsively echo his past trauma because it set up disturbances which have not yet been resolved.

This becomes clearer if we look at the assassination scene and consider the ways in which it, too, may be seen as an echo of the childhood incident. In fact, the film has a conscious link here: as mentioned, Anna Quadri is Lino's replacement in the narrative. In the novel, Moravia's calling her Lina makes this explicit. The link is the character's homosexuality: Anna is explicitly lesbian — or, at least, bisexual — and the scene in which she sits on the floor and makes sensual advances up Giulia's naked legs is overtly an echo of the way Lino sat on the floor and similarly embraced the young Marcello's legs.

As a result of the brothel scene, there has been a crucial change of terms from the childhood incident. Whereas the 'killing' of Lino was transgressive, that of Quadri is now the subject of a Fascist order. But Marcello shot Lino to deny his homosexuality, and his acceptance of the order to kill Quadri derives from the same impulse: to prove he's a good Fascist, i.e. in his terms, normal. In this respect, it is surely crucial that, although he is guilty of conspiracy to murder, he is not guilty of the actual murders of Anna and her husband. He's *not* a good Fascist: Manganiello calls him a coward, which he, Manganiello, equates with being a pervert or a Jew. This reinfects this particular example of the return of the repressed: insofar as the material does echo the childhood incident, it is done by displacement.

I believe there are indeed echoes in the assassination scene, which may be seen in the nature of the two killings. The thugs stabbing Quadri can be seen as a reworking of the boys molesting the young Marcello: both end up on their backs surrounded by their attackers. (In his entry on Bertolucci in *Cinema: a Critical Dictionary*, Robin Wood asks "Why is the assassination of Quadri staged to evoke the death of Caesar?"¹⁰. Perhaps Bertolucci's — unconscious? — wish to related the two incidents led to the need for such a staging.) Symbolically, the boys, grown up,

have become Fascist thugs; only now their victim — in Fascist terms — is a political rather than a sexual 'deviant'. (Implicitly, Marcello was molested because he was seen as effeminate: this is explicit in the book.) This not only emphasises the link Bertolucci repeatedly makes between Fascism and the suppression of deviance, but suggests that the father-figure is being punished in revenge for the way Marcello was sexually humiliated. In this respect, the thugs are like agents of Marcello's Superego.

Similarly, when Anna flees from the murderers to the protection of Marcello in the car — which echoes the young Marcello seeking the 'protection' of Lino from his attackers — Marcello shuts her out: another act of violent repression. At this point, Anna becomes like Lino. Her ensuing pursuit by the thugs *up* through the woods may then be seen as another echo: of the 'innocent' chase between Lino and Marcello from the car, across the grass and *up* into the house: the wind in the trees may be heard on both occasions. It's as if the false innocence of the childhood incident is re-enacted in a nightmare version; again, the thugs seem like agents of Marcello's Superego, punishing Anna for her homosexuality. When they catch up with her, she is shot; and — in a final, explicit, echo — her bloody face echoes Lino's. However, I would agree with Robin Wood's reservations about the way this scene is filmed: "Why the blood *all* over Anna's face when she appears to have been shot in the back... blood that has mysteriously diminished a few shots later?"¹¹. Kline quotes Bertolucci in an interview as saying he deliberately used excessive amounts of blood so that "audiences could think 'it's not true'..."¹², a tremendous failure of nerve on the part of a director who seems completely on top of his material throughout the rest of the film.

That the childhood events are here being echoed by displacement is emphasised by the fact that, although Marcello now has the gun (the present Lino promised him) he is incapable of using it. Whereas Lino watched the boys molesting Marcello from a position of power, standing on his car's running-board, Marcello cowers in the back of the car as Quadri is killed and Anna, distraught, appeals for his help.

In closing the car window on Anna, Marcello is shutting out the sexual deviant: keeping her on the other side of the glass. (There is perhaps a link here with Italo on the other side of the glass at the beginning of the flashbacks. Although this is never made explicit, most critics seem to agree that Italo is gay.) But, of course, Marcello also desires Anna, which is partly Oedipal (see later) but, more crucially, precisely because of her androgyny. His desire — anticipated in the sudden attraction he feels for the whore in Ventimiglia — may be seen as a 'permitted' expression of his repressed homosexuality, permitted because she's a woman. With

Giulia, Marcello is sexually rather coy, but with Anna he is extremely aggressive, suggesting a desperation, as if he's driven by forces beyond his control. And so we have here a classic example of ambivalence, of a character divided between conflicting impulses. At the point when he refuses to save Anna, the Superego impulse to repress triumphs. At the end of the film, with the Fascist Superego swept away, the Id triumphs.

A crucial difference from the childhood incident is the role of the chauffeur: here Manganiello. The sexually enticing Lino has been converted into the sexually enticing Anna, but his persona as chauffeur has been relocated with the Fascist heavy Manganiello. This continues the split that was noted in the brothel in Ventimiglia: Lino has been divided into two characters: Manganiello as chauffeur and Dominique Sanda as erotic object. We can make sense of this in terms of the film's transformation of the sexual (Lino, with his gun enticingly between his legs as a come-on) into the political (Manganiello, for whom a gun is used purely to kill and the object between his legs is used to urinate in disgust at Marcello's failure to do this). On his first appearance, when he seems to be following Marcello on foot in his car, Manganiello is linked in the latter's mind to Lino in his car: this accounts for the sudden introduction of the canted camera angles — they indicate Marcello's unease. As soon as Manganiello identifies himself as a secret agent — i.e. a political, not a sexual figure — Marcello relaxes and the canted camera straightens up. When, during the car journey, Bertolucci then re-uses the image of Manganiello driving behind Marcello on foot to trigger the memory of Lino driving behind the young Marcello, this is little more than a convenient association: Marcello's unease has gone. The only moment when unease returns is when Marcello hides in the toilet in the Chinese restaurant in Paris and pulls his gun on Manganiello. Given the setting, and Marcello's pointing the gun at the chauffeur, it's as if, again, he is re-enacting elements of his encounter with Lino.

With the film's third chauffeur, Alberi, who is also Marcello's mother's lover, there is more oblique echoing of the childhood incident, with Signora Clerici (Milly) in the equivalent position to Marcello. Alberi's weapon of seduction is a morphine needle rather than a gun, but it's similarly deadly. Just as he did to Lino, Marcello makes a point of attributing deviance to Alberi, and he gets Manganiello to dispose of him — as he himself did with Lino. Moreover, Signora Clerici's house — with its steps up the front — suggests the house in which Lino sought to seduce the young Marcello. When Manganiello beats up Alberi by the car, this may be seen as a reworking of Marcello's past so that the 'deviant' chauffeur is disposed of before he gets to the bedroom and becomes

seductive. Each chauffeur's car is parked in a very similar position in the grounds in front of the respective house, and with Alberi, too, we note the motif of the discarded hat; this time the chauffeur's. (Again, as in a dream-reworking, there has been a displacement.) As Manganiello hits Alberi, Marcello becomes very animated, running up the steps into the house and saying "Tell the Colonel he can count on me", i.e., your efficient disposal of the deviant makes me keen to demonstrate my Fascist credentials, too.

Once this pattern of repetition-compulsion in the film is grasped, it should be clear why Bertolucci felt the need to jettison Moravia's ending; to find a resolution which enabled Marcello, potentially, to come to terms with his repressed demons. The extreme emotional violence of the re-encounter with Lino — to say nothing of the way Marcello, as if in psychic recognition of the link between the events, blames Lino for the Quadri murders — bears testament to the forces which are surging through Marcello as he experiences, for the first time consciously, the return of his repressed feelings. In hysterically driving Lino away — up the steps of the Colosseum — and allowing the crowd to spirit Italo (his Fascist conscience) away, Marcello in effect sets the scene for the act which will enable him, if not to heal, at least to confront the crucial feature of the past traumatic event. As he turns to gaze at the prostitute — Lino's replacement as young man — it is not simply the myth of the cave that is suggested, but also Marcello and the barrier and the 'deviant'. But the film stops at this point. Here Bertolucci is deliberately leaving his hero poised: we cannot say whether Marcello really will be able to cross the barrier and embrace the male object of desire.

The killing of Quadri, a father-figure; the desire for Anna, his wife; the disposal of Alberi, the mother's lover: these are equally the sort of Oedipal elements one finds repeatedly in Bertolucci's movies. But there is a separate group of such elements which provide another slant on the hero; which focus more on his identification with the Fascist state. Marcello's own father (Giuseppe Addobatti) is an inmate in an asylum, driven mad, it is implied, because of Fascist depravities in his past (one of the film's many references to the Fascist practice of using castor oil as a torture weapon). And the way Marcello torments him with the memory of these clearly suggests Oedipal hostility. Ultimately, he goads his father to the point where the latter strikes out impotently at him. Signor Clerici then calls out for the

⁹ Kline, p. 229.

¹⁰ Robin Wood, "Bernardo Bertolucci" in *Cinema: a Critical Dictionary*, Vol. 1. ed Richard Roud (Martin, Secker & Warburg, 1980), p. 128.

¹¹ Wood, p. 128.

¹² Kline, p. 225.

Marcello and Anna in Paris.



attendant Franz and puts his arms in position for the strait-jacket he's wearing to be bound. His submissiveness, and the readiness with which Franz, the authority-figure, resorts to the use of the jacket, expresses the control of the state over its victims. But, crucially, Marcello himself provokes the whole incident: he wants to see his father so humiliated. He aligns himself with the repressiveness of the state.

The décor of the asylum is a vast white enclosed arena of marble benches, one of the film's examples of Fascist architecture, harking back to Rome's imperial past, massive and impersonal. Other notable examples in the film of Fascist décor are the Ministry and the brothel: the latter a scaled-down version of the marble

monumentality of the former. And in these venues, too, Marcello bears witness to a Fascist authority-figure and a dominated subject: specifically, Dominique Sanda being sexually propositioned by a man. In the Ministry, he spies on the Minister and an elegantly-dressed woman who lies on his desk and offers her body to him. Kline perceptively relates this to the primal scene, noting the visual link between the woman's leg dangling under the table and Signora Clerici's leg under the bed when Marcello fishes out the morphine syringe¹³. The scene when Marcello enters his mother's bedroom is, moreover, Oedipally charged: he complains about her state of undress; she says she's just had a dream in which he came through the door

I kissed her. When she insults Giulia, both of them, connoting a mother/son complicity at the sense of the son's fiancée. This heightens the sense, when Marcello spies on the Minister and Sanda, latter, a highly glamorous figure, substitutes for mother in the Oedipal configuration. This scene is echoed in the brothel in Ventimiglia: another authority-figure (Manganiello); Sanda again subject of the figure's (here bullying) attentions. This is not as direct a version of the primal scene as one in the Ministry. Here Marcello is not a surreptitious observer, and Manganiello — in a very paternal way — offers him the whore. It's as if the primal scene has been reworked in terms of an Oedipal fantasy, culminating with the 'mother' surrendering to the ardent embrace of the 'son'. Nonetheless, both these scenes are followed by a demonstration of Fascist authority which locates Marcello, too, as submissive subject. He is summoned to the Minister, and led towards the man at his two deferential officials who speak in whispers in his superior's presence. In the brothel, Raoul's imposition of Marcello's embrace is so commanding that he converts him into a scampering schoolboy, to obey. And so, not only do these versions of the primal scene include Oedipal overtones, but also, the scene with Signor Clerici, these are linked to the structures of the state with which Marcello identifies and to which he submits.

Bertolucci himself, however, has spoken of another version of the primal scene: when Marcello spies on his father making erotic advances up Giulia's naked legs. This scene suggests a homosexual seduction triggering an erotic shudder. But beyond the specific meaning, this situation brings to mind the primal scene. I feel, at this point, that all my cinema may be incorporated into this scene.¹⁴ If this can be seen as a variation of the primal scene, it is one onto which Freudian primal phantasy — the 'scene of the father' — has been grafted. Laplanche and Pontalis have explored the links and differences: "If we consider the links and differences: the striking similarity is that they have one trait in common: they are all related to the origins... In the 'primal scene', it is the subject that is represented; in seduction, it is the origin or emergence of sexuality..."¹⁵ This precise echoing of the Lino/Marcello seduction scene locates it as representing the latter far more prominently. On the other hand, its relationship to the scenes in which Marcello spied on his father and Sanda in a sexual situation cannot be overestimated — in the switch from Italy to France, from the passive to the active sexual partner, so now transgressing gender boundaries. She is now the mother: Signora Clerici's bedroom

was filled with dogs; here, Marcello finds Anna's dog guarding the entrance to the bedroom. But the authoritarian structure that characterised her appearances in the scenes in Italy is no longer in evidence.

When Marcello encounters Manganiello and Sanda as whore in the brothel, the latter declares that she's "completamente pazza" (completely crazy). The utterance, which Manganiello forces her to repeat, is bizarre, with no apparent connection to anything. However, when Marcello resumes his train journey with Giulia, and she resumes her story of her teenage seduction by sixty year-old 'Uncle' Perpuzzio, she uses the same phrase: to justify his seduction, Perpuzzio declared that he was "completamente pazzo" over her. Now, as Giulia tells her story of the stages of Perpuzzio's seduction, Marcello imitates them. And we could see what he's imitating as yet another representation — here oral — of the primal scene. In other words, Marcello has sex with his wife for the first time (a) in imitation of one of the Italian authority-figures and (b) with her echoing the words of the mysteriously desired whore. Giulia herself virtually disappears behind the fantasy-substitutions.

On the one hand, the identification of the hero with the power structures of the Fascist state is thus detailed and sophisticated: as if he has internalised them in his psyche. It seems quite logical that his mission, as agent for the state, should be to commit an Oedipal crime. On the other hand, Bertolucci suggests something willed about Marcello's commitments: his marriage to Giulia *because* she's so ordinary; his identification with Fascism *because* it makes him feel 'normal'. During the party in the blind people's home immediately before his wedding, Marcello asks Italo what he thinks a 'normal man' is. The conversation takes place in a basement room which has windows above head level; through these we see women's legs walking to and fro outside. And so, when Italo replies that a normal man is one who turns to admire a woman's backside and finds that other men have done the same, Bertolucci is using the proximity of the women pointedly to ironise such a comment from a blind man. Italo goes on to say that a normal man likes "crowded beaches, football matches, bars" and Marcello adds "And mass rallies". But one cannot imagine Marcello having any attraction whatever to mass rallies. The story he tells Italo in the opening flashback about his father's past in Munich — which mocks Hitler as a lunatic who made wild political speeches — seems much closer to his position.

Bertolucci also ironises his hero's commitment to

¹³ Kline, p. 232.

¹⁴ Ranvaud & Ungari, p. 192.

¹⁵ J. Laplanche & J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 332.

Fascism in the way he captures Marcello's strutting self-importance within the Fascist world: e.g. when he visits the Ministry, or when he marches by a huge monument, erected to celebrate the military victories of Augustus, with whom Mussolini undoubtedly wished to compare himself. Even the camera cranes in the Italian scenes serve to reinforce Marcello's inflated sense of his own power. This is particularly in evidence in the two matching cranes in front of his mother's house: as he comes out to order Manganiello to get rid of Alberi, and as he goes back in again declaring that the Colonel can count on him. There is a rhetoric here which is pointedly over-emphatic: Bertolucci is ironising his hero's sense of his own importance.

In Paris, all this changes. Marcello still dresses similarly — tight overcoat and fedora — but, rather than strut, he becomes a besotted lover, stalking Anna as she takes Giulia shopping, whilst simultaneously trying to avoid an overzealous Manganiello. As he marched by the monument, he bore aloft a bouquet of yellow roses for Giulia. As he walks down the street with Anna when she comes out of the hotel, he similarly carries a posy of "violets from Parma", but now he's uncomfortable, unsure of Anna's response. The *mise-en-scène*, too, changes. The flamboyant cranes of the Italian scenes cease; the Parisian scenes are characterised, rather, by elegant tracks and dollies — the Ophulsiian influence. (The cranes return, significantly, for the assassination scene: specifically, as Quadri is murdered.) But if, from one point of view, this is a more sensuous world — as in the flowing camera movements in the Joinville dance hall — it is also one that is more troubling for the hero. Marcello's interior scenes alone with Anna — in her bedroom; in the ballet change-room — are accompanied by shots in mirrors which separate the characters by placing them in different spaces. And it is Marcello who tends to be located only in the mirror space: when Anna is seen in reflection, she is also usually framed in front of the mirror at the same time. In the changing-room, Bertolucci uses these framings when Anna is attacking Marcello for his Fascism: she ends by calling him a spy and an informer. In France, and from Anna's point of view, the perspective on Fascism has changed: now it's as if Marcello, by his commitment to Fascism, has located himself in an imaginary mirror world. There are similar overtones to the myth of the cave scene in Quadri's study. Marcello brings the darkness of Plato's cave, symbolically the darkness of Fascist Italy, into the Professor's world.

But in the changing-room it seems, for a moment, as if Anna's scorn has stung Marcello: as the camera pans away from the mirror to show him 'directly', he says he'll give up his mission. Anna's behaviour at this point becomes strangely contradictory. Instead of pressing him on his change of heart, she refutes it — "You're too

much of a coward" — but she then strips off the top of her leotard to offer herself to him. Goldin points out that the lighting at this moment is "a sinister blue-green (which) makes her ugly", and Bertolucci says in reply "When she undresses she is going to the slaughterhouse; which is why I used that light"¹⁶. But this doesn't account for Anna's contradictory behaviour, nor why her offering herself should so fail to move a Marcello who only moments before was asking her to run away with him. He embraced the Ventimiglia whore with far more fervour than he musters for Anna here. It is no doubt significant that, as Anna stands before him, for the first time Bertolucci frames both of them exclusively in the mirror space. Clearly this suggests the illusory basis of her action. But it doesn't explain it.

To conclude, I would like to return to my comment that the opening suggests an homage to *film noir*. It would only require a shift in generic point of view to see Marcello as a *noir* hero, in flight from his anxieties about sexuality, embracing Fascism as a (false) solution to these anxieties and becoming corrupted by this association with a gangster world. As in many *films noirs*, he is married for the sake of conformity to a domesticated woman, but yearns for the sexual allure of the 'femme fatale'; a role Anna comes close to playing in her attempts to manipulate Marcello in her pursuit of Giulia. It is true that Bertolucci uses (parodic) *noir* imagery in Marcello's first scene with Giulia rather than with Anna — the bizarre slatted effect of the lighting in her mother's apartment — but in many respects Anna is like a *femme fatale*: married to a father-figure; sexually liberated; glamorous and exciting. But, by the end of the film, it is apparent that Fascism is the equivalent of the *noir* world, and that Anna — potentially, at least — could have been the person who saved Marcello from that world. But this solution is offered in the film only in the dream Marcello recounts to Manganiello. And another element in the dream is that he was blind, and required Quadri to cure him. This, of course, is what Marcello resolutely refuses. He remains 'blind', and, even at the end, when he turns towards both the male object of desire and the camera, there is no evidence that he has gained any self-awareness other than a recognition of his homosexuality. In making his hero look directly and uneasily into the camera, Bertolucci stresses the unresolved quality of the ending. It is not inconceivable that, in the film's Oedipal design, Marcello has become 'like' his father, imprisoned, not by a strait-jacket, but by the image of the bars through which we observe him.

¹⁶ Goldin interview, p. 65.