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Review of The Conformist

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The Conformist
(Paramount Home Video, 12.5.2006)

With *The Conformist*, Bernardo Bertolucci went from being a young director with great promise, on the basis of *Before the Revolution* and *Partner*, to being one of the most significant filmmakers of the seventies. As good as his early films, which include *The Spider's Strategem*, are, none show the accomplished skills of *The Conformist*.

The Conformist, released in Europe in 1970 and based on a novel by Alberto Moravia, examines one of the most profound phenomena of the twentieth century: those who lack any moral, philosophical, or political views of their own but are quick to absorb the prevailing views of the moment. Marcello Clerici (Jean-Louis Trintignant) is such a man in the Italy of the late thirties. Mussolini's fascism dominates Italy, so Clerici works for the fascists, hunting down supposed "subversives."

On his honeymoon in Paris, Clerici combines business with pleasure by looking up his old professor, Quadri (Enzo Tarascio), an exiled anti-fascist, and luring him to his death. Clerici has married the pretty-but-dim Giulia (Stefania Sandrelli) not despite her stupidity but because of it. Such a wife will never disrupt his relatively placid existence. Yet Clerici has longings, seeing a prostitute (Dominique Sanda) as the embodiment of his sexual desires.

Some viewers get confused because Sanda also plays Quadri's wife, but Bertolucci intends her to represent the extremes of feminine behavior. This point becomes clearer when Anna Quadri begins making lesbian advances to Giulia. Because of a dramatic youthful encounter with a homosexual (Pierre Clementi), Clerici is more than a bit confused about sex, and these women reflect his ambivalence. The hot tango between Anna and Giulia is one of the great scenes of the seventies.

Finally, what matters most about *The Conformist* is not politics or sex or ideas of any sort but the brilliant images composed by Bertolucci and his collaborators. Several scenes, such as Clerici's first glimpse of the whore version of Anna, take place in fascist-inspired architectural settings, with lots of cold marble, vast empty spaces emphasizing the anonymity of the individual. Bertolucci's longtime cinematographer Vittorio Storaro filters out most of the color in many scenes to emphasize the moral grayness of Clerici's world. At the other extreme are the deep reds on the trim of the glass-enclosed dancehall and the sensual blue seen through these windows to accentuate the sexiness of the lesbian dance. The assassination in a deep, snowy forest is the greatest of the many wonderfully cinematic moments in *The Conformist*. Cutting back and forth between the killers, their victims, and the ominous scenery is a treatise on the art of editing by Franco Arcalli. This perfect transfer helps make *The Conformist* a visual feast.

The film is worth seeing just for this scene, as it is for the sight of Sanda, arguably the most beautiful woman in the movies of the seventies. This was Trintignant's best performance until he surpassed himself with Kieslowski's *Red*. Trintignant uses his thin, graceful body ironically to show how emotionally and morally immature Clericic is. His denunciation of everyone but himself in the final scene, ending with Clericic's turning his lost, desolate look toward the camera, is yet another great scene. Gastone Moschin, memorable as the don killed by Robert De Niro's Vito Corleone in *The Godfather: Part II*, is compelling as Clericic's suspicious driver. Coppola fans can see obvious influences in *The Conformist*, especially the pacing and the operatic tone.

The Conformist was released in the United States in both subtitled and dubbed versions. The DVD gives the option of watching it in Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, or English, with English, Spanish, or Portuguese subtitles. The theatrical version was also missing a five-minute pre-wedding party orchestrated by Clericic's blind friend Italo (José Quaglio). This scene, not in Moravia's novel, is a bit heavyhanded with the blind symbolism, adding little to the film's impact.

This addition is among several topics discussed by Bertolucci and Storaro in 39 minutes of making-of extras. Bertolucci reveals that his girlfriend (current wife Clare Peploe) read the novel and told him the story. He then based his screenplay on what he had heard, still not reading the book. He considered Brigitte Bardot for Anna but decided she could not provide the necessary qualities, everything Clericic "refuses to be." Bertolucci says the film's sets, costumes, and framing express his love for the thirties. He also discusses his initial troubles with Paramount; the studio was not interested in releasing **The Conformist** in any form until Coppola, Sidney Lumet, and Arthur Penn applied pressure. The film made Bertolucci feel for the first time "like a grown-up director."—Michael Adams