



The Conformist

Director: Bernardo Bertolucci
Country: Italy
Date: 1970

An edited review from film.igitalfix.com:

Bernardo Bertolucci was one of the great directors of the 1970s, the product of the same film-obsessed generation that produced Coppola and Scorsese. His early films are interesting and well made but his first masterpiece was *The Conformist*, made in 1970. He followed this up with two more amazing films, *Last Tango in Paris* - containing Brando's finest performance – and *1900* before declining into personal obsessions and, most depressingly, respectability with *The Last Emperor*.

The Conformist, based on the novel by Alberto Moravia, concerns Marcello Clerici (Trintignant), an Italian who is about to get married to a middle-class woman Giulia (Sandrelli). Marcello's obsession with conforming to the norms of society extends to joining a secret government organisation. He volunteers to seek out the anti-fascist Professor Quadri (Tarascio) and is eventually told to assassinate him. But things become complicated when Marcello and his wife meet the Professor's wife, Anna (Sanda).

One of the most famous passages in the Gospel of Mark asks what profits a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul. All very well, but what about a man who doesn't have soul to lose? *The Conformist* is, on one level, a film about moral compromise in Fascist Italy, but it's also an intensely stylised study of a man who is so obsessed with fitting in, with 'conforming', that he has become an empty vessel to be filled with the prevailing obsessions and prejudices of the society in which he finds himself. But behind the elegant conformity, there is a terrifying vacuum which can never be penetrated; not by love, hatred or any recognisable human feeling. Marcello is always willing to make a deal with the devil in order to appear 'one of us', but in fact he gave away his soul years ago, as we discover, when – as a teenage boy – he shot and apparently killed a chauffeur who was in the process of seducing him. It's a simplistic psycho-sexual explanation but it works in the context of the film because we can see that right from that moment, Marcello damned himself to a secret life - the ultimate secret being that he has nothing except the disguise of normality that he is so desperate to put on. The murder of which he feels guilty has frozen something inside of him and when, at the end of the film, he blankly stares into the middle distance as he performs a terrible betrayal, we can see the void behind the eyes.

Jean-Louis Trintignant is the perfect actor to play Marcello because he knows how to hold something back. But Marcello is given numerous levels by the actor and we begin to see that this most banal of men comes to life only when playing his parts to the full – stiff-backed Fascist, misogynist, seducer, petit-bourgeois husband, gun-toting assassin. Yet when the part requires action, he reaches his limits and freezes. He can play the part but he can't inhabit the soul because his soul is missing – in this context, it's deeply ironic that Marcello quotes the Emperor Hadrian's famous farewell to his soul. Trintignant's deep and true performance is perhaps the peak of his screen work. The moments that you remember aren't so much his insolent wit when talking to his mother but the silences in the car with the Fascist thug Manganiello as Marcello has his coat buttoned up like the gumshoe in a Film Noir. Being buttoned-up might also suggest that Marcello is repressing his own homosexuality – that the shooting of the seducer was an act of horrified self-recognition perhaps – but this is a reading which I don't think the film fully confirms. Marcello's act of deviance in the seduction and shooting certainly repels and terrifies him but I don't think that, as an adult, he has any particular orientations beyond the ones which he puts on to try and conform.

The Film Noir reference seems appropriate because there is a sense in which Marcello is descending into the kind of moral squalor that so many Noir heroes have to negotiate in their investigations. But it's

different here because it's a willing descent – more than that, it's a sought descent by a man who feels that passing by the pigsty isn't enough; you have to wallow in the pig-shit so you stink of it. But the look of the film has a lot of Noir about it, particularly the very striking Expressionist use of light and shadow by director of photography Vittorio Storaro - at one point, Marcello seems to be locked inside a middle-class cage by bars of shadow on the walls. The series of cages in which Marcello imprisons himself is symbolised by the extraordinary use of ornate and intimidating architecture. As director, Bertolucci draws our attention to these cages by contrasting them with extraordinarily outlandish crane shots and some dreamily luxuriant use of tracking.

There's some debate to be had about how political a film *The Conformist* is. It's certainly a film about society but it doesn't raise a banner for either right or left, largely because the central character is such a deliberate blank. Bertolucci apparently relished the chance to gain revenge on the leftist denunciation of him by giving the assassinated Professor the telephone number of Jean-Luc Godard, but I don't think that reflects any more than a private bit of revenge. What is very obvious, however, is Bertolucci's delight at making a film about Fascism which is so lushly decadent. Everything about the film is a bit too much, in a good way. A simple scene such as Marcello joining his mother in the front of the car becomes a visual orgy by the use of a tracking shot through billowing autumn leaves. The colours become increasingly obsessive – oranges and blues smother the images in places – and the costumes and production design flaunt profligacy to the point where it would be easy to believe that Bertolucci really had gone back in time to the 1930s to make a film at the height of the Hollywood Golden Age. Even Georges Delerue's beautiful music score is consciously over the top, particularly in my favourite moment – the gorgeous sequence where Marcello and his wife make love in a railway carriage.

There's a very clear influence from Visconti here and it's surely no coincidence that the art director, Ferdinando Scarfiotti, had worked with the Count during the 1960s. Sometimes, there's no excuse for the decisions made by Bertolucci and his collaborators other than a delight in their own brilliance – the insane asylum in the stadium for example, which works brilliantly but doesn't make a jot of sense on a realist level.

Part of this delighted debauch is the flagrant eroticism of the movie, something which Bertolucci developed in his later work; brilliantly in *Last Tango*, less so in *La Luna* and *The Dreamers*. The aforementioned love scene is the most erotic railway journey in film history, at least as far as this viewer is concerned, and the famous tango between those stunning actresses Stefania Sandrelli and Dominique Sanda isn't far behind. Difference of one kind or another haunts Marcello – the blindness of his friend Montanari, the homosexuality of the chauffeur – and the deviancy of Sanda both fascinates and terrifies him. He stands and watches as she stalks and entraps his wife with a mixture of delight and sadness, as if he's realising both the joys of non-conformity and his own inability to ever experience it. It's this recognition of how special Sanda is, how unique, that makes his inaction to save her all the more chilling.

This inaction comes towards the end of the assassination scene, a justly famous series of images which come so fast at the viewer that it's hard, on first viewing, to completely take them in. They are horrific certainly but somehow abstracted, as if we're seeing them from Marcello's non-involved point of view. It's only towards the end, when we see Sanda's face pushed up against the car door and, subsequently, smeared with her own blood, that the human element is fully indulged. This is the scene which the film has led towards, with its complex flashbacks and accumulating sense of dread, and it has extraordinary power.

At the end of the film, I always return in my mind to that quotation from the Gospel of Mark and wonder what Marcello has actually gained. He stares at the camera for a few moments too long right at the end and perhaps what he gains in a certain self-realisation – but his eyes are blank. The immolation of the self is complete and irrevocable. But if this is a tragedy, it's a tragedy for Professor and Anna Quadri. It's not tragic for Marcello. How can it be when everything was lost so long ago?

Taken from: <http://film.thedigitalfix.com/content/id/75235/the-conformist.html>