

Textual Analysis: *Il Conformista* / The Conformist (1970)

Sequence running time: 03:04:00 - 08:04:00

FILM (HL)

Words: 1,756

Introduction

This film textual analysis analyses a scene from *The Conformist* (1970) with reference to the cultural context, film elements and the ways that the cultural context and film elements work together to create meaning. The scene occurs at 03:04:00 to 08:04:00 in the film. It is a flashback with the main character, Marcello Clerici, recalling a collection of memories, represented by a series of conversations related to conflicts about freedom and conformity.

The flashback scene starts with Marcello in a car, lost in thought as he drives to the secret police headquarters. It then cuts to a two-part flashback scene. In the first part, (Figure 1) Marcello is in a booth, in a radio studio, with colourful music playing with many musicians, singers and dancers playing behind him. Marcello is talking about his relationship with his wife, with his blind friend, Italo. The scene then changes to a second part; a conversation between Marcello and a person who is trying to recruit him into the Fascist police (figure 2).



Figure 1: *Marcello seated in the radio studio with the reflection of Italo*

Cultural context

Regarding the cultural context, the political, social and historical contexts of this film are interconnected. This political thriller, an adaptation of the novel by Antonio Moravia (1951), is set in Italy and France, 1938, during the Italian fascist regime of Mussolini. In an interview, Bertolucci said that his intention was to reconstruct the “memory of [his] memory” on film, and, more importantly, to “expose both Fascism and the sins of fathers” (Bertolucci 1971).

Bertolucci also indicated that he wanted to use the film to alert audiences to the fact that Fascism had survived the collapse of Mussolini’s fascist regime in 1945 and was alive and well in contemporary Italy” (Cavaliere 2004). Bertolucci’s ‘historical film’ “may be seen as a parable of what happens when an individual, and by extension an entire population, abdicates responsibility for its moral condition” (Marcus 1986, p. 286).

Cavaliere (2004) stated that Bertolucci aimed to reconstruct three key themes: “the myths of Resistance historiography; conformism and the degree to which Italians actively participated in the crimes of the regime; and the dialectic of the class struggle in the modern Italian experience”. Bertolucci achieves this through the lens of Marcello; a confused man, unsure of his sexuality, and “drawn to Fascism, desperate to fit in in 1938 Rome” (Cavalier 2004). These conflicts are central in the scene and the entire film as “he is sent to Paris to murder his anti-fascist former college professor” (Patterson 2012). For example, Marcello states that he feels different when dressing in front of a mirror in the morning. This could be strengthening the idea of him being a homosexual; which is highly illegal in fascist Italy at the time and most likely lead to death if discovered.

The film was released in 1970; a time of social unrest in Italy. There were growing fears throughout Europe of a new fascist uprising in Italy as there was a revival of neo-fascist ideas and beliefs. Italian officials sought the support of the US government to reduce the risk of new fascist revolution. The hard fought for freedoms were under threat in people’s day-to-day lives.

Film elements

Next, there are many diverse film elements in this scene, however, I focus on the cinematography, filmmakers' influence intentions and visions, and mise-en-scene. The darkened sets, split screen effects, and images of bars, used in the scene, also repeated in many other scenes in the film, suggest a feeling of being trapped and in conflict (Marcus 1986, 296). Bertolucci uses flashbacks to contrast the present with memories of the past while also highlighting conflicting emotions about freedom and conformity.

This scene contains many features of cinematography. For example, as seen in figure 1, when his friend Italo makes a propaganda broadcast celebrating the "Prussian aspect of Mussolini" and the "Latin aspect of Hitler" (Bondanella 2001: 306-307). There is the image of Marcello through a pane of glass that picks up the reflections of other people outside his own mental state. As the camera cuts back to Marcello we can see his friends shadow where he was sitting when they were just having a conversation. Bertolucci wanted the audience to understand that their dialogue is still continuing even if his friend is speaking on the Radio.

The composition of this close up shot is very basic with Marcello in the center but slightly to the left. In this shot, Bertolucci may have intended to convey the idea that fascists are far right in political terminology and that Marcello, seated left but not to the right, does not like the idea of fascism entirely. The audience gets a sense that Marcello is trying to remain unseen from the public eye with his trench coat covering neck to toe and even his face is obstructed by an out of focus wind-screen wiper.

As this scene continues with different flashbacks, the camera cuts back and forth between Marcello and his friend. Every time it cuts back the camera moves closer to the person in said shot as if gradually bringing the contrasting situations of Marcello and his friend into focus. In addition, as Marcello is pacing back and forth the camera is following him using a track slider at head level. Although the camera is smooth, Marcello is not, his steps seem very heavy. Bertolucci may have intended the camera to be a metaphor for how living in conflict can appear smooth but feel heavy, and/or as a resignation of conformity with Marcello following but not to the letter.

Contrasting colour is also used to convey contrasting states of mind. In figure 1, Marcello's clothes are dark, but his white shirt brings elements of purity and merge with the room behind. Marcello's body language also points to him belonging in the other room as he is leaning against the window. In contrast, his friend is wearing a grey suit and a dark blue shirt. This man seems to belong in this room of darkness. He is seated at the back of the room as far from the other room as possible.



Figure 2: *Marcello being recruited into the secret fascist police.*

Just before the screenshot of figure 2, Marcello enters the room. His body language is very closed implying that he feels uncomfortable. The light in the room dims slightly when he starts speaking further strengthening this point. Marcello sits down and is facing towards the room again. Marcello's conversation with the fascist Colonel in figure 2 is very one sided. There is only one cut in this conversation and the longest shot is of the Colonel with his face completely lit up apart from his eyes. This effect is likely created using a light source directly above the Colonial. In contrast, Marcello, with his back to the viewers, is lit to show him there but barely there. The white shirt of the Colonel and the lit lamp far left of the shot highlight the power of fascism; barely lit Marcello highlights his conformity to, but inner disagreement with fascism.

Furthermore, the film element of vertical lines is used to convey the theme of conformity (Tlandry 2015). The pervasive straight lines in the screenshot of figure 3 could represent conformity in fascist Italy at the time and could also portray an

international image of conformity on the part of an Italian fascist regime. Marcello also seeks to conform; standing simultaneously in line and opposed by closing his eyes and looking outward.



Figure 3 – Marcello conforming, in vertical line, but also turning his back on this.

The mise-en-scene is purposely lacking as illustrated in figure 2. The shot is bare bones with only a lamp and folder on the desk. The lighting appears to come only from the ceiling, however, in some shots there are added lights, ensuring the characters are lit. Marcello looks like he is trapped outside of what is the real world. Bernardo Bertolucci wanted the character to seem as if he was in a cage in all senses, psychologically, physically and visually.

Cultural context and film elements

Finally, the cultural context and the film elements work together to explore and convey two key themes in the film: conformity and freedom. Similarly, other Bertolucci films, for example, *La Commare Secca /The Grim Reaper* (1962), *Prima dellarivoluzione/ Before the Revolution* (1964) provide a “cinematic representation of the conflict between freedom and conformity” (Cavaliere 2004).

Bertolucci portrays the film’s themes of feeling trapped and blind, through his composition of individual shots and the use of effects of light and shadow. For example, “the use of shadow and silhouette underscores the relationship between

illusion and reality, sight and blindness, and is used in the film to indicate the moral choice that besets Clerici : the shadows of Fascist compliance or the bright light of resistance” (Marcus, 1986 300).

Bertolucci integrates these themes within the unique social, political and historical context by layering flashback scenes throughout the film to convey that people, culture and history interact in non-linear ways. His use of flashbacks interrupts any linear sense of time or experience. “The film presents the viewer with a jumble of elements and chronologies which can be described only as oneiric, [since] these first scenes not only lack causal and chronological coherence, but they operate by condensation, displacement, projection, and doubling-all techniques of what Freud has termed the latent dream work” (Kline 1978, p. 231).

Colour and context also interact to convey a grey area between; past and present, conformity and freedom. Scenes depicting the present are filmed in blues and greys, featuring shots of Marcello deep in thought. These shots capture the murky conflict space between conformity and freedom. In contrast, flashback scenes are filmed with a mix of warm colours indicating nostalgic emotions, a longing for a time when things seemed clear and certain. Past conflicts look clearer in hindsight.

Flashback shots are also portrayed as images against a black background with strong light used to illuminate characters faces. Bertolucci seems to use the black background to illustrate areas of social and political deception in Marcello’s life, such as getting married to a woman when he was a homosexual and joining the fascist secret police when he was unconvinced politically of this regime. This black façade is captured later in the film text as being “for the appearance of normality” (Thomas 2015). Paradoxically, this conversation occurs between Marcello and his blind friend who sees Marcello and his social and political actions clearly.

References

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