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## Il conformista (The Conformist) (15 – X on release)

Director: **Bernardo Bertolucci**

Italy/France/W Germany 1970 In Italian/French with English subtitles

Running time : 111 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Jean-Louis Trintignant** (Marcello Clerici), **Stefania Sandrelli** (Giulia), **Enzo Tarascio** (Professor Quadri), **Dominique Sanda** (Anna Quadri), **Pierre Clémenti** (Lino).

SCRIPT: **Bernardo Bertolucci, Alberto Moravia** (from his novel). PHOTOGRAPHY: **Vittorio Storaro**. EDITING: **Franco Arcalli**. MUSIC: **Georges Delerue**.

### *Reveals minor plot details*

Bertolucci has long alternated political subjects (*Before the Revolution, The Spider's Stratagem*, 1900) with sexual ones (*Last Tango in Paris, La luna, The Sheltering Sky*). Often, indeed, the two are enmeshed, as they are in *Il conformista*. Coming as it did at the close of an immensely political decade (the growth in student radicalism, a re-examination of Italy's fascist past), this film also represents a tipping point in its director's career and heralded what was to be his most productive decade of work.

Marcello is a dandyish, dispassionate man who, at the film's opening in 1938, is preparing to marry a beautiful daughter of a family whose position in fascist Italy is calculated to assure him advancement on the fringes of the Mussolini regime. Trintignant, an actor who combined an almost feline beauty and grace with an evasive, sinister quality, thanks to those narrowed gimlet eyes, is perfectly cast as Marcello, about whom we immediately sense an air of sexual repression.

No sooner than on his honeymoon trip to Paris, the newly anointed recruit to the cause is given an assignment by his superiors: to assassinate his former professor, a political dissident who has fled to France with his beautiful young wife. Our impression of a regime going about its business like an underworld organisation is enhanced by Bertolucci's *mise en scène*: overcoats and fedoras, shadowy lighting, and a terrifyingly messy ambush in the woods that could be a scene from *The Godfather*!

Gradually we become aware that sex and violence are linked in Marcello's psyche, and ultimately in a flashback we see why. We also come to understand the curiously sexless marriage of Marcello and Giulia; in fact, there seems to be more going on between Giulia and Anna, the professor's wife, and the film's most eroticised scenes are a tango between the two women in a

Paris dancehall and a scene in Giulia's bedroom in which they try on clothes. Is there a sense where Bertolucci is saying that homosexuality, or bisexuality, though officially censured by the regime, nevertheless exist within it as emblems of its dysfunctionality? Or that it didn't care what you were, provided that you offered surface conformity? Whatever the case, it is clear that a measure of irony is intended by the film's title, for Marcello both conforms and does not conform.

Consequent upon this theme, *Il conformista* is a film very much concerned with the surface of things, from the settings – for example the sparsely furnished halls of the building to which Marcello comes immaculately attired, his leather shoes echoing smartly on the marble floor – to the preoccupation with dress. Conversely, the characters give away little of their inner, psychological selves, and the most expressive, emotionally warm character, the Professor, is killed. The result is that Bertolucci's cameraman, Vittorio Storaro, has a field day with light and colour, and the film is one of the most beautiful in a genre where an aesthetic closer to actuality footage is often felt desirable, one that has now entered the mainstream with the Bourne films.

*The Conformist* has aged well. Its view of an Italy in which gangster politics rub shoulders with sexual transgression and surface sheen remains oddly apt in the era of Berlusconi! Comparing favourably with the empty visual grandstanding of *The Last Emperor* a decade and half later, and shining a discomfiting light on its nation's past, it remains perhaps Bertolucci's most accomplished film.

**David Clare**