Title
Bertolucci 's *The Conformist*: A Study of the Flashbacks in the Narrative Strategy of the Film

Permalink

Journal

ISSN

Author
Kidney, Peggy

Publication Date

DOI

Bertolucci's *The Conformist*: A Study of the Flashbacks in the Narrative Strategy of the Film.

P. M. KIDNEY

> Da buon seguace della teoria dell' autore ritenevo che il montaggio non fosse che una logica conseguenza del modo di girare... (invece) ho capito che è un'altra scrittura, che si può montare un film anche contro il modo in cui si è girato, contro quello che si e' girato.
>
> —Bernardo Bertolucci

Bertolucci's *Il conformista*[1] (1970) is not just the cinematographic adaptation of Moravia's novel (Bompiani, 1951)[2] but a rewriting of that same text[3] and the historical event upon which it is based: the June 1937 assassination of the Rosselli brothers by order of the Italian Foreign Office.[4]

In his film version of the novel, Bertolucci abandons Moravia's chronologically developed narrative in favor of a discourse built on anachronous sequences, specifically flashbacks or *analepses*.[5] This constitutes the fundamental change with respect to the novel and is also the key to the film's independence of it.

While the basic story remains unaltered in the text of the film, it is the discourse,[5a] the new textual arrangement of the plot, that gives rise to a psychological and highly subjective text. The new text is no longer presented through the ''objective rational point of view of an omniscient narrator who controls the narrative,'' but through the point of view of the protagonist himself, Marcello Clerici. The point of view adopted by Bertolucci is thus internal and subjective, and expressed

through the flashbacks. These portray the character's psychological state as a product of past events which are continuously present. They correspond to a narrative strategy aimed at creating a structure that encourages the lack of diffentiation between past and present, suggesting a Bergsonian concept of time as experienced duration in which the past is an integral part of the present. The flashback structure also reinforces the psychological nature of the character's entrapment in a system he himself has created and cannot escape.

The flashbacks function to increase the viewer's involvement, because s/he naturally seeks the reorganization of events presented initially without causal and chronological coherence. The viewer must rearrange the scenes mentally, according to a rational progression, in order to reconstruct the chronology of the narrative and the sequence of events which have led to the protagonist's problematical situation. The final reorganization of all events in their proper sequence can occur only at the end of the film when the action develops strictly in the present and is no longer interrupted by flashbacks. Some of the flashbacks, those that contain other flashbacks (flashbacks within flashbacks) present a special problem since the viewer must reconstruct not only the external, overall, chronological sequence of the flashbacks in real/historic terms but the internal chronological sequence of the flashbacks within flashbacks in order to establish the sequence of events. The complex structure of Bertolucci's film thus requires an active viewer, who unlike the reader of Moravia's linear text, is called upon to organize and interpret what s/he sees.[6]

Whereas Moravia's narrative begins with the description of Marcello as a child and then follows the character's development, Bertolucci's narrative begins in *medias res* in the Paris hotel room on the morning of the murder of Professor Quadri and his wife. The first sequence takes place in the hotel room as Marcello prepares to go out, the second portrays Marcello as he leaves the hotel, and the third shows him getting into a car driven by special agent Manganiello,[7] Marcello's assistant. From this point on the narrative follows two lines: one chronological, a framing device for the narrative which represents the present (and is reinforced by a leitmotif), and another that depicts past events with the introduction of flashbacks.

Schematically, the narrative follows a linear progression associated

with the car in which Marcello and Manganiello are riding, and which is moving continuously in time and space toward the scene of the murder, and a non-linear progression that includes ten breaks in the linear development or ten moments of *analepsis*, which occur while the car is traveling. These breaks, which can be considered ten incidents of ellipsis because "the discourse in the present halts, though time continues to pass in the story" (Chatman, p. 70), are obviously more important than the framing device of the traveling car. The viewer, in fact, is left to assume that Marcello and Manganiello continue their journey in the car, while the flashback sequences are presented on the screen. This structure emphasizes the importance of the psychological effects of past events on the character and the workings of his mind, his thoughts and recollections, even his dreams (vertical development) while de-emphasizing the role of objective considerations linked to the plot (horizontal development). Kline points out that the first scenes of the film (where Marcello is portrayed at various times dozing in both the car and the flashbacks) operate on principles of "condensation, displacement, projection, and doubling—all techniques of what Freud has termed the latent dream work" (Kline, p. 231).
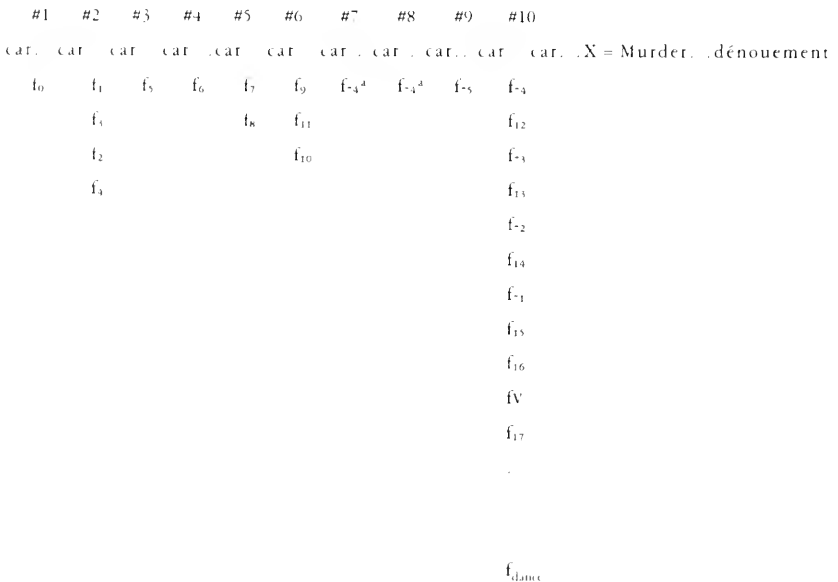
In diagram form, the structure of the film is as follows (*analepsis* breaks by number):
car#^{1} car#^{2} car#^{3} car#^{4} car#^{5} car#^{6} car#^{7} car#^{8} car#^{9} car#^{10} car–X = Murder scene . . . dénouement
X = point of convergence, elimination of the flashbacks and the framing device (the car). X is followed by a dénouement set in time a few years later, at the collapse of the fascist regime, in 1943.

The *analepses* are presented both as single flashbacks followed by a return to the present action within the traveling car (a device which is employed six times) and as composite flashbacks, in other words, flashbacks within flashbacks (a device which is employed four times). In the second case the composite structure produces a *mise-en-abîme* effect that functions to confuse the chronological order of the events presented. The action in fact does not return to the present after each flashback to establish the distinction between the past and the present (as is customary), but continues instead with another flashback, creating internal relationships between various levels of time in the past. From

one moment in time in the past the narrative moves either to another moment in time which is chronologically situated in a more distant past with respect to the initial flashback sequence or closer to the present with respect to the preceding flashback, but still in the past. As the number of flashbacks increases so does the number of internal relationships produced, since these are tied to the positioning of each event with respect to the other on an ideal chronological time-line. For example, in the second break in the linear development Bertolucci offers the viewer a composite flashback which contains four distinct flashbacks. The first, f_1, is a continuation of the first flashback in real/historic terms which portrays events at the radio station and to which I have assigned the value f_0. f_1 is followed by three other flashbacks (distinguished from each other by a film cut) in which the events of f_2 occur in film time after f_3. The last flashback in this sequence, f_4, occurs in historic time after f_3 but in film time after f_2. The sequence produced is thus: f_1, f_3, f_2, f_4. In diagram form the *analepsis* breaks (by number) are as follows:

#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10		
car.	car	car	car	.car	car	car .	car .	car..	car	car. .X = Murder	.dénouement
f_0	f_1	f_5	f_6	f_7	f_9	$f\text{-}4^d$	$f\text{-}4^d$	$f\text{-}5$	$f\text{-}3$		
	f_4			f_8	f_{11}				f_{12}		
	f_2				f_{10}				$f\text{-}3$		
	f_3								f_{13}		
									$f\text{-}2$		
									f_{14}		
									$f\text{-}1$		
									f_{15}		
									f_{16}		
									fV		
									f_{17}		
									.		
									f_{dance}		

(For individual identifications of the flashbacks presented in this diagram see footnote #8)

This use of a non-chronological ordering of the flashbacks is repeated in the internal structure of the 6th and 10th breaks in the narrative and in the external relationships between narrative breaks themselves when considering the chronological gap between breaks #6 and #7 and breaks #9 and #10. The most complex narrative break is the last one, break #10. In this composite flashback which, after four sequences of internal *analepsis* develops according to a chronological scheme, there is the greatest chronological gap between single flashbacks. The arrangement, repeated seven times, juxtaposes some of the earliest historical events of the narrative f_{-4}, f_{-3}, f_{-2}, f_{-1} and the most recent events expressed in flashback form f_{12}, f_{13}, f_{14}, f_{15} which are the scenes of Marcello's confession. This arrangement brings Marcello's past to bear as openly as possible on his present situation and suggests the existence of an intimate relationship between past and present in which past events are not only not relegated to the memory of the past but play a vital role in shaping the present and are in fact part of it. It is important to note not only the duration of the confession flashbacks and the insistence upon the confession sequences themselves (presented four times in the film) but the importance the sequences acquire due to their positioning in the narrative development. They immediately precede in fact the chronological development and the return to the present with its crucial murder scene. The repetition of the confession sequences suggests Marcello's preoccupation with the idea of making amends for the past and settling the score with it through the murder of Professor Quadri.

Break #10, the last break preceding the murder scene is not only the most complex from the point of view of its internal structure and the non-linear presentation of the events, but also the most interesting as far as the external structure of the *analepsis* breaks is concerned. In fact break #10 presents events which chronologically precede all events presented up to that point in the narrative (with the exception of f_{-5}) suggesting that the time factor in no way minimizes their bearing on later developments. The earlier events of the narrative are placed in the same *analepsis* break in which the last flashback of the narrative (the dance scene) is presented. The dance represents the further chronological development of the flashbacks, the moment of the past which is closest to the present, specifically the events of the night before. After the dance scene, f_{dance}, the narrative "catches up" with the present

and integrates itself with the linear development that has been used as the framing device for the discourse. From this point on there are no flashbacks, the past is incorporated in the present and the action coincides with the movement of the car in which Marcello and Manganiello are riding to the scene of the murder.

The apparently chaotic presentation of the flashbacks suggests the workings of Marcello's own mind. While Marcello is in the car on the way to the murder scene he thinks about past events and these are presented on the screen in the order in which he recalls them. As Lopez states:

> In Bertolucci's *The Conformist* time becomes telescoped and reordered. It is compressed into memory based on Marcello's personal experiences, and thus becomes internalized and more real in the sense that the years that intervene between one significant event and another do not necessarily have to be accounted for in the viewer's mind as we accept (due to our own experience) the selective, sifting process of memory. (Lopez, p. 306)

The sequence which I feel best demonstrates this concept occurs in breaks #7 and #8 which basically contain elements of the same flashback. In these two mini-flashbacks, f_{4a} and f_{4b}, which have in fact minimal screen duration, Marcello, who has temporarily gotten out of the car which Manganiello is driving, recalls getting into Lino's car[9] as a child. The recollection is triggered by the visual parallel offered by the car which Manganiello is now driving behind him and Marcello's own ambivalent feelings about wanting or not to get in. The abrupt cutting in these two flashback scenes and the minimal duration of the flashbacks themselves suggest not only Marcello's recollection of the events but his re-experiencing of them as a déjà vu. The *analepses* are separated by an extremely brief period of story-time creating the overall effect of what Chatman calls "discontinuity between discourse-time and story-time" in which the former clearly dominates the latter, underscoring once again the lack of a rational chronological structure.

The *analepsis* breaks with their internal and external non-linear structure, present Marcello's point of view on a narrative level. Nowhere is the break from Moravia's story more evident in fact than in the murder scene. In Moravia's novel Marcello is not present at the scene but reads

about it in the newspapers at the office. In Bertolucci's film Marcello is present at the scene inside the car which has held him captive for most of the film and from which he now does not emerge. While the murder scene is not shot completely from Marcello's point of view, that is, it is not shot strictly through "Marcello's eyes" with the camera at his eye level, the camera does focus on his eyes three times, suggesting that the scene is witnessed from his point of view which is, of course, the point of view of the viewer as well.[10] Shots of his eyes precede in fact the professor's getting out of his car to investigate what has happened to the driver in the car that is blocking the road, the arrival of the fascists from behind the trees, and Anna's desperate call for help outside his car window. Marcello's physical presence at the scene, his role as indirect participant,[11] not just spectator, as evidenced especially in the shot in which Anna bangs on the car window and he fails to respond, increase the subjective presentation of the main event of the film.

The murder scene, the climax of the film is important structurally because it signals the moment in which past and present coincide. It is the central scene of the film because the function of the narrative up to that point is to present the events and the reasons that have led Marcello to his involvement in the murder of Professor Quadri. Bertolucci's murder scene is a rewriting of the Moravia text not only because Marcello is at the scene and it is presented essentially from his point of view, but because the violence of the scene, Professor Quadri's lengthy and repeated stabbing and Anna Quadri's chase in the woods and eventual murder (with the shot that disfigures her beautiful face), reinscribe the political aspect of the historical account into the scene, which thus becomes as obvious indictment of fascism.

Whereas in Moravia's novel the narrative an ideological change that has shifted the emphasis from political history to psychological, sexual, and social questions, Bertolucci's film reintroduces the political question, thus integrating both texts and producing a third, highly subjective text. The film, as I have already suggested, is thus a rewriting of both the generally accepted historical "text" of the Rosselli murders (subtext$_1$) and the Moravian text of Marcello Clerici (subtext$_2$). Although Bertolucci introduces other elements such as the psychoanalytic code,[12] the fundamental change that he brings to the Moravia text is structural and it is a change that affects the entire narrative and the

conclusion of the story. In the novel in fact, Marcello is eliminated in
the implied author's "deus ex machina" strategy of an air raid in which
Marcello, his wife, and daughter are all killed, whereas in the closing
sequence of the film Marcello is presented in a self-reflexive mood, as
he attempts, it seems, to face his homosexual tendencies, the root of
all his troubles. He looks at the naked body of a young male prosti-
tute barely visible in the shadows, and from whom he is separated by
a symbolic series of bars through which he glances, still a prisoner of
himself, his past and his problems. In Bertolucci's film the problemat-
ical past re-erupts tragically in the present and Marcello's difficult sit-
uation, his dilemmas and reflections about his condition and his actions
continue unresolved as he finally glances directly at the viewers calling
on them to pass judgment on him and hopefully to reflect on their own
impulses of conformity. With this strategy the viewer is invited again
to actively participate in the construction of the film's meaning.

   In conclusion, the difference between the two texts, the tension be-
tween Bertolucci's film and Moravia's novel is not just a formal differ-
ence: it is the critical difference, a difference which is the expression
of the ideological concerns of Bertolucci's film. The adoption of the
intricate system of flashbacks functions to present the subjective point
of view of the protagonist instead of the implied writer's objective view-
point. It is the subjective viewpoint that frames the narrative and in-
fluences the discourse.[13] Bertolucci demonstrates conclusively that point
of view in cinema can be achieved not only cinematographically with
the use of the camera, but through narrative structure as well.

                                                                UCLA

Notes

1. The English version of the film is entitled *The Conformist*. Henceforth cited is
the English title.

2. The English translation of the novel is *The Conformist* (London: Secker and War-
burg, 1953).

3. The story of Moravia's novel is closely related to the story of the Rosselli case.
In the novel Moravia changes the historical events of the murder by introducing a
husband-wife team (Professor Quadri and his wife Lina) in place of the Rosselli brothers

and by concentrating not on them directly or on their murder, but on the person responsible for arranging it. The story of Marcello Clerici thus represents the fictional development of an implied text of the event, the story of the organizer of the crime.

4. The well-known historical event, the Rosselli case, involved the June 1937 political assassination of Carlo and Nello Rosselli. See Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 104.

5. For a discussion of *analepsis* see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 64, henceforth cited as Chatman.

5a. For a discussion of the difference between story and discourse see Chatman.

6. For a discussion of the role of the active viewer in *The Conformist* see Robert Philip Kolker, *Bernardo Bertolucci* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), henceforth cited as Kolker.

7. For a discussion of the changes that Bertolucci makes with regard to the names of the Moravia characters see T. Jefferson Kline, ''The Unconformist: Bertolucci's The Conformist'' in *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation*, edited by Andrew Horton and Joan Magretta, (New York: Ungar, 1981), pp. 222–237, henceforth cited as Lopez. Kolker (p. 88) remarks upon the resemblance between Manganiello's name and the Italian word *manganello*, the club, symbol of the fascist *squadristi* and their punitive attacks without ever commenting, however, on the humorous effect produced. Even Giulia in the film comments on the comical character of the name: ''Che nome buffo, Manganiello.'' Bertolucci's intent was clearly ironic and the choice of name appropriate for the character.

8. The flashbacks presented in this diagram can be identified as follows:

f_0 Radio station visit with Italo Montanari

f_1 Continuation of f_0 at radio station

f_2 At the Minister's headquarters: ''The Office of the Minister!''

f_3 Continuation of f_1 at radio station

f_4 Continuation of f_2 at fascist HQ; Marcello is accompanied to the Minister

f_5 Cemetery wall with names; Marcello with flowers on way to Giulia's

f_6 Continuation of f_5

f_7 At Giulia's for lunch

f_8 Marcello and Manganiello at mother's house

f_9 Continuation of f_8 at mother's house

f_{10} Back from visit to asylum

f_{11} Asylum visit with father

f_{-4_a} Shot of Lino's car from behind with child on side (part of f_{-4}; to be repeated)

f_{-4_b} ''Stop!'' by Marcello as a young boy (part of f_{-4}; to be repeated)

f_{-5} Children around Marcello on the ground

f_{-4} Children around Marcello; continuation of f_{-5}; Marcello gets up and gets into Lino's car. Flashback contains previous f_{-4_a} and f_{-4_b} segments

f_{12} Confession

f_{-3} Marcello with Lino outside villa and in Lino's room

f_{13} Confession: "Then what happened?"

f_{-2} Back to Lino's room. Scene on bed (with sound of the confession)

f_{14} Confession: "Are you sure you are telling the truth?"

f_{-1} Back to Lino's room: "Shoot, shoot, kill the pretty Butterfly"

f_{15} Confession: Marcello talks about repaying society and is absolved

f_{16} On train with Giulia. Giulia begins to explain why she is unworthy of him

f_v Ventimiglia: Marcello walks behind a painting which turns into reality. Visits fascist leader who gives him new orders. Note: the chronological positioning of this event is extremely difficult because f_{17} continues as if there had been no break although the train's arrival in Ventimiglia had been announced by the conductor at the end of f_{16}

f_{17} On train. Continuation of f_{16}. Action begins where f_{16} left off. Giulia tells Marcello about Uncle Perpuzio and he re-enacts the scene described, assuming the role of the uncle.

$\vdots$ Henceforward the action develops chronologically up to f_{dance}

f_{dance} Last flashback before story returns to the present, to the traveling car which is following Prof. Quadri and his wife.

Note that most flashbacks except for f_7 and f_v are linked in content to another flashback. The correspondence between flashbacks increases in complexity as the film progresses. The last flashback is the longest and most complex with regard to the temporal correspondences in the alternation of the flashbacks.

9. Both in Moravia's novel and Bertolucci's film Lino is the chauffeur who attempted to seduce Marcello and who Marcello believed he had killed.

10. It is interesting to note that the point of view in Anna's murder is that of the fascists who are chasing her. The fascists however are not seen during the chase (which is filmed with a hand-held camera) thus forcing the viewer to assume the point of view of the fascists themselves.

11. It must be remembered that although Marcello does not participate personally in the executions of Professor Quadri and Anna Quadri, he is responsible for setting up the murder of the Professor. Anna Quadri who was not supposed to be part of the murder had to be eliminated once she witnessed her husband's murder.

12. For a discussion of the psychoanalytic code as it is used by Bertolucci in the film see Kline.

13. In an interview with Enzo Ungari published in *Scene madri di Bernardo Bertolucci*, (Milano: Ubulibri, 1982), p. 73, Bertolucci states that he shot the film leaving open the possibility of ordering it in a chronological manner but that in the editing room he discovered the possibilities for the vertical development obtainable through montage. From the very beginning however he admits that he was fascinated with the idea of using the trip in the car as the "present" of the story, the container, while the protagonist traveled also in the past. (The translation is my own.) On the importance of the montage and Bertolucci's collaboration with Kim Arcalli see Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi: *Il cinema italiano d'oggi 1970–1984 raccontato dai suoi protagonisti* (Milano: Mondadori, 1984), p. 143. The opening quote is taken from this source.