

***The Conformist* by Bernardo Bertolucci:  
Alberto Moravia + Plato against Fascism<sup>1</sup>.**

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To Inmaculada Sánchez

**Abstract:**

Why Bernardo Bertolucci, when adapting as a film Alberto Moravia's novel *Il conformista*, introduced into its homonymous *The Conformist* the Platonic image of the cave? The article is to give an answer to this question by analysing Moravia's work in search of "cave images", which would justify Bertolucci's decision.

**Key words:**

Alberto Moravia, Bernardo Bertolucci, *Il conformista*, *The Conformist*, Plato's cave, fascism, classical tradition

*The conformist* (1970)<sup>3</sup>, the cinematic adaptation by Bernardo Bertolucci of the homonymous novel by Alberto Moravia, *Il conformista* (1951), introduces a highly significant element that does not appear in the Italian author's original text: the reference to the Platonic image of the cave, that is, to the prisoners referred to in the first chapters of book VII of Plato's *Republic*. The plot of the novel reveals that the protagonist, Marcello Clerici (Jean-Louis Trintignant), a man with a tortured psyche as a result of childhood traumas that he has never overcome, has always wanted to become a normal citizen. His country, Italy, is passing through one of the darkest periods of its history, the so called *Ventennio Fascista* (1922-1945) and, far from joining the Resistance, Clerici opts for resigning himself to the political situation and joining the *OVRA* (*Opera Volontaria Repressione Antifascismo*). By identifying himself with the ruling Fascism, he eventually attains the normality of the masses. His soon receives his first, very macabre, mission: taking advantage of his honeymoon in Paris and his relationship as a former pupil, he must ask to be received by Professor Quadri (Enzo Tarascio), a distinguished member of the Italian anti-Fascism political exile community. His assignment is very simple: he must get on close terms with his former professor, get to know his movements and pass on the necessary information to other agents of the regime so that they can assassinate the academic. However, the following passage ensues:

Professor Quadri: 'It's very curious, Clerici. You come all this way only to see me?' Marcello: 'Remember, professor. As soon as you used to enter the classroom, you shut the windows. You couldn't stand all that light and noise. Later I understood why you used to do that. All these years, you know what

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<sup>3</sup> Director: Bernardo Bertolucci. Writers: Alberto Moravia (source material from novel); Bernardo Bertolucci (screenplay). Producers: Giovanni Bertolucci; Maurizio Lodi-Fe. Camera, Film & Tape: Vittorio Storaro; Enrico Umetelli. Editor: Franco Arcalli. Music: Georges Delerue.

remained most firmly imprinted on my memory? Your voice: “Imagine a great dungeon in the shape of a cave. Inside men who’ve lived there since childhood all chained and forced to face back of the cave. Behind them, far away, a light of fire flickers. Between the fire and the prisoners, imagine a low wall, similar to that little stage on which a puppeteer shows his puppets”. That was November 28’. Q: ‘Yes, I remember’. M: “And try to imagine some other men passing behind that little wall bearing statues made of wood and stone. The statues are higher than the wall”. Q: ‘You could not have brought me from Rome a better gift than these memories, Clerici: the enchanted prisoners of Plato’. M: “And how do they resemble us?” Q: ‘And what do they see, the prisoners?’ M: ‘What do they see?’ Q: ‘You, who come from Italy, should know from experience’. M: ‘They see only the shadows that fire makes on the back of the cave that faces them’<sup>4</sup>. Q: ‘Shadows, the reflections of things like what’s happening to you people in Italy’. M: ‘Say those prisoners were at liberty and could speak up. Mightn’t they call the shadows they see reality, not visioned?’ Q: ‘Yes, yes. Correct. They would mistake for reality the shadows of reality. Ah! The myth of the great cave!’<sup>5</sup> That was the graduate thesis you proposed to do for me? Did you finish it afterwards?’ M: ‘You departed. I used a different theme’. Q: ‘I’m truly sorry, Clerici. I had so much faith in you, in all of you’. M: ‘No, I don’t believe it. If that were true, you’d never have left Rome’<sup>6</sup>.

Bertolucci’s aim is quite clear<sup>7</sup>: the Platonic image of the cave, as represented on screen, will help the audience to imagine a whole country, Italy, in a cave, that is to say,

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<sup>4</sup> Compare it with Plato. *Republic* 514a-515b: ‘Next’, said I, ‘compare (ἀπέικασον) our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this. Picture (ἰδὲ) men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them (ὄρα)... Picture (ἰδὲ) further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets’. ‘All that I see’, he said. ‘See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent’. ‘A strange image you speak of’, he said, ‘and strange prisoners’. ‘Like to us’, I said; for, to begin with, tell me do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows (τὰς σκιάς) cast from the fire on the wall (προσπιπτούσας) of the cave that fronted them?’ ‘How could they’, he said, ‘if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life?’ -translated by Paul Shorey, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> I strictly follow the Platonic terminology, but it is worth remembering that “Myth, fable, simile, allegory, etc.” are some of the terms with which Plato has been “corrected”. Martin Heidegger (1988, p. 18) says, for instance: “Wir sprechen von einem ‘Gleichnis’, sagen auch ‘Sinn-Bild’. Das heisst: ein sichtbarer Anblick, so freilich, dass das Erblickte allsogleich ein Winkendes ist. Der Anblick will nicht und nie für sich allein stehen; er gibt einem Wink: dahin, dass es etwas und was es bei diesem Anblick und durch diesen Anblick zu verstehen gibt. Der Anblick winkt, - er lenkt in ein zu Verstehendes, d. h. in den Bereich von Verstehbarkeit (die Dimension, innerhalb deren verstanden wird): in einen Sinn (daher Sinn-Bild)”. Needless to say, interpreting a text by Heidegger is always risky. I do not dare maintain whether “Gleichnis” means here “allegory” or not. Ted Sadler (2002) renders it as “allegory” in his translation: “We speak of an ‘allegory’, also of ‘sensory image’ (Sinn-Bild), of a sort that provides a hint or clue...”. In any case, it is worth bearing in mind once again that Plato says simply “this image... we must apply...”. Therefore, it deals with a *προσαπτεία εικῶν* that Plato does not seem to consider a *ὑπόνοια*, the Platonic term for *ἀλληγορία*.

<sup>6</sup> *The Conformist*. Produced by Titan Productions, Inc. Edited by Film-Rite, Inc. Paramount. A Gulf + Western Company. All the quotations of the film will correspond to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> On Bertolucci, his films and *The Conformist*, see for example: Baroni, M., 2007; Carabba, C., 2003; Gerard, F. S., 2000; Campani, E., 1998; Tonetti, C., 1995; Campari, R., 1994; Klein, J. T., 1994; Aprà,

as a prisoner of the fascist dictatorship. Italy has mistaken the intellectual and spiritual darkness of its totalitarian regime with the true Light<sup>8</sup>. Freedom of thought has been banished and the citizens have become the subjects of both a single Truth and of the dictator who proclaims it: Benito Mussolini. A friend of Marcello, Italo Montanari (Jose Quaglio), an ideologist of the regime, even describes Italy and Germany as “two strongholds of light in the course of centuries”. He likes to refer to “*the Prussian aspect of Benito Mussolini and the Latin aspect of Adolf Hitler*”, and maintains openly that these two great nations have given the world two revolutions: “*the anti-parliamentarian and the anti-democratic*”. Millions of Italians were seduced by these flattering words, and they were also indolent enough, spiritually and mentally, not to realize that, as Plato said regarding his prisoners, they were seeing only shadows, mere simulacra of greatness and pride, whereas the reality of Justice belongs to another realm without limits or walls in which the true Light does not know any obstacle of a political or military sort.

Nevertheless, despite its effective use in the film script, the Platonic image does not appear in the novel, so that we should ask ourselves whether its inclusion into the film is a mere caprice of an ingenious screen-writer and director or the consequence of a very good knowledge of Moravia’s works and, particularly, the consequence of a Platonic reading of *Il conformista* (*The Conformist*), in my opinion a sage possibility at least with regard to some of its most outstanding passages<sup>9</sup>.

Professor Quadri recognized in Clerici’s words –which a long time before were also his own- “the myth of the great cave”, and one of the protagonists of *Il disprezzo* (*Contempt*) professes his thesis on the appropriateness of turning Ulysses’ adventures into a “psychological film”:

*‘All the Greek myths depict human dramas –dramas without time or place, eternal... are figurative allegories of human life... what ought we moderns to do in order to resuscitate such ancient and obscure myths?... to discover the significance which they can have for us of the modern world, and then to fathom that significance as deeply as we can, to interpret it, to illustrate it... but in a live, independent way... the Greek myths must be interpreted in a modern manner, according to the latest psychological discoveries... We’ve now got... to do with the Odyssey... that is, open it, as a body is opened up on the dissecting*

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A., 1993; Donovan, F., 1990; O’Healy, A., 1988; Bertolucci, B., 1987; Kolker, R. P., 1985; Wagstaff, C., 1983 and 1982; Klein, J. T., 1981; Caseti, F., 1978; Goldin, F. 1971; Vogel, A., 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Although the reason for any historical review, according to Bertolucci, must be to speak about the present: “... *quando si parla del passato si sta parlando soprattutto del presente... quando giravo Il conformista pensavo all’Italia che mi circondava, l’Italia del 69-70... Cerco di non dimenticare mai che i film sul passato, se non hanno un forte condone ombelicale con il presente, finiscono per essere delle più o meno riuscite illustrazioni d’epoca*” (Carabba, C. 2003) p. 13 (“... every time we speak about the past, we speak above all about the present... when I shot *Il conformista* I was thinking of the Italy that surrounded me, Italy in 69-70... I try ever to forget that films about the past, if they lack a strong umbilical cord linking them to the present become the most or least successful depiction of a historical period” –the translation is mine).

<sup>9</sup> On the role played by the Platonic cave in *The Conformist* by Bertolucci, see for example: Kolker (1985): “... *a consistent literary / philosophical referent that structures the entire work... Plato’s myth of the cave... this is a film about lives in the shadows, about shadows that seek other shadows... But if Clerici is the most unseeing character in this fiction, the one most given to hiding in the dark of his bad conscience, none of the other characters is permitted full entry into the light. Quadri would seem to be Clerici’s opposite, the man of the left, of conscience, fighting for the anti-fascist cause. But his comfort in Paris is at the expense of comrades imprisoned in Italy*” (pp. 96-100).

table, examine its internal mechanism, take it to pieces and then put it together again according to our modern requirements’<sup>10</sup>.

. ‘Tutti i miti greci adombrano drammi umani senza tempo né luogo, eterni... sono allegorie figurate della vita humana... cosa dobbiamo fare noialtri moderni per risuscitare questi miti così antichi e così oscuri? Prima di tutto trovare il significato che possono avere per noi, uomini moderni, e poi approfondire questo significato, interpretarlo, illustrarlo ma in maniera viva, autonoma... Noi dobbiamo... fare con l’Odissea... aprirla, come si apre un corpo sul tavolo anatomico, esaminare il meccanismo interno, smontarlo e poi rimontarlo di nuovo secondo le nostre esigenze moderne’<sup>11</sup>.

We see in the film that with respect Plato’s cave, Bertolucci does not opt for an aggressive dissection but limits himself to taking advantage of the attribute with which the Athenian philosopher endowed it: its applicability<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, as adapted by the Italian director, the image is not only a call to a journey of initiation of an ideal or “ideocentric” sort but also a reminder of a more immediate and earthly duty, namely, to abandon the golden cave of conformism, especially when “conformism” means not to disdain but to embrace that political and ethical degradation peculiar to Fascism. There is no need, then, to dissect the Platonic image, although Bertolucci, like Moravia, calls for the right not to be overwhelmed by the prestige of the Classical Tradition and by the loyalty that it seems to demand. At any rate, Moravia’s texts are full of cave images and images of self-imprisonment, intended to awaken our conscience and to help our minds to discover the real temptation or risk of accepting unworthy obligations or living in an unacceptable conformism<sup>13</sup>.

In one of his essays, *Extremism and Literature (Estremismo e letteratura)*<sup>14</sup>, Moravia writes about the “obligation in literature”<sup>15</sup> (“compromesso nella letteratura” -73) and takes the Victorian obligation as the most illustrative example, since it meant the adoption of limits of both formal and content, imposed on Art by the bourgeois industrial society of Nineteenth-Century England. Furthermore, this obligation was accepted freely without state intervention, that is, it was self-imposed; thus, the most important ideas were not stated in order to please a wider range of readers. “Writers who surrender to obligation feel the guardian angel of Fascism tugging on their sleeve” (“Lo scrittore dedito al compromesso si sente tirar la manica dall’angelo custode del conformismo” -75), and thus surrendering not to that moderation or prudence which is peculiar to any work of art but to the prudence which is the result of aesthetic and moral prejudices and makes the artist a prisoner. “Writers must be extreme... But obligation

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<sup>10</sup> Moravia, Alberto, 1999, pp. 138-39; translated by Angus Davidson.

<sup>11</sup> Moravia, Alberto, 1965, pp. 390-91.

<sup>12</sup> Plato. *Republic* 517a-517d: ‘This image (εἰκόνα) then, dear Glaucon, we must apply (προσαπτέον) as a whole to all that has been said likening the region revealed through sight to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear... is likely if in this point too the likeness of our image (εἰκόνα) holds’ –translated by Paul Shorey.

<sup>13</sup> On Moravia and his work, see for example: Mascaretti, V., 2006; Bruno, B., 2003; Stella, M. J., 2000; Paris, R., 2001; Voza, P., 1997; Peterson, T. E., 1996; Capozzi, R., 1993; Gervasutti, L., 1993; Kozma, J. M., 1993; Di Bartolomei, S., 1990; Elkann, A., 1990; Rando, G., 1989; Pandini, G., 1981; Esposito, R., 1978; Sanguineti, E., 1977; Vitter, C., 1973; Ross, J., 1972.

<sup>14</sup> Moravia, A. *L’uomo come fine e altri saggi*. Milano: Bompiani, 1964. All the quotations correspond to this edition and the numbers between brackets refer to it.

<sup>15</sup> From now on, the translations into English are mine until the point where I begin to analyze *The conformist*.

reduces the value of their works and takes them down into the geologic depths of literature among documents, curiosities and other similar fossils” (“Allo scrittore incombe il dovere di essere estremo... Ma il compromesso fa scendere ed adagiare l’opera nei fondi geologici della letteratura tra i documenti, le curiosità e altri simili fossili” –pp. 75-77). This last image goes beyond the difficulty of breathing in a cave, conveying a sense of fatal asphyxia caused by the metaphoric weight of several geologic strata, which so overwhelm both the artist and his / or her work that they become fossilized.

In *Lack of masters (Assenza di maestri -1946)*<sup>16</sup>, Moravia approaches the terrible consequences of receiving a single message from the police and the ministry of popular culture, a mixture of “nationalism, futurism and anti-reformist conformism” (“nazionalismo, futurismo e conformismo controriformistico” -81), a message sent in this case by a single master: Mussolini. The identity of the cave and the geologic depths become now too obvious: Italy during the *ventennio* and even later. Moravia focuses on the prisoners and replies those who dare maintain that young people and society in general need neither masters nor messages. Democracy does not want sclerotic minds – or cave-dwelling ones, so to speak- but minds used to the intellectual exercise of choosing after having received, free from restrictions, multiple messages and lessons coming from multiple masters.

With *Man as purpose (L’uomo come fine -1956)* we face an evident paradox. We are looking for “cave images” in Moravia’s works thinking of Quadri’s and Clerici’s discourse on the Platonic image, which Bertolucci *motu proprio* introduces into the cinematic adaptation of *Il conformista*. Well then, Moravia now takes advantage of the wisdom of the Greek Sophists, who were severely criticized by Socrates-Plato in Plato’s dialogues. The recovery of a centuries-old idea, that is, Protagoras’ “Man is the measure of all things”, is now presented as the antidote to the mental poison that consider human beings as a means and not as a purpose. Moravia mistrusts reason because it is quantitative and tyrannical, and therefore does not know what a human being is, whereas it knows very well, in turn, what one hundred, one thousand or one million human beings are: “... reason will not find any objection, from an abstract and absolute point of view, to the fact that a political minority be exterminated” (“que una minoranza politica venga sterminata dalla maggioranza... la ragione non troverà nulla de obietare in sede del tutto astratta e assoluta” -113)<sup>17</sup>. Times have changed and from considering themselves as a purpose, a fact that distinguished them from animals, human beings have passed to considering themselves as a means, but “... contemplation or wisdom will appear... nor any new concept of man until our world is once again reduced to the measure of man” (“... nessuna contemplazione o saggezza... nessun nuovo concetto dell’uomo si formeranno se prima il mondo non sarà ridotto una volta di più alla misura dell’uomo” -148)<sup>18</sup>. And it is now that Moravia reveals a wide range of “cave images” -or oppressive images-, so that, if Bertolucci were accused of not respecting the accuracy of the original text, he would now be immediately absolved.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem* note 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem* note 13.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Aristotle. *Metaphysics* 11, 6, 1062 b 13: “Protagoras said that man is the measure of all things (πάντων εἶναι χρημάτων μέτρον ἀνθρώπων), by which he meant simply that each individual’s impressions are positively true. But if this is so, it follows that the same thing is and is not, and is bad and good, and that all the other implications of opposite statements are true; because often a given thing seems beautiful to one set of people and ugly to another, and that which seems to each individual is the measure (μέτρον δ’ εἶναι τὸ φαινόμενον ἑκάστῳ)” -translated by Hugh Tredennick, 1972.

Indeed, in Moravia's opinion the world resembles "*Chinese boxes*" ("*scatole cinesi*" –p. 116), in which each box contains a smaller one, which in turn contains an even smaller one, which in turn contains yet a smaller one... The modern world is "*a general nightmare... which contains other smaller ones, more and more restricted, until each man gets the feeling of being himself a nightmare*" ("*... l'incubo generale... ne contiene degli altri minori, sempre piú ristretti, finché si giunge al risultato ultimo che ogni singolo uomo risente se stesso come un incubo*" –pp.116-17). The modern state, whose purpose is the State Itself is a nightmare, so enormous that man does not realise this fact, "*as an ant probably does not realise that the tree on which she walks is a tree*" ("*come probabilmente una formica no si rende conto che l'albero sul quale sta camminando è un albero*" -117).

The different Churches pursue only their own preservation and for them man has also become merely a means to an end. This state of prostration of mankind, this problem, has to be solved outside of the "*vicious circles*" ("*cerchi viziosi*" -124) where it resides. Day after day "*the anxious feeling of labyrinth without exit peculiar to the modern world*" ("*il senso angoscioso di labirinto senza uscita che è proprio al mondo moderno*" –p.125) intensifies.

Moravia also asks himself what is the difference between the beehive and the ant-hill on one hand and the modern State on the other, and does not hesitate to answer that "*in the beehive and in the ant-hill, like in the modern State, bees, ants and men are the means... and the purpose is the beehive, the ant-hill, the State*" ("*nel formicaio come nello Stato moderno, formiche, api e uomini sono mezzi... e il fine è invece... il formicaio e lo Stato*" –pp.125-26). However, from his point of view the most terrible thing is that there is no difference between the young man raised by his family and the State, and sent to fight and die, "*and the worker ant, the worker bee, the fighting cock or the bull in the bullring*" ("*e la formica soldato, l'ape soldato oppure il gallo da combattimento o il toro da corrida*" –p.126). Everything: politics, money, propaganda and thousands of means of coercion, "*is used unscrupulously against this residue of man used as a means in order to destroy him, to minimize him, to strangulate him, to annihilate him*" ("*vengono adoperati senza scrupoli contro questo residuo dell'uomo adoperato come mezzo, per distruggerlo, minimizarlo, soffocarlo, annientarlo*" – p.132).

In *The Conformist* Moravia insists on the sad nature –why not call it the "cavernous nature"?- of men and women who too often imprison themselves in the darkness of ideologies that annihilate their dignity. First, one might think that Moravia pays excessive homage to a Freudian and almost Calvinist determinism, but, leaving aside any sort of criticism, the result is the literary design of a man too conditioned to demolish either the walls he runs or the walls he builds himself. Indeed, he was "*different*"<sup>19</sup> (p. 6) ("*diverso*"-p.10)<sup>20</sup> from other boys of his age and "*he was, in some fatal and mysterious way, predestined to commit acts of cruelty and death*" (p. 17) ("*in un modo misterioso e fatale, era predestinato a compiere atti di crudeltà e di morte*"-p.19). The cook saw it very clearly: "*Who's wicked to beasts is wicked to Christians, too... It starts with a cat and he ends up killing a man*" (p. 25) ("*Chi è cattivo con le bestie, è anche cattivo con i cristiani... si comincia con un gatto e poi si ammazza un uomo*"-p. 27). On the other hand, taking into account that he had studied at home because of an illness, he had saved himself those unpleasant aspects of the school that

<sup>19</sup> Alberto Moravia. *The Conformist. A Novel*, 1999 -translated into English by Tami Calliope (all the quotations in English will correspond to this edition and the numbers between brackets refer to it).

<sup>20</sup> Moravia, Alberto, *Il conformista*, 1998 (all the quotations in Italian will correspond to this edition and the numbers between brackets refer to it).

make it seem “*like a prison*” (p. 29) (“*prigione*”-p. 30), but, during his first year at a state school, he finds out that “*he liked to wake up to the alarm clock in the morning*” (p. 29) (“*alzarsi a tempo di orologio*”-p. 30). He is seduced by this normality that does not depend on personal preferences and the natural inclinations of the spirit but is rather “*preestablished, impartial, indifferent to individual tastes, limited and supported by indisputable rules all directed toward a single end*” (p. 30) (“*bensì prestabilita, imparziale, indifferente ai gusti individuali, limitata e sorretta da regole indiscutibilie e tutte rivolte ad un fine unico*”-p. 30).

When, as an adult, he enters the ministry in order to offer his services to the Fascist State, he feels “*almost glad to be waiting like the others, among the others*” (p. 74) (“*quasi contento di attendere come gli altri*”-p. 71); he even discovers that “*its order and etiquette pleased him, seemed to him to be signs of a vaster and more generalized order and etiquette*” (p. 74) (“*quell’ordine e quell’etichetta gli piacevano, come indizi di un ordine e di un’etichetta più vasti e più generali*”-p. 71).

His marriage to Giulia, a young girl like many others, was “*one more link*” (“*anello*”) “*in the chain of normality with which he sought to anchor himself in the treacherous sands of life*” (p. 94) (“*nella catena di normalità con la quale egli cercava di ancorarsi nelle sabbie infide della vita*”-p. 89). Following Giulia’s advice he accepts going to confession and taking Communion, although he does not believe in God and has no religion. He even opts for a complete confession “*almost hoping that through confession he might change his own destiny, but at least conform to it more fully*” (p. 110) (“*quasi sperando... se non di cambiare il proprio destino, per lo meno di conformarsi una volta di più in esso*”-p. 103). He likes churches as “*points of security in a fluctuating world*” (p. 111) (“*come punti sicuri in un mondo fluttuante*”-p. 103), discovering in them that “*they had given massive, splendid expression to what he was seeking: an order, a standard, a rule*” (p. 111) (“*espressione massiccia e splendida ciò che egli cercava: un ordine, una norma, una regola*”-p. 103). Marcello is, then, like a copy that has been made with the help of a mould of a normal man: “*I have been a man like all other men... I have loved, I have joined myself to a woman and generated another man*” (p.166) (“*sono stato un uomo simile a tutti gli altri uomini... ho amato, mi sono congiunto ad una donna e ho generato un altro uomo*”-p. 152).

Nowadays, designing a tortured psychology like Marcello’s, hypercharacterizing it with the supposed physical and psychological features of a man who is both effeminate and homosexual is fortunately considered be a false, stereotypical characterization and, politically speaking, improper<sup>21</sup>. I mention this because, in addition to revealing that “*he had inherited from his mother a perfection of features that was almost precious*” (p. 31) (“*aveva ereditato da sua madre una perfezione di tratti quasi leziosa*”-p. 31), thus emphasizing the smoothness and beauty of his face and his “*characteristics so very feminine*” (p. 31) (“*caratteri... femminili*”-p. 31) which make him “*a girl dressed in boy’s clothes*” (p. 31) (“*una bambina vestita da maschio*”-p. 31), when the chauffeur, Lino (Pierre Clémenti), tries to abuse him sexually after tempting him with what he most desires, a pistol, Moravia chooses to underline his submissiveness, since “*he was glad, actually, to be constrained by violence to enter the car*” (p. 58) (“*contento, in fondo, di esser stato costretto con la violenza a salire nella macchina*”-p. 55). Later on, when Lino wants to force him by setting him on the bed, this very child, who on another occasion with his father’s pistol in his hands experienced “*a thrill of*

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<sup>21</sup> However, it has been suggested that it was Bertolucci and not Moravia who turns *Il conformista* into a tragic novel in which Destiny or Fate play a significant role, in a sociological or Freudian drama where Destiny gives protagonism to the Subconscious; see for example: Gerard (2000) 60-72 o Riambau (2000) 65.

connection, as if his hand had finally found a natural extension in the grip of the gun” (p. 4) (“*un brivido di comunicazione, come se la sua mano avesse finalmente trovato un naturale prolungamento nell’impugnatura dell’arma*”-p. 8), points the pistol at him and shoots while the also tortured corrupter begs him to do it shouting: ‘*Shoot, Marcello... kill me... yes, kill me like a dog!*’ (p. 61) (‘*Spara, Marcello... ammazzami... sì, ammazzami come un cane*’-p. 58). Nevertheless, the novelist wants Marcello to be submissive even when he grows up or, as we read, when many years later an old man tries to seduce him in Paris, and he discovers with stupor that he felt “*a sensation of subjection steeped in memory, as of someone who, having been subjected once already in the past to a dark temptation, is caught by surprise many years later in the same trap and can find no reason to resist*” (p. 228) (“*la memore soggezione di chi, avendo soggiaciuto già una volta in passato ad una oscura tentazione... dopo molti anni... non trovi ragione di resistervi*”-p. 207). He once again takes his pistol and gets rid of his attacker without shooting but not before the old man asserts his assumption: ‘*I thought you wanted to be kidnapped... You’re all like that, you want to be forced*’ (p. 230) (‘*avevo creduto che... voleste farvi rapire... siete tutti così, avete bisogno che vi si usi violenza*’-p. 209).

In any case, the novelist possesses more resources than those which are politically incorrect to elaborate the complex literary design of a character who is a prisoner of his conformism. For instance, Marcello wants Franco to win the Spanish war simply “*for love of symmetry*” (p. 72) (“*amore di simmetria*”-p. 69). The cases of Italy and Germany, and the Ethiopian and Spanish wars permit him to share his faith with millions of comrades. He does not notice –or perhaps he does- that these comrades are prisoners like himself, but the unifying effect of the recent history satisfies him: “*He was one with the society... He was not a loner, abnormal, crazy, but one of them: a brother, a citizen, a comrade*” (p. 73) (“*Egli faceva tutta una cosa sola con la società... non era un solitario, un anormale, un pazzo, era uno di loro, un fratello, un cittadino, un camerata*”-p. 70).

The political uniformity also implies an intellectual uniformity and, in order to show this, Moravia opts for hyperbole, that is, underlining the morbid mental state of a whole country which became alienated and subsequently confined to the most suitable cavern or prison: an asylum. His father resides there, but his doctor sees quite clearly that “*as far as Il Duce is concerned, we’re all as crazy as your husband, isn’t that right, Signora? All crazy as loons, we should be treated with the cold shower and the straightjacket... All Italy is just one big insane asylum*”(p. 144) (‘*per quanto riguarda il duce, siamo tutti pazzi come vostro marito, nevero signora, tutti pazzi da legare da trattare con la docia e la camicia di forza... tutta l’Italia non è che un solo manicomio*’-p. 132). On one occasion agent Orlando said to Marcello: ‘*Anything for the family and homeland, Dottore*’ (p. 124) (‘*... tutto per la famiglia e per la patria, signor dottore*’-p. 115), and he knows that, whatever may happen, Marcello will not hang himself like Judas, because he will always be in a position to say that he obeyed or, in other words, that in his case there were not “*thirty gold coins. Only service*” (p. 174) (“*non riceveva... trenta denari. Soltanto il servizio*”-p. 178). His personal position is certainly sad but an “*extremely right morality*” had informed his conduct (p. 77) (“*moralismo assai rigido*”-p. 73), Giulia maintains that he is “*too austere*” (p. 255) (“*troppo austero*”-p. 230), and his mother has always observed that his husband and her son do not want to “*enjoy life and you don’t want anyone else to enjoy it, either*” (p. 134) (“*non vorreste che gli altri si divertissero*”-p. 123).

Therefore, Marcello Clerici is as bound as the prisoners in the Platonic cave although, when he was informed that his mission has resulted practically nothing,



unlike them, he could hardly look straight ahead and he “lowered his head” (“*abbassò il capo*”) with a sense of “resignation, as if confronting an ever more thankless, yet unalterable and inevitable duty” (p. 174) (“ *rassegazione testarda e malinconica, come di fronte ad un dovere*”-p. 159). He accepts this with the discipline of a subordinate man, just as in a brothel the same sense of discipline leads his subordinate to say: ‘*Dottore, if you wish, if this one pleases you... I can always wait*’ (p. 160) (“*Dottore se lei vuole, se questa le piace... io posso anche aspettare*” -p. 162).

His conformism and inability to react now becomes unjustifiable if one bears in mind that he is perspicacious enough to perceive even the misery of other submissions, certainly noble but blind, like those of the young men recruited by professor Quadri: “... pushing them into enterprises that were daring, dangerous, and almost always disastrous... he sacrificed his disciples with nonchalance in desperate actions” (p. 184) (“... riusciva... a spingerli a imprese ardite, pericolose e quasi sempre disastrose... anzi li sacrificava con disinvoltura in azioni disperate”-p. 168). Quadri was not a daring man and he showed “a cruel indifference to human life” (p. 165) (“una crudele indifferenza per la vita humana”-p. 168), pushing his followers to take fatal risks while “he never exposed himself personally” (p. 165) (“mai si esponeva personalmente”-p. 169). On the contrary, Lina Quadri, his wife (Dominique Sanda), as the agent Orlando points out:

*‘... shouldn’t have died... but she threw herself onto her husband to protect him and took two slugs for him. He ran away into the woods where that barbarian Cirrincione reached him. She was still alive and I had to give her the coup de grace... that woman was braver than a lot of men’* (p. 283)<sup>22</sup>.

*‘... non doveva morire... ma si gettò davanti al marito, per proteggerlo e prese per lui due colpi di rivoltella... lui scappò nel bosco dove lo raggiunse... quel barbaio di cirrincione... lei viveva ancora e io, poi, fui costretto a darle il colpo di grazia... una dona coraggiosa più di tanti uomini’* (pp. 252-53).

And it is precisely this woman who will make us verify the Platonic temper of our protagonist. She desires him and Marcello “saw that dark, decisive flame had leapt up in her eyes” (p. 217) (“nei suoi occhi si era accesa una fiamma torbida e decisa”-p. 197), but Marcello abandons the concrete space and time of the physical world in order to put her in an ideal or metaphysical one, that is to say, after or beyond *phýsis*:

*“Marcello looked at her... he understood that he had loved her always, even before this day, even before he had felt her coming toward him, in the woman of S (p. 218)... desire was no more than the urgent, powerful help of nature to something that had existed before it and without it”* (p. 221).

*“la guardava... e capì di averla amata sempre, prima di quel giorno, anche prima di quando l’aveva presentita nella donna di S. (p. 197)... Il desiderio non era in realtà che l’aiuto decisivo e potente della natura a qualcosa che esisteva prima di essa e senza di essa”* (p. 200).

However, some events are still more significant:

*“He wanted to go back, in his memory, to the first time he had intuited her existence: to his visit to the brothel at S. ... He recalled that he had been struck*

<sup>22</sup> Bertolucci changes the roles in order to emphasize Marcello’s cowardice. Lina escapes into the wood and Marcello who, unlike the novel, sees the assassination, does nothing to save her.

*by the luminosity of her forehead... the purity he seemed to perceive there – mortified and profaned in the prostitute, triumphant in Lina. He now understood that only the radiant light emanating from Lina’s forehead could dissipate the disgust for decadence, corruption, and impurity that had burdened him all his life and which his marriage to Giulia had in no way mitigated... So naturally, spontaneously, by the strength of love alone, he would find through Lina the normality he had dreamt of for so long. But not the almost bureaucratic normality he had pursued all those years, but another, almost angelic kind of normality. And before this luminous and ethereal normality, the heavy harness of his political duties, his marriage to Giulia, and his dull, reasonable, ordered life revealed itself to be nothing but a cumbersome image he had adopted while he was waiting, all unaware, for a worthier destiny. Now he was liberated from all of that and he could rediscover himself” (pp. 223-24).*

*“Volle riandare con la memoria alla prima volta che aveva avvertito la sua esistenza: alla visita alla casa di tolleranza a S... Rammentò che era stato colpito dalla luminosità della fronte di lei... la purezza che gli era sembrato di intravedere mortificata e profanata nella prostituta e trionfante in Lina. Il ribrezzo della decadenza, della corruzione e dell’impurità che l’aveva perseguitato tutta la vita e che il suo matrimonio con Giulia non aveva mitigato, adesso comprendeva che soltanto la luce radiosa di cui era circondata la fronte di Lina, poteva dissiparlo... Così naturalmente, spontaneamente, per sola forza d’amore, egli ritrovava attraverso Lina la normalità tanto sognata. Ma non la normalità quasi burocratica che aveva perseguito per tutti quegli anni, bensì altra normalità di specie quasi angelica. Di fronte a questa normalità luminosa ed eterea, la pesante bardatura dei suoi impegni politici, del suo matrimonio con Giulia, della sua vita ragionevole e smorta di uomo d’ordine, si rivelava nient’altro che un simulacro ingombrante da lui adottato in inconsapevole attesa di un più degno destino. Ora egli se ne liberava e ritrovava se stesso attraverso gli stessi motivi che gliel’avevano fatto, suo malgrado adottare” (pp. 202-203).*

Here we learn about the positive feelings that Marcello has towards Lina Quadri and they are compared with the extremely negative ones aroused by the prostitute in the brothel where he received the precise orders referring his mission. The fact that Moravia chooses a brothel is so significant in itself as to not require any further comment. Bertolucci thinks that it is reasonable to make a reading of *The Conformist* based on Platonic notions. From the very beginning of his film he has shown Italian people as prisoners in a cave and, if we bear this in mind, we shall better understand the protagonist’s erotic response. Indeed, if Marcello is seen as abandoning the material world in order to attain the ideal one, we can then recognize that the demonic power of *éros* incarnated in Lina becomes essential. Before her appearance all was darkness: the bureaucratic normality that he had always desired, the heavy harness of his political duties, even the burden of his failed marriage, in short, a fading life that is the result of order and discipline considered as Absolute duties. Consequently, his life has been a series of shadows or simulacra –like those seen by Plato’s prisoners- of something worthier that is capable of generating enthusiasm and not resignation or conformism. Now –and tragically- he sees himself as a prisoner and eventually perceives the urge to become free. In other words –if we accept Bertolucci’s guidance and perhaps Moravia’s one-: he must leave the cave in order to be dazzled by Lina’s radiant and pure light, a

truly ethereal or uranic ascend –“almost angelic”, Moravia says- of a spirit burdened by the black –rather than dark- harness of Fascism.

Finally, Mussolini falls and it is time to become free. He might not attain freedom but this marvellous new condition will be undoubtedly within reach of new generations such as his daughter’s:

*“He would now consider a whole period of his life closed and buried, he thought, and start over from the beginning, on another level and in other ways... he was determined not to let the crime he had actually committed, his crime against Quadri, poison him with the torments of a futile search for purification and normality. Quadri was dead; and he would have liked to drop on top of that death, heavier than a tombstone, the definitive stone of complete and utter oblivion... He had voluntarily, stubbornly, stupidly bound himself in unworthy chains and to even more unworthy duties; and all this for the mirage of a normality that did not exist. But now these chains were broken, those duties dissolved, and he was free again and would know what to do with his freedom... Everything in his daughter’s life, he thought, should be spirited and inspired, graceful, light, limpid, fresh, and adventurous; everything in it should resemble a landscape that knows neither fog nor the close oppression of heat... Yes, he thought again, she must live in full freedom”* (pp. 319-21).

*“Si trattava, pensò, do considerare finito e sepolto tutto un periodo della sua vita e di ricominciare daccapo, su un piano e con mezzi diversi... era risoluto a non permettere che il delitto commesso davvero, quello di Quadri, lo avvelenasse con i tormenti di una vana ricerca di purificazione e di normalità. Quello che era stato era stato, Quadri era morto, e, più pesante di una pietra tombale, egli avrebbe calato su quella morte la lapide definitiva di un oblio completo... Egli si era costretto volontariamente, ostinatamente, stupidamente, dentro legami indegni e in impegni ancora più indegni; e tutto questo per il miraggio di una normalità che non esisteva; adesso questi legami erano spezzati, questi impegni dissolti, e lui tornava libero e avrebbe saputo fare uso della libertà... Tutto nella vita di sua figlia, pensò, avrebbe dovuto essere brio, estro, grazia, leggerezza, limpidezza, freschezza e avventura; tutto avrebbe dovuto rassomigliare ad un paesaggio che non conosce afe né caligini... Sì, pensò ancora, ella doveva vivere in piena libertà”* (pp. 286-88).

Marcello Clerici experienced a mirage, “*the normality this instinct had collided with was nothing but an empty form, within which all was abnormal and gratuitous*” (p. 291) (“*la normalità... non era che una forma vuota dentro la quale tutto era anormale e gratuito*”-p. 261), all was shadows or simulacra. Following the combined suggestions of Moravia and Bertolucci, we can easily foresee the inevitable obstinate response of the collaborationist: ‘*... I was only following orders.... All I did was do my duty, like a soldier*’ (p. 262) (‘*... ho fatto che eseguire gli ordini... non ho fatto che il mio dovere, come un soldato*’-pp. 268-69). In the end, we are asked to think of a cave which, unlike the Platonic one, has no way out and has been closed definitively after all sorts of remains including a crime and a vast degree of remorse on various counts have – metaphorically speaking- been thrown into it. Here is, then, a kind of geologic or sepulchral darkness that encloses an ethical darkness, in the naïve belief that, blocked in by the weight of a great tombstone, it will remain hidden and unseen right in the centre of his personality. Will he be free now? Probably not, because Marcello knows perfectly well that what remains in the human subconscious –into which he had already

tried to introduce the darkest events of his childhood although he did not succeed in this- will have its expression. Indeed, sooner or later he will have to be brave enough to opt for practicing a sort of psychological spelaeology -and not to escape- in order to discover with horror all the unworthy duties, bounds and limits that he shamefully pursued and that annihilated him as a person. The cave will not disappear but everything can be different for his daughter. Like the prisoner that Plato asks us to imagine going out, his daughter –and she will not need to be portrayed- will know the light and a wide range of antonyms of the weight of a life *in carcere et vinculis*: energy, inspiration, grace, lightness, freshness and adventure. The fog and the close oppression of heat belong to closed places whereas freedom loves open landscapes. Italy has emerged from the prison and Marcello hopes that at least his daughter will live in full freedom and this new experience will make her radiant and pure like Lina.

We could sum up as follows: obligation, self-criticism and adoption of formal and content limits in Victorian literature; geological depths where freedom becomes fossilized; lack of masters; uncontested message imposed by the police and the ministry of culture; man as a means and not as a purpose or measure; Chinese boxes and nightmares in order to reflect a world full of vicious circles and labyrinths with no exit; human beings who for the State are ants, bees, fighting cocks or bullfighting bulls; absolute rules preestablishing, limiting and directing human lives; enthusiasm for order, for becoming a link in a chain and for remaining within normality; massive churches suggesting order, norms and rules; submission; love of symmetry; a whole nation in a asylum; ‘anything for family and homeland’; service, obedience and duty; extremely right-wing morality; human lives turned into a simulacrum of what they could have been; tombstones to bury a shameful past; unworthy bounds and duties.

Bertolucci knew perfectly well what he was doing. His adaptation has succeeded in choosing the Platonic image of the cave in order to emphasize the oppression under Fascism<sup>23</sup>. Certainly he might be reminded that Plato seduced both Hitler and Mussolini, both Nazism and Fascism, but I am quite certain that he would answer that, in spite of being aware of this fact, in spite of knowing the darkest aspects of Plato’s ideology, philosophies in the end, like images, must be applied and, then, the ethics of the person doing it makes obviously the difference.

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<sup>23</sup> See e.g.: Katie Fleming: “Fascism”, chapter 23 in *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, edited by per Craig W. Kallendorf, 2007, and the bibliography in it on this theme.

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