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Italian Politics of Memory in *The Conformist* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

Historical novels and their cinematic adaptations often contribute to and reveal how people view their connection to the historical past. During the end of World War II, Italians responded to their complicity in the war by launching a failed revolution, seen as the “Second Risorgimento,” where they rebelled against Nazifascism. Through the historical novels *The Conformist* by Alberto Moravia and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* by Giorgio Bassani and their film adaptations by Bernardo Bertolucci (*The Conformist*, 1970) and Vittorio De Sica (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, 1970), different strategies are used to reveal the contribution to Italian politics of memory seen during the final years and aftermath of World War II. Some of the aesthetic strategies these novelists and directors use to portray this collective psyche of the Italian population include neorealism, postmodernist ambiguity, enargeia, and the contortion of memory. Each novelist/director uses these strategies contrastingly to reveal the intention of their film/novel and whether they choose to ultimately validate or confront Italian politics of memory.

The first example of an affirmation of the politics of memory within Italy is through Alberto Moravia's, *The Conformist*. The novel showcases a conflicted man, Marcello, who struggles throughout his life to conform to social standards and uses his integration into the Fascist hierarchy as a means of compliance. The beginning of the novel captures Marcello in his childhood where he has these same afflictions towards being perceived as “normal” as he does in his adult life. As he contemplates being sent away like other boys to boarding school, he thinks

“...even this thought, humiliating and almost repugnant, seemed pleasant in his present desperate aspiration toward any kind of order and normality (Moravia, *The Conformist*, 21).” Marcello’s internal dialogue represents a singular struggle of morality, which then becomes the root of his feelings of support towards fascism. This singularity isolates Marcello not only from the other characters, but from the general Italian society, making his experience with fascism un-universal and virtually uncontrollable. Moravia’s singularity of Marcello represents his intention as a historical imaginary rather than an effort to confront the Italian politics of memory.

This theme continues throughout Moravia’s *The Conformist* as he uses postmodernist ambiguity to separate the viewers from their fascist pasts. For example, one of the final scenes which becomes a turning point for Marcello after the fall of the Fascist regime comes when he realizes that Lino is still alive. This interaction shook the roots with which Marcello had built his Fascist ideology on, leading him to the conclusion that “this was what normality was– this breathless, futile desire to justify one’s own life, already stained by original sin...(Moravia, *The Conformist*, 314).” This exemplifies that because Marcello no longer believes he murdered Lino, which is what allowed him to justify the assassination of the Quadris, the ending of the novel is ,“the logical conclusion to a story of inexorable fate (Marcus, “Bertolucci’s *The Conformist*: A Moralists’ Cage”, 310).” The idea that Marcello’s fate is “inexorable”, or unable to prevent, is what contributes to the ignorance of Italian politics of memory. It relieves the notion of responsibility from Italians, making it seem as though the Fascist dictatorship and World War II were inevitable. Moravia’s use of postmodernist ambiguity allows Italians to be essentially removed from the narrative of fascism, allowing their politics of memory to be transformed into a position of passivity rather than taking responsibility for the actions which they may have been

complicit in. The cinematic adaptation of *The Conformist*, however, takes a different approach to addressing the Italian politics of memory during the end of World War II.

Bernardo Bertolucci's film adaptation of *The Conformist* uses aesthetic strategies in a contrasting manner to the novel in order to "force [Bertolucci's] viewers to confront their Fascist past and to rethink their relationship to it, [constituting] a plea for moral responsibility akin to the early neorealists (Marcus, "Bertolucci's *The Conformist*: A Moralist's Cage", 310)." The cinematic adaptation transforms, intersects, and borrows from the original text in order to show through a neorealist lens the consequences of the Fascist regime and the Italian peoples' complicity within it. *The Conformist* film is used as a counter-memory, as the film's point of reference in time is Marcello in a driving car (Bertolucci, *The Conformist*). The use of flashbacks and flashforwards within the film shows the ongoing transformation of history into memory. Because of this, Bertolucci focuses far more on the consequences of fascist actions and compliance than Moravia's original text does. For example, Bertolucci makes the active decision to have Marcello be present and witness the murder of the Quadris. The scene uses a neorealist lens to show the brutal effects of fascism as Lina is being attacked, a scene not described within the novel. The red painted on her face reveals the moment of enargeia where the vividness of the violent act forces the audience to confront the fascist history they have participated in. In addition, Bertolucci uses the reference to Plato's cave to further demonstrate the negative effects of fascism.

Bertolucci's decision to change certain aspects of the novel was, "not only purposeful, but essential to his moral adaptation of the Moravian text (Marcus, "Bertolucci's *The Conformist*: A Moralist's Cage", 312-313)." One of these key changes is replacing the idea of the Oedipus complex with the allegory of Plato's cave. The final scene within the film is one of the largest

changes Bertolucci made as he portrays a surrealist image of fire in the back of a cave, which is what casts the shadows the prisoners believe they are observing. The mise en scene of the portrayal of Plato's cave connects the ignorance of the prisoners to the politics of memory in Italy. Bertolucci uses surrealism and mise en scene to represent how, "Marcello has fulfilled the negative teachings of Plato's myth by choosing the shadows of Fascist compliance over the bright light of resistance (Marcus, "Bertolucci's *The Conformist*: A Moralist's Cage", 317)." This allusion to Marcello's decisions and consequences forces the audience to confront their own positions regarding fascism. Bertolucci uses his film to dismiss Moravia's idea that Marcello's fate was "inexorable" by using cinematic elements to show the cause and effect of his actions on the Fascist regime. Similarly to *The Conformist's* adaptation from novel to film, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* also represents the shift in Italian politics of memory surrounding the aftermath of the Fascist regime.

Giorgio Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is a historical novel which represents the experience of Italian Jews through the emergence of fascism to the outcome of the Holocaust. The main character, Giorgio, narrates his experience as a Jewish man in Ferrara during the late 1930's, while also alluding to his childhood in 1928 and the aftermath of the Holocaust in 1957. Giorgio's interactions with a Jewish aristocratic family, the Finzi-Continis, particularly the character Micol, reveal a larger story about Italian Jewish thought and behavior during the time period. Like in *The Conformist*, Bassani uses a memory framework that reflects on Jewish memory throughout the Fascist regime. An interaction between Giorgio and Micol reveals how the characters viewed their memory as ever-valuable and unconstructed. Giorgio exclaims that "Compared with memory, all possession, in itself, can only seem disappointing, banal, inadequate..." and says that him and Micol are the same as they are "proceeding always with

[their] heads turned back (Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, 186).” This emphasis on the importance of memory is used to display the passivity and denial that many Italian Jews held during the time. Bassani introduces the fate of the Finzi-Continis at the beginning of the novel rather than the end to highlight the “most extreme form of historical denial,” that takes place within the garden as they ignore the racial laws and political movements occurring around them (Marcus, “De Sica’s *Garden of Finzi Continis*”, 331). This technique allows for the audience to be aware of the characters’ deaths and acknowledge each moment that the family sits in passivity, essentially denying the hints towards their future. Akin to the memory framework used in both texts, Bassani, like Moravia, uses postmodernist ambiguity to alleviate the sense of guilt or shame that Italians may have experienced after World War II.

Bassani’s ambiguity is exemplified as he never explicitly shows the “Second Risorgimento” as a failed revolution. Instead, Bassani chooses to focus on the psychological process of the Italian Jews through the complex relationships between Giorgio, Micol, Malnate, Giorgio’s father, and others. There are many historical signs, as well as internal signs within the Finzi-Continis family, that reveal the severity of events occurring that are ignored throughout the novel. The historical signs include the Infornata del Decennale of 1933 which opened up Fascist Party membership to the population with Jewish enrollments reaching up to the ninetieth percentile, as well as racial laws being instituted that kept Italian Jews out of certain social spaces (Marcus, “De Sica’s *Garden of Finzi Continis*”, 331). The internal signs being ignored within the family are displayed through Alberto’s progressing sickness and Micol’s sexual promiscuity. These signs demonstrate how Bassani never has the characters truly address the political situation they are living in. Similarly, his conscious decision to only allude to Micol and Malnate’s affair rather than confirming it reflects Bassani’s lack of criticism of Italian politics of

memory, and his choice instead to be a self-critical historical imaginary. The cinematic adaptation of the novel directed by Vittorio De Sica, however, takes different strategies to acknowledge the Italian politics of memory present within the story.

De Sica uses elements within his film-making similar to Bertolucci, such as neorealism and enargeia to confront Italian politics of memory, despite the two films achieving different outcomes. De Sica made the purposeful decision to situate Micol's character into the archetype of the femme fatale in order to emphasize the denial of Italian Jewish people during the beginning of World War II. He portrays Micol's character as a sort of all-knowing being, who is privy to the fate of humankind but refuses to disclose any information. De Sica uses Micol's characterization to "[entice] the narrator into the garden of historical forgetfulness where, like the crusading knight, he sheds his armor and ignores the inevitable signs of impending doom (Marcus, "De Sica's *Garden of Finzi Contini*", 333)." This shows how Giorgio is blinded throughout the film by Micol's essence and beauty, causing him to remain ignorant about the historical effects of the Fascist regime. Giorgio is only able to finally return to historical consciousness when he witnesses Micol and Malnate together in bed at the end of the film. This moment is critical in the film because it establishes Giorgio's position as the voyeur, the onlooker, and Micol as the spectacle, the object of his gaze. Similarly, this is a key moment of difference between Bassani's original text and De Sica's interpretation which exemplifies De Sica's intention of criticizing the politics of memory within Italy.

De Sica chooses to include the moment where Giorgio finds Micol and Malnate in bed, rather than just alluding to it as Bassani does, in order to awake Giorgio from his passivity as he wishes to awake the Italian population to corrective social action. This is the moment of enargeia within the film as De Sica attempts to use a neorealist lens to expose Italian reality. The scene is

dramaticized as the audience can hear the sound of animals while the music turns on and off, creating a sense of reality. The silence is prolonged as Giorgio and Micol make prolonged eye contact, forcing the audience to focus on Giorgio's perspective through the window. This focused perspective ultimately undermines the intention of neorealism as it betrays all other aspects of the scene, showing the betrayal of the other 20 years of Italian fascist history. The small window into reality is unable to expose the true Italian reality, though De Sica does attempt to address the effects of the Holocaust and the Fascist regime. The cinematic adaptation and its slight changes to the plot ultimately reveal a critique of the politics of memory not found within the novel.

Overall, the intention of the two film adaptations, *The Conformist* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, demonstrate the objective of confronting the Italian politics of memory, representing the "Second Risorgimento" as a failed attempt at revolution. The original texts by Alberto Moravia and Giorgio Bassani demonstrate historical imaginaries who used postmodernist ambiguities to make no direct criticism of the politics of memory in Italy after the Second World War.

