

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Characters in Bertolucci's Films

## **MARCELLO** (in "the Conformist") Closed

**Marcello** Marcello is a dull man, a bureaucrat who rarely smiles and who is afraid to stand out from the crowd. He seeks anonymity in following social conventions and the prevailing political ideology. He lacks both courage and conviction, in all aspects of life, including his love life. His sexual desire for his wife is voyeuristic and his interest in Anna is momentary.

**Conformist** As announced in the film's title, Marcello is first and foremost a conformist. Or, more accurately, he strives to conform. This desperate desire is articulated by him in an early scene, when and his blind colleague Italo (a fascist) are working in a radio recording studio in Rome. As always, the scene is carefully composed, with a trio of women singing a light-hearted song just behind Marcello. We hear their bubbly voices as Marcello replies to Italo's question about what he expects to get from marriage. 'The impression of normality' is his concise answer. Italo laughs and Marcello elaborates. 'Yes. Stability. Security. When I get dressed in the morning and look in the mirror, I think I look different from everyone else.' These words are revealing. Marcello is interested in 'the impression' of normality, the reflection he sees in a mirror, the person that others will see. It is an exterior image that he wants to create, not caring about any inner reality, which might include some principles or a moral code. It is an important scene also because it is one of the few moments in the two-hour film in which Marcello laughs.

**Passive** As the previous paragraph suggests, Marcello is largely a hollow man, without any guiding core, which means that he reacts rather than acts. In a word, he is passive. As both a bureaucrat and an assassin, he receives instructions, he follows orders and he attempts to blend in. His passivity is illustrated to devastating effect in the final scenes, when both Qadri and Anna are murdered. Throughout the horrific slaughter of Qadri by knives, Marcello sits motionless in his car, some twenty or thirty metres away, and watches the assassination through a misty window. His expression is fixed, his eyes stare and his body stays rigid. Anna runs up to him and bangs on the window in panic, knowing that she will be the next victim. But he doesn't move a facial muscle. He watches as she runs away into the woods, where the assassins kill her. He had a gun and could have shot her himself. Manganiello, who sits in the driver's seat, later despises Marcello, calling him a coward. But even some cowards have convictions. Marcello, alas, has none.

**Serious** Marcello wears a stern expression through most of the film, whether riding in a car, talking with silly Guilia or confronting seductive Anna. His mother calls him a 'moralist,' but that label suggests a set of principles that he does not possess. Instead, we have a more penetrating description of him during the dinner at the Chinese restaurant with Guilia, Qadri and Anna. 'Tell me what he was like as a student,' a tipsy Guilia asks Qadri. 'He was serious. Too serious,' the professor says, with a little chuckle. Guilia comments that being serious is not a bad thing, but the professor explains that 'really serious people are never serious.' This barb hits the mark, hinting at the illusory exterior that Marcello projects. Anna asks if Guilia has ever seen her husband laugh, and she says, 'Only a couple of times. That's his nature.' Marcello is listening, with a silent scowl, as if to provide evidence of this assessment of his character.

**Sexuality** Marcello's sexuality is confused and conflicted. He was deeply affected by an experience as a young boy when he was seduced by an older man (the chauffeur), whom he thinks he killed with a gun. Marcello appears to have buried this disturbing event because it doesn't fit his self-image of normality. The power of that suppressed memory is released in the final scenes when he recognises the chauffeur on the street and denounces him as a homosexual and a murderer. Although he is not sexually attracted to Guilia (whom he considers 'mediocre' and 'petty'), he marries her because he wants to appear conventional by having a wife. At the same time, he is sexually attracted to Anna, the professor's wife, and yet is not passionate enough to carry on an affair with her.

**Seduction** The seduction scene by the chauffeur appears on screen as a visualisation of Marcello's

confession to a priest. 'I was thirteen,' he begins as we watch the chauffeur rescue young Marcello from the taunting of other boys. The handsome chauffeur, who is perhaps in his mid-twenties, drives him to a mansion. On the lawn outside, Marcello and he play a game of tag, each touching the other and running away. 'What did those boys want from you?' the chauffeur asks. 'Nothing,' Marcello says. The chauffeur lures Marcello into his room with the promise of showing him his pistol. Once upstairs, the chauffeur grabs Marcello by the neck and marches him into his room, where he throws him on the bed. The chauffeur sits on the bed and takes off his hat, revealing his long hair, which he shakes loose. Marcello goes to him and brushes his hair. The chauffeur draws him close and begins to kiss his bare leg, at which point Marcello grabs his pistol. 'Go on,' the chauffeur goads him, 'Shoot!' Marcello fires the gun several times at the walls and the chauffeur on the floor. He has hit the man (though not killed him, as we later discover). He puts the pistol into the chauffeur's hand, in order to suggest suicide, and flees.

Although Marcello wants to erase this experience from his memory and become 'normal' through heterosexual marriage, the scene itself reveals his normality. He is grateful to a man who has just rescued him from humiliation; he responds to the man's playfulness; he is excited by the reference to a gun; and he is intrigued by the secrecy of the small room at the back of the big house. What is more common than a young boy wanting to play games, discover secrets, brush the hair of a 'woman' and hold a real pistol? But Marcello knows that it was a homosexual encounter, which is why the scene ends in chaos and violence. When the chauffeur handles him roughly (grabbing the neck and throwing him on the bed), there is a marked change in Marcello. He is passive, possibly ashamed of what he senses is coming. When the gun is brandished, he reaches for it, like a little boy. And when the hair is shaken loose, he immediately wants to brush it. 'What did he want from you?' the priest in the confessional asks. 'I didn't understand,' Marcello answers. 'He was just like a woman.' Guilt is already heavy on his shoulders, so Marcello attempts to exonerate himself by placing the pistol in the man's hand. The salacious priest wants to hear more details about any 'carnal relations,' but Marcello says it's enough. He has lived with this disturbing memory for too many years.

*Verbal voyeur* A second significant sexual scene is also a confession, but this time by Guilia to Marcello, as the newlyweds travel by train to Paris for their honeymoon. Fearing the worst, Guilia admits that she is 'not a virgin.' Marcello receives this painful admission with indifference, saying, 'I married you because I love you not because you were a virgin.' Guilia is pleased that he has such 'a modern outlook' and proceeds to tell him more about her seduction by the family's lawyer, who was sixty. Now, Marcello is interested and begins to smile as she paints a picture of her seduction, detail by detail, which is re-enacted by Marcello in the train compartment. For instance, when Guilia describes how the lawyer grabbed her by the hair and unbuttoned her blouse, Marcello unbuttons her blouse and fondles her breasts. She responds and mentions that she was 'well-developed at fifteen.' 'Did you like it?' he asks and then undresses her before making love. This scene is the only one in which Marcello shows sexual desire toward his wife, the mediocre girl he married for sake of convention. It is telling that his passion is aroused vicariously, through her description of another man forcing himself on her. Again, Marcello is passive, a verbal voyeur, who responds to the sexual desire shown by a third party. Although his passion is real, he merely re-enacts the lawyer's seduction. He is a conformist.

*Sexual attraction* Marcello does show unmediated sexual desire toward Anna, the professor's wife. They meet when Marcello and Guilia go to the professor in his flat. Attractive, sexy Anna is cold toward Marcello, which piques his interest. When they find themselves alone together in a room, he cannot hide his desire. He says he has seen another woman recently with her eyes. She was a prostitute. They kissed but 'didn't finish it,' he says, provocatively. 'I was left with this great desire.' He walks up to Anna, grabs her and kisses her hard. She calls him a 'bastard,' but they end up on the bed, kissing while fully clothed. This could be seen as a display of ordinary sexuality, the life that Marcello craves. But it is, of course, illicit, and doubly so since both participants are married. Marcello is still searching for his normality.

The above scene is soon followed by another, when Marcello turns up at Anna's ballet school, where she is teaching in a revealing leotard. Unable to control his desire, he drags her into a room and reveals that he wants to run away with her. Her response is to denounce him as a fascist spy. But, then, she strips off her leotard to the waist and walks up to him. His response is to turn away and look out the window. When she asks him to hold her, he does. But when she asks him to protect her, he says, 'I don't know.'

Again, his 'normal' sexuality is thwarted by his political position. He is sexually attracted to Anna, but their political opposition prevents him from realising his desire. He cannot say that he will not 'hurt' her.