

- FINKEL, L. F. & SADJA, P. (1994). Constructing visual perception. *Amer. Scientist*, 82: 224-237.
- FRIED, I. ET AL. (1997). Single neuron activity in human hippocampus and amygdala during recognition of faces and objects. *Neuron*, 18: 753-765.
- GAZZANIGA, M. S. (ED.) (1995). *The Cognitive Neurosciences*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- GILBERT, C. D. (1995). Dynamic properties of adult visual cortex. In *The Cognitive Neurosciences*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 73-90.
- GRAY, C. M. & SINGER, W. (1989). Stimulus-specific neuronal oscillations in orientation columns of cat visual cortex. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA.*, 86: 1698-1702.
- GRAZIANO, M. S. ET AL. (1997). Coding the locations of objects in the dark. *Science*, 277: 239-241.
- KOSSLYN, S. M. & KOENIG, O. (1992). *Wet Mind: The New Cognitive Neuroscience*. New York: Free Press.
- & SUSSMAN, A. L. (1995). Roles of imagery in perception: or, there is no such thing as immaculate perception. In *The Cognitive Neurosciences*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 1035-1042.
- LE VAY, S. ET AL. (1975). The pattern of ocular dominance columns in macaque visual cortex revealed by a reduced silver stain. *J. Comp. Neurol.*, 159: 559-575.
- LEDoux, J. (1995). Emotion: clues from the brain. *Ann. Rev. Psychol.*, 46: 209-235.
- MORAN, J. & DESIMONE, R. (1985). Selective attention gates visual processing in the extrastriate cortex. *Science*, 229: 782-784.
- ORNSTEIN, R. (1991). *The Evolution of Consciousness*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- RAMACHANDRAN, V. S. & GREGORY, T. L. (1991). Perceptual filling in of artificially induced scotomas in human vision. *Nature*, 350: 699-702.
- RAO, S. C. ET AL. (1997). Integration of what and where in the primate prefrontal cortex. *Science*, 276: 821-824.
- RIZZOLATTI, O. ET AL. (1997). The space around us. *Science*, 277: 190-191.
- RUMEMHART, D. E. & MCCLELLAND, J. L. (EDS.) (1986). *Parallel Distributed Processing: Explorations in the Microstructure of Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- SHEPARD, R. H. & COOPER, L. A. (1982). *Mental Images and Their Transformations*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- SIEGEL, D. J. (1996). Cognition, memory and dissociation. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 5: 509-536.
- SINGER, W. (1995). Time as coding space in neocortical processing: a hypothesis. In *The Cognitive Neurosciences*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 91-104.
- VAN DER KOLK, B. A. (1993). Biological considerations about emotions, trauma, memory and the brain. In *Human Feelings: Explorations in Affect Development and Meaning*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, pp. 221-240.
- VAN ESSEN, D. C. & DE YOE, E. A. (1995). Concurrent processing in the primate visual cortex. In *The Cognitive Neurosciences*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 383-400.
- ZEKI, S. (1992). The visual image in mind and brain. *Scientific American*, 267 (September): 68-76.

Regina Pally
11980 San Vicente Blvd., Suite 810
Los Angeles
CA 90049

Copyright © Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London, 1997

Int. J. Psycho-Anal. (1997) 78, 1031

International Journal of Psycho-analysis vol 78 of 1997 pp 1031-1033.

FILM REVIEW ESSAY

HIDDEN IN THE IMAGERY: AN UNCONSCIOUS SCENE IN *THE CONFORMIST*

HERBERT H. STEIN, NEW YORK

The Conformist: 1970
Director B. Bertolucci
Paramount Home Video (1986)
555 Melrose Ave.
Hollywood, CA 90038

Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 film, *The Conformist*, is based on Alberto Moravia's novel about a young man, Marcello, in pre-war Italy, who volunteers his services to the Fascists, not out of ideology, but to blend in, disguising his perverse sado-masochistic tendencies by expressing them through a perverse cultural norm. Bertolucci has changed the focus of Moravia's plot by presenting most of the story through Marcello's reminiscences as he is driven towards the film's central scene, a particularly violent assassination. Marcello has helped set up the assassination of his former teacher, Luco Quadri, but now he is chasing after Quadri's car with the vague hope of saving Quadri's wife, Anna, who has unexpectedly joined him on the fatal trip. The car and Marcello's memories converge on the assassination, making it the intense focal point of the film.

Marcello's reminiscences are presented with the subtle distortions of subjective memory. Through them we share some of Marcello's own confusion about his motives. We see that he harbours anger towards his psychotic father and drug-addicted mother. We also learn that as a child he was the victim of an attempted seduction at the hands of a young

man, Lino, and ended up shooting his seducer, leaving him for dead. He marries a woman he does not love and falls in love with a woman he hardly knows. In its subjectivity and uncertainty the film is similar to an analytic hour. If we approach it that way, we can see that hidden in this tale of an abused and tortured man is another, shorter tale of a child and a primal scene fantasy. It is as if we could reconstruct an early screen memory that adds meaning to the current surface.

One clue to the unconscious in an analytic hour is the presence of repetitions. *The Conformist* can easily be seen to have continual repetitions of primal scene imagery, imagery relating to a child witnessing parental intercourse. Throughout the film, each scene contains some obvious elements of the primal scene while other elements are disguised or missing. As viewers, we never experience the primal scene directly, but are continually teased with fragmented primal scene imagery.

For instance, as the film opens Marcello receives a phone call in bed. He prepares to leave, taking a pistol, and covers his sleeping wife's exposed back and buttocks. Here we have important static visual elements of the primal scene—a man and woman in bed, the woman's exposed body, and the symbolic suggestion of the phallus. A few scenes later, Marcello parts a curtain in a government office to see a man beginning to make love

over a desktop to a sexually provocative woman. Now, the bed is disguised as a desktop and the nakedness as sexually provocative clothing while the sexual act and the voyeurism are explicit. The child is represented by the adult Marcello, but the visual distortion of this memory sequence makes him look smaller than the figures he is observing. In what will become a pattern, the two scenes contain separated elements of a single image, leaving it to the viewer to bring them together to construct his own preconscious gestalt, blending personal experience and needs with the film's suggestive imagery.

Adjoining scenes add resonance with images of sexual voyeurism. Marcello stares from a darkened radio booth at three attractive singers, describes his sexual embraces with his fiancée, Giulia, to his blind friend, Italo, and has his petting with Giulia interrupted first by her maid and then by her mother. The last of these scenes takes place in Giulia's sitting room, but the light and dark lines of light from the blinds blending with the black and white stripes on Giulia's dress could suggest a view through the slats of a crib.

There are also scenes, scattered throughout the film, that are linked by their repetitive focus on certain visual details. When Marcello peers at the couple through the curtain, the first thing we see is the woman's leg swinging over the side of the desk. In the same scene, the man seems not to see Marcello, but the woman turns to smile back at him. In the course of the film, the camera will focus several times on dangling bare legs and backward stares. There are also reprisals of the opening scene, for example when Marcello, visiting his mother in her bedroom, attempts to cover her partial nakedness and when Lino, the seducer, holding a pistol, undresses while the young Marcello lies on a bed beside him.

In an analytic hour, the repetition of detail can be interpreted as pointing to the presence of an unconscious screen memory (Arlow, 1980, 'The revenge motive in the pri-

mal scene'. *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.*, 28: 519-541). Using a little imagination, we can begin to construct some variation of the following 'screen memory' in *The Conformist*: A child peers up, perhaps through the bars of a crib, as a man undresses and approaches a woman in her bed. The man pulls back the sheet, exposing her nakedness. The child is beckoned and excited by the woman's backward glance at him and her bare leg hanging down.

That hidden 'memory' is further elaborated into a violent fantasy through the assassination and the scene that follows it. The primal scene is not a neutral act. Arlow (1980) has pointed out that it often engenders feelings of envy and desires for revenge from the child who is forced to be a passive observer. Marcello and Quadri capture that envy discussing Plato's parable of the cave in which men are chained to a wall and forced to look at images through a screen. This metaphor applies equally to the passive child forced to view parental sex and the film's audience seated in a theatre, looking up at images on a screen it can never enter. The viewer of *The Conformist*, who is subtly, but repeatedly presented with primal scene imagery, should be primed to identify with that child's excitement and frustration.

As the assassination scene begins, Marcello sits in the rear seat of the car, behind his driver, Mangianello, seemingly paralysed as he watches the events unfold. Quadri and Anna are just ahead of them on a winding mountain road in the midst of a snow covered forest. Anna looks back over her shoulder (one of the film's repetitive images) at the car following them. She is frightened at being followed, but Quadri is calm and unsuspecting. A car swerves in front of Quadri's car, blocking the way. The driver is slumped over the steering wheel. Anna fears danger and pleads with Quadri not to leave the car. Nevertheless, he goes out to check. Assassins appear from the surrounding woods. The driver of the car steps out to join them. As Quadri asks him what he wants, they begin stabbing

him repeatedly. They head for Anna who flees, screaming in terror, as she runs to Marcello's car. Anna presses her face against the rear seat window implicitly begging for him to save her. Marcello does nothing. Anna runs on, the assassins in pursuit. They finally shoot her. She falls to the snow, her face covered with blood.

The scene changes. Several years have passed and Mussolini's government has just been toppled. Marcello says good night to his 3- or 4-year-old daughter after leading her in her prayers. He gets a call from his friend, Italo, and prepares to go out to meet him. His wife begs him not to leave (just as Anna had begged Quadri not to leave the car) because there is rioting and danger in the streets in the wake of Mussolini's fall (another assassinated father). Marcello goes out over her objections (as Quadri had). As he leaves, the lights begin to go off and on. The little girl cries out, 'Mommy, where are you? I'm afraid!'

Once again, two scenes can be taken as separate aspects of a single fantasy. The little girl in bed, the parents arguing in the other room, the hint of external danger, and the girl's fright are more mundane elements of the primal scene close to the experience of every viewer. The assassination appears to be far from the bedroom or scenes of childhood, but it conveys the raw emotion and violent imagery that we might associate with

the primal scene revenge fantasy. Influenced by the repetitive primal scene imagery that has come before, we can construct the following: a child lies in his bed or crib, perhaps with a nurse nearby (Mangianello), watching his parents in bed, or imagining them together in the next room. He weaves a fantasy of revenge. The parents are interrupted and father leaves, possibly to check on the supposedly sleeping child (the slumped over driver). This imagery has been suggested in the opening scene when Marcello leaves his bed to go out. The father is viciously murdered and the mother sadistically abused and killed in a more violent version of the primal scene while the child watches, frozen by the scene and his own ambivalence.

Moravia's novel (1951, *The Conformist*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, trans. A. Davidson) contains a primal scene experience with violent overtones that Bertolucci has chosen not to include in the film. Instead, he has, with what I assume to be unconscious artistry, imparted a sense of an unconscious primal scene memory and fantasy that can enrich our experience in a unique way. The success of this unusual dimension will depend upon the ability and need of each viewer preconsciously to reconstruct a scene from its fragmented elements. When it works, it adds depth to the presentation of the film's major political and dynamic themes.

Herbert H. Stein
425 East 79th Street
New York, NY 10021

Copyright © Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London, 1997

END