

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CONFORMIST (IL CONFORMISTA) 1970

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

Bertolucci's film is based on a novel with the same title by Alberto Moravia, published in 1951. However, the screenplay differs from the novel in both structure and content. First, Bertolucci replaces the novel's linear structure with a series of flashbacks to both the recent and distant past. Second, the film places Marcello at the scene of the assassination (he's in Rome in the book) and also includes a final sequence, in which he denounces his old friend, Italo. Bertolucci commented that the film could be seen as a metaphor for his relationship with his mentor Jean Luc-Goddard: the 'fascist' on a mission to kill the 'radical.' The two directors reportedly fell out after Bertolucci accepted Hollywood backing for the film. *The Conformist* has been widely hailed as a masterpiece, especially for its cinematic style, which recalls the 'shadows and bars' of German expressionism.

SYNOPSIS

Exceptionally beautiful and experimentally structured, this film tells the story of Marcello Clerici, a young Italian man who joins the secret police of the Mussolini dictatorship in 1938. Marcello is sent to Paris to infiltrate a group of Italian anti-fascists who have exiled themselves in France. The drama is enhanced by the fact that they are led by Professor Qadri, who happens to be Marcello's old teacher. Using the pretext of a honeymoon with his wife, Marcello travels to Paris, where is ordered by his superiors to assassinate Qadri. The passive and hesitant Marcello falls for the professor's wife, which complicates his mission, but it is carried out with ruthless efficiency. Most of the present-day action, which constitutes a long day of following Qadri in a car, is interrupted by flashbacks to Marcello's past.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Marcello	Marcello Clerici is a young Italian fascist living in Rome.
Guilia	Guilia is his fiancé.
Qadri	Professor Qadri, who was Marcello's teacher, now lives in Paris in exile, where he leads an anti-fascist group.
Anna	Anna is Qadri's wife.
Manganiello	Manganiello is an agent of the fascist secret police.
Italo	Italo is a blind friend of Marcello and also a fascist.

STORY

1938 Marcello wakes up in a Paris hotel, dresses, puts a pistol in his overcoat pocket, places a sheet over the naked woman lying on the bed and hurries out onto the street. It is early, just dawn. He gets into a car driven by a colleague, who says that 'his wife got in the car with him. But I followed instructions.' The atmosphere is mysterious and intense.

Hitler and Mussolini In a flashback, Marcello is working in a radio recording studio in Rome, where he tells his friend, a blind man called Italo, that he wants to get married in order to be 'normal,' to conform. He also recounts his father's story about meeting a funny man in a bar in Munich who made wild speeches. 'He was Herr Hitler,' Marcello says. Italo delivers a speech on the radio, in which he praises the two great civilisations of Italy and German.

Plan Marcello applies for a position with the secret police of the fascist government and is granted an audience with a minister. Entering his spacious, echoing room, he sees the minister making love to a young woman on his enormous desk and is forced to wait. The minister approves a plan for Marcello to travel to Paris in order to infiltrate an anti-Fascist circle that has formed around Professor Qadri. Qadri is Marcello's old professor, which the minister realises will allow Marcello to get close to the man and collect information about their enemies.

Anonymous letter Marcello visits his fiancé, Guilia, who is passionately in love with him. Her mother shows them an anonymous letter that warns her not to allow her daughter to marry Marcello. 'That would be to commit a crime,' the letter says, because his father has a hereditary brain disease. Marcello promises to check with doctors that his father's disease is not hereditary.

Mother Marcello walks through the gates to a wreck of a mansion, where he has been followed by a car. The man in the car introduces himself as 'Special Agent Manganiello', who has been sent by their superiors. Marcello is visiting his morphine-addicted mother in the dilapidated house. Entering her bedroom, Marcello finds her lying half-naked and tells her to cover up. 'Oh, I've got a moralist for a son,' she sighs. Back outside, Manganiello tells Marcello that there is a 'slight change of plans.' On his way to Paris, Marcello must stop at a small town and meet Raoul, who will give him further instructions. Marcello tells Manganiello about 'Trees,' the Japanese chauffeur who brings drugs to his mother and has sex with her. After Manganiello eliminates Trees, Marcello's mother drives to the hospital to visit her ailing husband.

Asylum At the mental hospital, wife and son watch as husband and father, Antonio, stalks around repeating speeches, such as, 'If the state doesn't model itself on the image of the individual, how can the individual model himself on the state?' Marcello has him sign a letter of consent for his marriage to Guilia. But when the son demands that his father tell him about his past, when he tortured and killed people, the father refuses.

The chase Back in the present, Manganiello is driving Marcello through Paris in the early morning. Marcello wants him to speed up, but the special agent says, 'They're only half an hour ahead. We'll catch up.' They are chasing Professor Qadri and his wife, who are driving toward his summer house in Savoy. Marcello is insistent that they must 'save' his wife, Anna.' They continue to chase the car on snow-covered roads in the countryside, all the time arguing about whether they can or should spare Anna, with whom Marcello is in love.

Sex and murder In another, key flashback, we see Marcello as a schoolboy set upon by his mates, who pull down his trousers and taunt him. He is rescued by a chauffeur, who plays tag with him and leads him into his room, where he shows him a pistol and makes sexual advances to the young boy. Marcello is confused but responds a little until he grabs the gun and starts to shoot wildly. He leaves, thinking the chauffeur is dead.

Confession In a flashback to the recent past, Marcello goes to confession before his marriage and admits that he has committed every sin, even murder. He says he's marrying a middle-class and mediocre person, full of petty ambitions and ideas, in order to have a 'normal' life based on the ideals and images of the church. 'I'm confessing today for the sin I'm going to commit tomorrow,' he says, referring to the assassination that lies ahead.

Seduction Later, when they are in a train travelling to Paris for their honeymoon, Guilia confesses to Marcello that she is not a virgin. In fact, she had a sexual relationship with the family lawyer for six years. Her description of the seduction arouses Marcello, who makes love to her in the train.

Party This is followed by a flashback, to a party held to celebrate the upcoming wedding. Amid the happy celebrations, a man is beaten for making a joke about Mussolini, and Marcello talks with his blind friend, Italo, about 'normal' sex.

Raoul En route to Paris, Marcello stops at a seaside town, as instructed, and finds Raoul, who tells him that there has been another change of plan. Now, he will not infiltrate Qadri's circle. He will kill him. Raoul hands him a pistol and tells him to choose his own time and place for the assassination.

Anna Having arrived in Paris, Marcello telephones Qadri and gets himself and his new wife invited to the professor's flat. Manganiello tries to contact him, but Marcello avoids him. At the flat, Qadri's beautiful wife, Anna, is gracious to Guilia but hostile to Marcello, which makes her more attractive to him.

Qadri When Marcello is taken to see Qadri in another room, the professor is suspicious of Marcello's motive for coming. Qadri discusses Marcello's unfinished thesis about Plato's famous 'Allegory of The Cave', in which people mistakes shadows for reality. Qadri says that what the people of Italy see is only the shadows, not the real situation, while Marcello claims that the people do see reality. Qadri also explains that he left Italy because there was no support there for his anti-fascist movement. Marcello says that he has become a fascist, but Qadri says that a true fascist wouldn't

say something like that.

Ballet school Marcello leaves him and goes to another part of the flat, where he finds Anna and forces himself on her. She resists but then gives in to his kissing on a bed. Before leaving her, he rips a label from inside one of her slippers with the address of a ballet school. Sending Guilia to see the Eifel Tower on her own, he goes to the school and finds Anna teaching ballet, in a revealing leotard. He takes her to a closed room and says he wants to run away with her, drop everything and emigrate to Brazil. She hands him a letter written by a prisoner that describes torture by the fascist Italian government. 'You're a spy,' she cries. 'A fascist. A grass.' Marcello doesn't deny it and agrees to take the first train back to Rome, but Anna strips to the waist and offers herself to him. When he turns away, she asks him not to hurt her or her husband.

Anna and Guilia Anna takes Guilia shopping, and the two women revel in their pleasure at new fashions. Anna tells her that she and her husband are leaving Paris because things are too dangerous and going to stay in the countryside, in Savoy. Back in Marcello's hotel room, Anna makes sexual advances to her, which she doesn't resist. When Anna leaves, she runs into Marcello, who has bought flowers for his wife. He gives the flowers to Anna and kisses her. When Marcello is with Guilia in their hotel room, she tells him that Qadri is going to Savoy in the morning, but that Anna will stay behind. She gives him the address in Savoy, and he realises that this is the perfect opportunity for the assassination.

Breaking bread The two couples have dinner together at a Chinese restaurant. While eating, Anna taunts Marcello about the cruelty of the fascists, while Qadri comments that he and Marcello are political enemies but still friends who can share a meal. Qadri hands a letter to Marcello and asks him to deliver it to one of his 'comrades' in Rome when he returns to that city. Marcello refuses and suggests that Qadri is making the request in order to have Marcello arrested. 'Frankly,' Qadri says, 'doing some time in a fascist prison might be good for you.'

Tested Disturbed, Marcello goes into the wash room and tries to hand his gun to Manganiello. 'I don't want to kill anyone,' he says. The agent warns him that if he quits 'the war', he is a deserter. Manganiello admits that everyone thinks of deserting, at one time or another, but that it would be a betrayal not of his country, but of himself. Reassured, Marcello returns to Qadri, who says that Marcello is not really a fascist because, if he were, he would have taken the letter and turned it over to the police in Rome. Then he shows Marcello the letter, which is blank. 'Just a little trick, to test you,' the professor says.

Warning Anna and Guilia, both in fancy dress, perform a stylish tango in front of a big crowd at a dance hall and lead everyone in a circular dance. When Marcello dances with Anna, he warns her not to go with her husband to the country in the morning. She agrees to stay behind.

Stories Back in the present, in the car chasing Qadri's car through the countryside, Marcello dozes off and has a dream. He wakes up and describes his dream to Manganiello. He was at a clinic in Switzerland, where Qadri performed an operation to restore his sight. It was successful, and Marcello left with Qadri's wife. Manganiello reciprocates with his own story about an 'operation' in Africa that left four men dead but was unnecessary. 'Our boss said we were beasts,' Manganiello explains, 'but I said we weren't beasts. We were men.'

Road blocked They see Qadri's car a short distance ahead. Marcello checks his pistol. Sitting next to Qadri, Anna notices the car following them. A third car skids to a halt in front of them and blocks the road. Anna begs her husband not to leave the car, but Qadri steps out to see if he can assist the stalled car.

Murder Standing exposed, he is stabbed to death by men who emerge from behind the trees, while Marcello watches from inside his car. It is a slaughter by knives. When the men go for Anna, her dog attacks one of them and she flees down the road toward Marcello's car. As she bangs on the closed window in panic, shots ring out and she runs into the woods. Marcello says nothing and does nothing. Manganiello is disgusted by Marcello's cowardice and curses him along with 'homosexuals and Jews.' Anna is pursued and shot to death.

Resignation It is now 1943. The radio announces that Mussolini and his fascist government have resigned. Guilia and her young son listen to the news, after which Marcello leads the little boy in bedtime prayers. Italo, the blind fascist, calls on the telephone and asks to meet Marcello 'at the usual place.' Marcello goes out and Guilia warns him to be careful, especially because she knows

about the 'Qadri business.' Marcello says there's no danger because there are still 'too many of us. Besides what did I do? Only my duty.'

Denunciation Marcello and Italo haven't seen each other for many years. Meeting at night, Marcello removes Italo's fascist symbol pinned to his coat as anti-fascist mobs roam the streets, knocking down Mussolini statues. As the two old friends walk the streets, Marcello notices a man trying to pick up a younger man and recognises him as the chauffeur who made advances to him when he was a boy. Marcello denounces the chauffeur as a fascist, a homosexual and the man who killed Qadri and Anna. Still screaming to no one in particular, he then denounces Italo as a fascist. Marcello begins to hit Italo, who begs for mercy. A crowd of monarchists (who brought down the dictatorship) pass him by singing patriotic songs. He sits down and looks at the young man whom the chauffeur was propositioning.

THEMES

Sexual politics In this film, sexual normality and sexual deviance are markers of political identity. 'Normal' people conform to social norms, which in 1930s Catholic Italy meant heterosexuality, marriage and children. This condition of normality is what Marcello wants to achieve for himself, having been lured as a young boy into a homosexual encounter with the chauffeur that ended in violence. It is also the image of normality that is associated with fascism, the political movement that sought to promote traditional social values. That association is made explicit in a scene in the radio recording studio, when Italo, a fascist, gives a short speech about the 'great civilisations of Germany and Italy.' It is also expressed by Italo in another scene. When Marcello asks his friend what normality is, he says, 'A normal man is someone who turns around to look at a woman's backside, and sees that others have, too. He realises that he's not the only one. That's why he likes crowds, the beach, the bars, the football game and listening to Mussolini in the square. That's why the normal man is a patriot.' Marcello listens to this explanation with his perpetual frown and adds, 'And he's a fascist.'

People with 'abnormal' sexual desires are more than once identified as the enemy of fascism, along with Jews and cowards. Homosexuals are said to be deviants, just like Marcello's father (who has a brain disease) and Marcello's mother (addicted to morphine). No wonder his mother lives in a rundown mansion with rotting vegetation and wild animals. It's not a normal house, with normal people, as Marcello points out. It's a decadent house. Fascism aims to eliminate all forms of decadence, from art to religion, but sexual decadence is most popular target. It is no surprise, then, that Anna, the anti-fascist, is the seducer, of both Marcello and Guilia. Anna's sensuality is darker than Guilia's, who is a fun-loving 'normal' woman. Anna also uses her sexual attraction as a political weapon against Marcello. While the two couples eat a meal, she taunts him about his fascist allegiance, while simultaneously rubbing his leg with her stockinged foot under the table. That is an act of pure decadence, a wife cheating on her husband in his presence, but that is what we expect from the politically and sexually deviant Anna.

Loyalty and betrayal Bertolucci also examines the vexed topic of loyalty in the context of 1930s Europe. To what or to whom is Marcello loyal? And what or whom does he betray? It might seem obvious that his allegiance is to fascism and that he betrays Qadri, his old professor. But Bertolucci digs deeper than these surface answers, for instance, in a key scene with special agent Manganiello toward the end of the film. After passing the test set for him by Qadri (the fake letter to take to anti-fascists in Rome), Marcello wavers in his dedication to his assassination mission. He hands over his pistol to Manganiello and confesses that he doesn't 'want to kill anyone.' Manganiello grabs him and says, 'This is a war. If you bail out, you're a deserter.' But the agent softens and admits that everyone, at some point, has doubts. 'Even I did,' he says, 'but then I realised that it wasn't my country or my honour that I was about to betray. No, it was myself.' This personalised, interior loyalty is also suggested in the scene when Marcello is interviewed by the secret police. The official wants to know what motivates Marcello to work with them. 'Some people collaborate with us out of fear,' the man says. 'Some out of money, some out of faith in fascism. But you're not governed by any of these.' This is a perceptive observation, for we come to understand that Marcello is not driven by fascist ideology as much as by a desperate desire to conform, irrespective of the content of the prevailing conventions. That is why Qadri tells him, on two separate occasions, that he doesn't act like a fascist. And that is why, at the end of the film, in a scene not found in the source-novel, Marcello denounces his erstwhile fascist friend Italo. A new political normality has arrived after the fall

of the dictatorship, and Marcello must disassociate himself from what is now seen as abnormal (fascism) and embrace the reigning monarchy. Manganiello was right: Marcello is interested in staying true to his self-designed image of normality. Qadri was also right: Marcello was never a true fascist and only used the prevailing ideology for his own psychological needs. He did, of course, betray his friendship with the professor, but he never betrayed himself.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

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 1 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.

Sexual attraction 2 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.

Anna Anna is young, beautiful and brave. Married to Professor Qadri, she works as a ballet school instructor and has firm anti-fascist convictions. She is as sharp as she is lovely. Protective of her naïve husband, she is quick to sense danger.

Perceptive Within minutes of meeting Marcello and Guilia, Anna senses that something is wrong. Her dog barks at Marcello, and she comments that the dog doesn't hurt her friends. She invites the newlyweds in and serves coffee, but only to Guilia, pointedly leaving Marcello to serve himself. Like her dog, she has instinctively realised that Marcello is an enemy, a source of danger. As they talk, she directs her comments to Guilia and invites her to go shopping. Marcello wants to join them, but she says firmly, 'No. Shopping is for women. Men only pay.' When Marcello has left the room, to talk with Qadri in his study, Anna turns to Guilia and asks, 'I'm curious. Did you sleep with him before you got married?' She is gathering information to be used in what she knows will be a conflict with this dangerous fascist spy.

Committed Anna is a woman firmly committed to the anti-fascist cause. She displays this allegiance in a scene when Marcello tells her that he wants to run away with her. 'We can live in Brazil,' he says. 'I have friends there.' She says, 'And I have friends in Italy. Here is a letter.' It turns out to be written by a prisoner who describes the details of his torture by the fascist authorities. When Marcello asks why she had him read the letter, she shouts, 'Because you're a fascist spy. A grass! You disgust me.' Her angry words pour cold water on Marcello's dream of running away with her. She could never leave her husband for a man whose politics she detests.

Sexuality Anna's sexuality appears to be defined, at least in part, by her free-spirit and political allegiance to anti-fascism, both of which feed her hatred of authoritarianism. She dresses and moves with a self-awareness of her sexual appeal, slinking around in loose-fitting garments that suggest laxity toward social conventions, something that both confuses and attracts Marcello. She unleashes her erotic charge, and partial nudity, on Marcello in an attempt to shield her husband from what she assumes is his murderous plan. Anna's unconventional sexuality crosses gender boundaries and includes a seduction of Guilia in the hotel room and a stylised display of lesbian adoration when they dance together before an admiring crowd.

Sexual freedom Although she is married, and is devoted to her husband, Anna is a sexually liberated woman. This quality is dramatised in a conversation with Marcello, who has just been watching her play erotic songs for Guilia, his wife. Her first words are accusatory: 'Do you often spy on people?' And when Marcello says that she has the eyes of a beautiful woman he saw recently, she continues to throw verbal darts at him. But she also leads him on with questions about who this woman was and what they did together. When he grabs her and attempts to kiss, she resists. But not for long. A second later, she is rolling around on the bed with him, kissing him with relish. In terms of her sexual desire, the scene is enigmatic, inconclusive. It isn't clear if she wants to make love with him, or even if she would let him, but she has enjoyed a few delicious moments of kissing a man she suspects of being a fascist spy. She doesn't always allow such political niceties to spoil her sexual pleasure.

Sexual manipulation Another side of Anna's complex sexuality is revealed in a later scene, when Marcello comes to her ballet school, where she is teaching in a tight-fitting leotard. Like the fairy-tale prince using a glass slipper to track down Cinderella, Marcello uses the label of Anna's ballet slipper to find her. When he yanks her into a private room, she neither resists or consents. Inside, after he makes his declaration of desire, she forces him to read a letter from a prisoner tortured by the fascists in Rome. Then she says that he 'disgusts' her, that he is a 'grass,' 'a snitch', a 'rat.' Someone who 'sings' to the authorities. Now that she has unmasked him, she can manipulate him. He says he will give up his assassination mission and return to Rome. But Anna says, 'No, you won't because you're a coward.' Then she slips her leotard off her shoulders and stand half-naked in front of him. She walks up to him, he turns away, but she tells him to hold her. When they embrace, she says softly, 'I'm frightened. Don't hurt us.' Having humiliated him and called him a coward, Anna uses her sexual powers to disarm Marcello and ask for his protection. If she is embarrassed by her erotic display or hesitant to ask for his help, it doesn't show. Mata Hari would be proud of her performance.

Guilia Guilia is a young, middle-class woman of little intellect, just the normal sort of wife that Marcello wants. She is likable and lively but somewhat shallow, naïve and spoiled. She wants to get married and enjoy life, in that order.

Carefree The first time we see Guilia is in her parents' flat when Marcello arrives with a large bouquet of flowers. It is a comfortable apartment, with a maid who opens the door and takes the flowers to Guilia, dressed in a stylish striped dress. 'Today, I absolutely need your flowers,' she says to Marcello she skips up to him. 'I was thinking of going to a fortune teller. I want to know everything about you.' She sits down, looks lovingly at him and sighs, 'Darling.' Then she leaps on top of him on a couch. They roll around on the floor until the maid walks in with the flowers. Marcello is embarrassed and jumps up, but Guilia says, 'What's the matter? We're engaged.' Then, without a pause, she runs over to a gramophone and puts on a dance record from America. Prancing around, she swings her hips and smiles at her fiancé. She doesn't have a care in the world.

Docile Simple-minded Guilia is impressed by money, status and beauty. And in the hands of the more sophisticated Anna, she can be easily influenced. All this is evident in the scene, where she and Marcello go to the apartment where Anna lives with Professor Qadri. From the beginning, Guilia is flattered by the attention she receives from the worldly Anna. Marcello says she is hostile, but Guilia protests, 'Oh, no. She's very nice.' Soon, Guilia is sharing personal secrets with Anna about her past love life, lounging on a couch, wrapped in expensive furs and listening to romantic songs. 'Will you really let me keep these?' she asks, flinging the fur wrap around in the air. Anna tells her to keep them for as long as she wishes. 'Oh, thank you,' Guilia says and buries her head in the fur. Sated with the furs, the music, the coffee and cigarettes, docile Guilia leans back and luxuriates in Anna's company.

Sexuality Guilia has the normal sexuality that Marcello craves. She is not a virgin when she marries, although she is not ashamed of that fact. She has a finely-tune awareness of her physical body, likes to dance and to feel pleasure. Far from a prude, she responds to Anna's sexual advances but is not sure if she should.

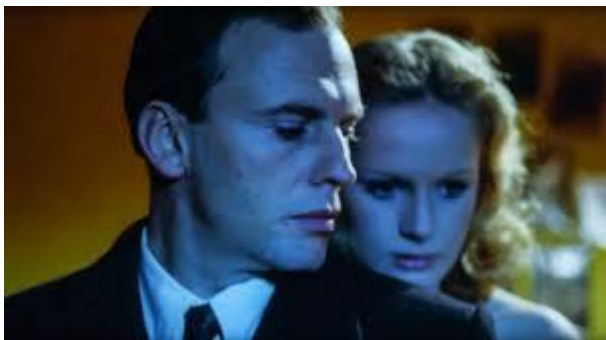
Sensual Guilia displays a highly sensual nature in a key scene that occurs when she and Marcello are travelling by train to Paris after their wedding. It begins with her coy admission that she is not a virgin and that she was seduced by an old man, the family's lawyer. But when Marcello shows interest in her story of that childhood seduction, and as she begins to describe it in some detail, she shows her sensuality by sighing and rubbing against Marcello. 'I was well-developed at 15,' she says with some pride. 'He squeezed me so hard I almost fainted.' Overcome with passion or pain, she doesn't say, but the former is implied. When he laid her on the bed, she says, 'I understood everything and all my strength left me.' She had succumbed and 'he did everything he wanted to me.' She does not speak with any disgust or guilt. The whole scene, which is shot in a soft and seductive yellow light, suggests her fully-budded sensuality.

Innocent Although Guilia's sexual appetite is considerable, given her bourgeois background and mentality, it has not strayed from the conventional path. Not until she meets up with Anna, who seduces her. Innocent Guilia is not seduced all at once but in a series of moves, including the 'girls going shopping' and listening to sexy songs. But it culminates in a scene in a hotel room where Guilia and Marcello are staying. With Marcello out, Anna is stroking Guilia's long leg. 'You don't mind if we stay like this?' she asks and Guilia says she does not. Anna leads her to imagine scandalous situations, such as, 'If I weren't married, I...' Still rubbing her leg, Anna moves her hand up her thighs and kisses them. Guilia is laying back on the bed with an ecstatic smile. When Anna touches her clitoris, Guilia's face registers concern and she momentarily puts a hand on Anna's hand. A second later, her face changes and says, 'you naughty girl,' as she lies back down and smiles again. It is a subtle performance of facial expressions and few words, which express Guilia's corruptible innocence.

Qadri Qadri is a middle-aged professor who left Rome for exile in Paris when the fascist movement quashed his freedom of expression. He is amiable, but also clever, if a little naïve.

Perceptive The professor is a wise man, especially in his understanding of human nature and the nature of fascism. When Marcello comes to Qadri's flat in Paris, where he has been in exile for ten years, the professor is curious about the younger man's motives. Marcello comes up with a memory of Qadri's lecture about Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave,' which is a description of how men are fooled by shadows, tricked by illusions that they believe represent reality. Qadri asks Marcello, like a teacher questioning a student, what the people see, and Marcello dutifully answers 'the shadows.' Qadri nods and says, 'Yes. Only the reflections of things. Like what's happening to you people in Italy now.' Marcello claims that the people would call their visions reality. 'Of course,' admits Qadri, 'they would mistake the shadows of reality for reality itself.' Marcello stares at him, realising that this is a description of himself, a man confused about himself. The scene is cleverly shot to reproduce the darkened cave, with light coming in from one window and casting shadows on the far wall. But Qadri is clear-sighted.

Naïve The learned professor is no fool—he correctly suspects Marcello's motives from the beginning—but he is naïve. That is the word Anna uses to describe her husband after he has dismissed any real hostility between him and Marcello. 'My husband makes a point of being naïve,' she says. That innocence is later dramatised in the sensational final sequence, when he is killed. Qadri is driving along a snowy road, unaware that Marcello is following. Suddenly, a third car skids to a stop some distance in front of him and blocks the road. Anna is anxious, fearing danger, and pleads with him not to get out of the car. But he is concerned that the driver of the third car may be injured. 'I should look and see,' he says to Anna and walks to his death. He should have realised that it was a trap, a fake car accident, set up by his enemies. But Qadri is not a naturally suspicious person. He wants to see the best in people. A fatal flaw when fighting fascism.



(Marcello and Anna, who is half-naked in this scene)



(Anna and Marcello, in the final scene, of her death)