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The Linguistic Construction of Conformity: A Critical Analysis of Ideological and Multimodal Discourse

Dr Emil Theodoropoulos
University of Ioannina, Greece
emil@uoi.gr

Stavroula Tsakanika
Educator

Ioanna Mpoleti
Educator

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Abstract

This article examines how normalcy is produced and naturalized through linguistic and multimodal discourse practices, using Bernardo Bertolucci's The Conformist (1970) as its case study. Grounded in Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and social semiotics, the methodology involves a qualitative analysis of selected scenes to explore how dialogue, image, body posture, and spatial organization interact to reinforce the film's ideological framework. The findings demonstrate that the film articulates a model of normalcy grounded in discipline, conformity, and exclusion. Linguistically, this is achieved through generalizations, impersonal constructions, and moralized vocabulary that frame conformity not as a choice but as a universal necessity for stability. Multimodally, the film's visual architecture encodes bodily regulation and containment, while the construction of the "Other"—specifically political dissidents and gender-nonconforming figures—serves to legitimize the authoritarian order. Ultimately, the article argues that tensions between the verbal and visual layers generate critical ruptures that expose and destabilize the mechanisms through which fascist imaginaries are normalized, positioning the film as a vital resource for developing critical language and visual literacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (Il conformista, 1970) has often been read as one of the most sophisticated cinematic explorations of fascism, both as a political regime and as psychic economy (Marcus 1986; Cavaliere 2004; Rigoletto 2012). Set in 1938, on the eve of the Second World War, the film follows Marcello Clerici, a petit-bourgeois subject haunted by childhood trauma and guilt, who invests in "normality" as a mode of survival. Conformity with the demands of the fascist regime – a conventional marriage, collaboration with the secret police, complicity in the assassination of a former professor – is presented as the price he is willing to pay for full inclusion in the social "centre" (Raphaelides 1971). As Paxton (2006) and Rocco (2006) argue, fascism is not only a set of institutions or doctrines but a culture that relies on

the mobilisation of the masses, on discipline, and on the construction of enemies. In The Conformist, this culture is condensed in the figure of Marcello as a "chameleon in power" (Raphaelides 1971), a social climber endowed with a monstrous capacity for adaptation, who relinquishes moral autonomy in the name of order and security.

The present article approaches the film through a critical social semiotic lens. It combines Fairclough's CDA – where discourse is understood as a form of social practice that both reflects and constitutes power relations (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995, 2003) – with social semiotic accounts of multimodality that treat image, space, body and movement as semiotic resources organised in culturally patterned ways (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). The focus is not only on what characters say but also on how the film's visual, spatial, and kinetic organisation contributes to the production of meaning and ideology. The analysis is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) Which linguistic and lexical choices contribute to the naturalisation of normality and conformity? (RQ2) How do multimodal resources – verbal language, image, body, space, and movement – work together to support the ideological functioning of discourse? (RQ3) How is the "Other" constructed and how is dissent silenced through discursive and multimodal practices?

The Conformist is treated as a multimodal text in which verbal dialogue, cinematography, music, and mise-en-scène are woven together into a dense semiotic fabric (Mellen 1971; Soueref 2005). In line with work on critical language awareness (Fairclough 1992; Stamou 2012; Archakis and Tsakona 2011) and critical pedagogy (Freire 1977; Giroux 2020), the article argues that the film offers rich material for fostering critical awareness of how contemporary discourses naturalise authoritarian forms of normality.

2. CRITICAL AND SOCIAL SEMIOTIC FRAMEWORK

In Fairclough's framework, discourse is conceptualised as a mode of social practice which is simultaneously textual, discursive, and social (Fairclough 1992, 1995). At the textual level, analysis focuses on vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and textual structure; at the level of discourse practice, on processes of production and interpretation; and at the level of social practice, on the broader relations of power and ideology within which discourse is embedded. Everyday linguistic patterns are treated as both outcomes and instruments of social struggles over power and hegemony (Fairclough 1989: 17–20). According to Fairclough (1992), discourse constitutes a social practice that represents social ideological perspectives and, at the same time, reproduces them in society as a whole. Discourse practices constitute a form of social practice that ultimately contributes to the construction of "social identities", "social

relations" and "systems of knowledge and meaning" (Fairclough, 1992; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2009: 117).

Social semiotics broadens this focus beyond language, treating all semiotic modes (image, colour, gesture, layout, sound) as resources for meaning-making in social practice (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Rather than assuming fixed codes, social semiotic analysis asks how specific communities use semiotic resources to realise communicative purposes, negotiate identities, and reproduce or contest power relations. This multimodal perspective has been developed in relation to visual communication, advertising, film, and digital media, among others (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2003).

In this article, CDA provides tools for examining how lexical choices (e.g., "normal", "stable", "proper life"), grammatical patterns (e.g., impersonal constructions, nominalisations), and intertextual references (e.g., to Catholic discourse of sin and absolution) contribute to the naturalisation of a particular social order. Social semiotics, in turn, provides concepts for analysing how visual composition, spatial organisation, and bodily conduct work together with verbal language to construct fascist normality and produce Otherness. A central notion here is normality as a social and discursive construction rather than a neutral state. Normality emerges through the repeated drawing of boundaries between what counts as legitimate, natural, and desirable, and what is marked as deviant, pathological or dangerous (Heywood 2011; Hogg and Vaughan 2010). Under fascism, these boundaries are tightly aligned with the nation-state, patriarchal family structures and normative gender and sexual identities (Paxton 2006; Rigoletto 2012). According to Fairclough (2015) power relations are imposed and ultimately naturalized by those in power.

The film has been widely discussed in relation to memory, masculine identity and Oedipal dynamics (Bouchard 2006; Rigoletto 2012), as well as from the perspective of political and cultural history of fascism (Mellen 1971; Marcus 1986; Cavaliere 2004). Building on this work, the present analysis foregrounds linguistic and multimodal practices of normalisation and Othering as key mechanisms through which the film stages fascism's everyday semiotics.

3. METHODOLOGY

The analysis is qualitative and interpretive, located within the tradition of critical discourse and social semiotic studies of media texts (Clark et al. 1991; Fairclough 2003; Blommaert, 2005). Seven scenes from *The Conformist* were selected for close analysis because they foreground key aspects of normality, conformity and Othering:

• Marcello's conversation with his blind friend Italo at the radio station (marriage and "normal life");
• the domestic scene with Giulia before marriage;
• the confession scene in the church;
• Marcello's meeting with Professor Quadri;
• Manganiello's fascist monologue;
• the conversation with Giulia on the night of Mussolini's fall;
• Marcello's recognition of Lino in the final sequence.

The dialogues in these scenes were transcribed and aligned with detailed descriptions of relevant visual and sonic features: framing, camera movement, lighting, spatial arrangements, body posture, gesture and musical motifs. This allowed for a systematic comparison between verbal and non-verbal cues. On the verbal plane, attention was paid to evaluative lexis related to normality, morality, security and deviation; generalisations and impersonal constructions ("everyone", "it is natural", "one must"); nominalisations and passive constructions that obscure agencies ("stability", "correction", "sins will be forgiven"); and intertextual echoes of religious, medical and political discourses.

On the multimodal plane, following O'Halloran's (2003) proposal for multimodal CDA and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design, the analysis considered how bodies are framed (close-up vs long shot), positioned and lit; how architectural spaces (ministerial buildings, apartments, monuments) organise social distance and hierarchy; how colour and light symbolically mark characters and situations; and how camera movement and editing rhythms contribute to a sense of enclosure, surveillance or suspension. Finally, the discursive construction of the "Other" was analysed in relation to psychoanalytic accounts of identification and projection (Freud 1991, 2014) and sociological work on stigma and everyday interaction (Goffman 2006; Daskalakis 2014).

4. ANALYSIS

4.1.Linguistic naturalisation of normality and conformity (RQ1)

In Marcello's conversation with Italo at the radio station, marriage is framed not as a personal or affective choice but as an instrument for achieving "stability" and "the impression of normalcy". Marcello explicitly contrasts his feeling of being "different" with his desire to become "like everyone else". The lexis of stability, security and sameness indexes a model of

normality anchored in the petit-bourgeois life course: getting married, having a home, conforming to expectations (Marcus 1986).

Generalising expressions ("everyone would like…", "everyone else") as well as vague, impersonal formulations present this model as self-evident and universally desired. No specific agents are named as prescribing this norm; instead, "society" functions as an abstract judge, echoing the way fascist discourse often invokes "the nation" or "the people" as homogeneous subjects (Paxton 2006).

The confession scene further intertwines the lexicon of normality with that of sin and absolution. Marcello's past is cast in terms of "sins" and "deviations" that can be washed away by the Church, on the condition that he embraces a "proper", "orderly" life. The priest's language of repentance and forgiveness depoliticises Marcello's choices: joining the secret police appears less as political complicity and more as personal moral correction. Here, theological discourse functions as an ideological resource that legitimises fascist alignment as spiritual healing (Stamou 2014). Throughout these scenes, nominalisations ("stability", "normal life", "correction") and passivisations blur the question of agency. Who defines what counts as "stability"? Who is corrected, by whom and in whose name? By erasing these questions, such grammatical patterns participate in what Fairclough (1989, 1995) identifies as the naturalisation of power through linguistic form.

At the same time, the film makes visible the affective rewards of normalisation. Marcello derives "feelings of safety, pleasure and satisfaction" from his adjustment to the social whole, resonating with Freud's (2014) insight that identification with the group and its leader can bring relief from anxiety, at the cost of critical autonomy. The lexis of belonging and safety thus connects individual insecurity to broader authoritarian structures.

4.2.Multimodality: image, body, space and movement (RQ2)

The ideological work of verbal discourse in The Conformist is amplified and sometimes problematised by the film's visual and spatial design. Storaro's cinematography has been widely praised for its play of light and shadow, its use of colour and its architectural framing (Cavaliere 2004; Bouchard 2006). From a social semiotic perspective, these are not merely aesthetic choices but semiotic resources for constructing a fascist world. Ministerial offices and official buildings are shot in a way that miniaturises the characters within monumental spaces. Long corridors, towering columns and geometric patterns in floors and walls create a sense of discipline and surveillance. Light often falls in rigid bands that cut across faces and bodies, visually suggesting entrapment. When Marcello walks through such

spaces, his body appears constrained by architecture, visually enacting the submission to state power invoked in his discourse.

Domestic interiors also participate in normalising work. Giulia is repeatedly framed among domestic objects – kitchen cupboards, beds, wedding dresses – that index her as "dowry", a bundle of property and fertility promised to Marcello. Her bodily conduct – giggling, rolling on the carpet, seeking sexual contact – is juxtaposed with Marcello's restrained posture. The contrast between her excess of emotion and his controlled performance of masculinity aligns with hegemonic gender norms (Hogg and Vaughan 2010).

Anna, in contrast, is introduced as a figure who disturbs these norms. Her body occupies space confidently: she smokes, walks decisively, looks Marcello directly in the eyes. The camera often follows her movement, granting her a fleeting centrality. Yet her political activism and ambiguous sexuality also mark her as non-normative and, eventually, disposable (Rigoletto 2012). Her ultimate assassination in the snow visualises the elimination of a doubly othered subject – politically and gender-sexually.

The sequences at the Ara Pacis further illustrate the multimodal construction of fascist normality. The monument, appropriated by the regime as a symbol of Roman imperial continuity, serves as a backdrop against which the characters appear small and transient. Marcello is visually absorbed into a grandiose narrative of national history that, in Paxton's (2006) terms, demands the sacrifice of individual freedom for the "greater whole". The spatial placing of his body in relation to the monument naturalises the idea that the individual must conform to the monumental order of the nation.

Colour and music likewise contribute to the film's semiotic work. Warm, saturated tones in domestic scenes contrast with cold blues and greys in exterior political sequences, marking different spheres of life while also showing their entanglement. Recurrent musical motifs create an almost hypnotic rhythm, contributing to what Bertolucci has described as a sensation of "dreaming with open eyes" (Brocourt,1971). The multimodal orchestration of language, image, sound and movement translates political blindness into aesthetic experience.

4.3.Constructing the Other and silencing dissent (RQ3)

The film systematically shows how fascist normality is predicated on the construction and neutralisation of various Others. The political Other is embodied in Professor Quadri, who stands for knowledge, critical thinking and anti-fascist resistance. Within fascist discourse, such figures are resignified as "enemies" of the nation, whose elimination is presented as

necessary for social health (Rigoletto 2012; Barberà 2012). In the film, the shift from Quadri as mentor to Quadri as target is evident in the changing ways he is talked about and framed: from warm, dialogic relations in the Plato cave allegory scene to cold, distant talk in the secret-police context. Gendered Otherness circulates primarily through the contrast between Giulia and Anna. Giulia is constructed as the "normal" woman: housewife, wife, mother, carrier of dowry. Her lack of political awareness and her attachment to domestic romance mark her as safely within the norm. Anna, by contrast, embodies a disobedient femininity: politically engaged, sexually ambiguous, uninterested in domestic roles. Her violent death in the snowy forest functions as a paradigmatic silencing of a doubly othered subject. As Mellen (1971) and Marcus (1986) point out, the scene visualises the fascist logic that what cannot be incorporated must be destroyed.

Sexual Otherness is associated with Lino, the chauffeur linked to Marcello's childhood trauma. In Marcello's imagination, Lino is tied to homosexuality, perversion and death. Fascist ideology pathologises such sexualities as illnesses endangering the body politic. The category of "abnormality" here operates as a projection mechanism: Marcello expels onto Lino what he fears in himself (Freud 1991, 2014). This dynamic is crystallised in the final sequence, where Marcello publicly denounces Lino (and Italo) to the crowd in order to cleanse himself of responsibility.

Disability and cognitive blindness emerge in the figure of Italo, the blind fascist intellectual who speaks on the radio. Italo's literal blindness becomes a metaphor for ideological blindness: he cannot see, yet he constantly speaks for the regime. The relation between Marcello and Italo – with Marcello as "eyes" for the blind activist – encapsulates the fusion of personal and collective conformism. When Marcello turns against Italo after the regime's fall, the film shows how quickly categories of ally and enemy can be rearranged in the struggle over normality (Raphaelides,1971). Across these cases, Othering involves both verbal and multimodal practices: derogatory labels ("cowards, homosexuals, Jews – they're all the same thing", as Manganiello declares), spatial exclusion, framing that isolates bodies, and narrative techniques that allocate visibility and audibility unevenly. The silencing of dissent is enacted not only through physical violence but also through ridicule, trivialisation and narrative marginalisation (Hogg and Vaughan 2010; Giroux 2020).

5. DISCUSSION

From a critical social semiotic perspective, The Conformist offers a dense portrayal of how authoritarian normality is produced across modes. Linguistic patterns of generalisation,

impersonalisation and moralisation interact with visual and spatial design to present conformity as both emotionally rewarding and structurally inevitable (Fairclough 1992, 1995, 2003; Mulderrig 2011).

At the same time, the film does not simply reproduce fascist semiotics; it also opens up spaces for critical distance. The recurrent disjunction between what is said (e.g. "freedom", "duty", "stability") and what is shown (enclosure, surveillance, isolation) invites viewers to question the naturalness of the represented social order. In this sense, The Conformist can function as an object of critical language and image awareness, helping audiences to perceive the ideological work of contemporary discourses that normalise exclusionary politics. Moreover, the film foregrounds the ambiguous pleasures of conformity. Marcello's desire to be "like everyone else" and his pursuit of safety and belonging resonate with broader social dynamics in which individuals trade autonomy for inclusion in imagined communities, whether national, religious or ideological (Hogg and Vaughan 2010; Paxton 2006). A social semiotic analysis can thus illuminate how fascist and neo-authoritarian discourses today mobilise anxieties around normality and security. By exposing the gap between the language of normality and the lived reality of repression, Bertolucci invites critical distance. The film becomes a pedagogical text, fostering awareness of how contemporary discourses continue to naturalise exclusion, obedience and moral indifference under the guise of order and security.

Finally, the film's representation of Othering – of political opponents, non-normative women, sexual minorities and disabled subjects – demonstrates how categories of deviance are constructed through discursive and multimodal practices, and how these categories underpin regimes of violence. This insight is central to critical pedagogy aiming to denaturalise exclusionary discourses (Freire 1977; Giroux 2020).

5.1.Classroom applications: using The Conformist for critical literacy

From a pedagogical perspective, The Conformist can be productively integrated into secondary and higher education contexts as a tool for developing critical language awareness and multimodal literacy. Rather than being approached as a historical illustration of Italian fascism, the film can be framed as a case study in how authoritarian normality is learned, internalised and reproduced through everyday discourse and visual practices.

In classroom settings, selected scenes may be used to guide students' attention to specific linguistic and multimodal features. For example, Marcello's dialogue with Italo at the radio

station offers material for analysing generalisations, impersonal constructions and moral abstractions that present conformity as natural and universally desired. Students can be encouraged to identify how responsibility is linguistically displaced and to discuss how similar discursive strategies appear in contemporary political or institutional discourse.

Similarly, the confession scene provides an opportunity to examine how moral and religious language can legitimise political obedience. Through guided discussion or written reflection, learners can explore how notions of guilt, normality and redemption are mobilised to neutralise ethical responsibility. Multimodal analysis tasks may focus on lighting, framing and spatial organisation, prompting students to consider how visual elements reinforce verbal meanings.

The contrasting figures of Giulia and Anna can be used to foster discussion on gendered normality and the construction of Otherness. By comparing bodily conduct, spatial positioning and narrative outcomes, students can critically reflect on how femininity, sexuality and dissent are evaluated and sanctioned within authoritarian frameworks. Such activities support the development of critical visual literacy, enabling learners to question how images and bodies communicate ideology.

Importantly, pedagogical engagement with The Conformist should prioritise critical inquiry rather than moral prescription. The aim is not to present Marcello as a monstrous exception, but to invite learners to reflect on the ordinariness of conformity and the affective appeal of belonging and safety. In this sense, the film aligns with critical pedagogy's emphasis on problem-posing education, encouraging students to interrogate how power operates through what appears normal, reasonable and unquestionable.

6. CONCLUSION

Addressing the first research question, the analysis has shown that linguistic and lexical choices in The Conformist naturalise normality by drawing on generalisations, impersonal constructions, nominalisations and moralised lexis. Conformity is framed as a condition for psychological balance and social acceptance, while the dimension of complicity is obscured (Fairclough 1989, 1995; Raphaelides 1971).

Regarding the second question, the multimodal analysis revealed that image, body, space and movement are crucial carriers of ideology. Cinematography, architecture and kinesics visualise enclosure and discipline, often undermining verbal invocations of "freedom" and "stability" (Cavaliere 2004; Bouchard 2006). The film's multimodal orchestration translates political ideas into embodied experience.

As for the third question, the film demonstrates that fascist normality is constructed through the production and elimination of Others: the anti-fascist intellectual, the disobedient woman, the homosexual, the coward, the blind comrade. Dissent is silenced through physical violence, but also via discursive and multimodal practices of stigma, pathologisation and ridicule (Freud 2014; Paxton 2006; Rigoletto 2012).

By intersecting the legacy of Italian political cinema with theories of discourse and social semiotics, The Conformist emerges as a paradigmatic case for understanding how verbal and multimodal discourse can simultaneously serve the production of normality and expose it to critique. As such, it provides a powerful resource for social semiotic work interested in the politics of representation, as well as for educational projects that seek to develop critical literacy and visual literacy in times of resurgent authoritarianism. Ultimately, *The Conformist* reminds us that authoritarianism is learned. As such, it can also be unlearned through pedagogical practices that foreground critical interpretation, multimodal analysis and ethical reflection. By integrating cinematic texts into critical literacy education, educators can create spaces in which students learn to see beyond the apparent normality of power and to reclaim responsibility for meaning, judgement and action.

The ultimate theoretical contribution of this case study is the recognition that authoritarianism is not an inherent trait, but a learned behavior, culturally and discursively acquired through the "everyday semiotics" of normality. If the desire for conformity is constructed through specific linguistic generalizations and visual framing, then it can—and must—be unlearned. This process of "unlearning" fulfills the paper's primary goal of fostering critical awareness by transforming the viewer from a passive consumer of ideology into an active critic. By engaging in a multimodal analysis of The Conformist, students practice "denaturalizing" the exclusionary discourses that often pass as common sense. This pedagogical intervention does more than teach film history; it equips learners to interrogate the "gap" between the seductive language of security and the visual reality of repression and reclaim ethical responsibility for their own judgments, rather than surrendering to the "safety" of the crowd. In this sense, critical literacy becomes a civic act: it exposes the "ordinariness of conformity" to prevent the recurrence of authoritarianism in the present.

Based on the study, the key theoretical-methodological takeaway is that analyzing the discursive construction of conformity requires a multimodal approach that integrates linguistic analysis with an examination of visual and spatial semiotics. This case study demonstrates that conformity is not merely a verbal agreement but an embodied experience produced through the

following interconnected layers. Linguistic analysis reveals that conformity is naturalized through "generalizations, impersonal constructions, nominalizations and moralized lexis". These rhetorical strategies present social norms as universal and self-evident, obscuring the specific agencies and power dynamics at play. A purely linguistic analysis is insufficient because visual modes often contradict or undermine verbal claims. For instance, while characters may speak of "freedom" or "stability," the cinematography and architecture simultaneously visualize "enclosure," "surveillance," and "discipline". Analyzing these tensions exposes the gap between the *promise* of conformity (security, normalcy) and its *reality* (repression).The study teaches that defining "normalcy" is inextricably linked to the production and elimination of the "Other". Methodology must therefore identify how "categories of deviance" (political, gendered, or sexual) are constructed not just through labels, but through "spatial exclusion," "framing," and "narrative marginalization".

Ultimately, this approach teaches us that authoritarian conformity is "learned, internalized and reproduced" through everyday discourse. To truly critique it, one must adopt a critical social semiotic framework that treats linguistic patterns and visual design as simultaneous, often conflicting, carriers of ideology. This dual focus allows the analyst to dismantle the "apparent normalcy of power"

Competing interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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Appendix. Selected scenes from The Conformist

This appendix presents the key scenes that are used as interpretive examples in the analysis. They are linked to the three research questions (RQ1–RQ3) as follows: (a) the linguistic and lexical naturalisation of "normality" and conformity; (b) the multimodal construction of fascist normality through image, body, space and movement; and (c) the discursive and multimodal construction of the "Other" and the silencing of dissent. The numbering corresponds to references in the main text.

Scene 1 – Marcello and Italo at the radio station (marriage and "normal life")

Marcello talks with his blind friend Italo about his decision to marry and his desire to become "like everyone else".

Italo: You've really made up your mind. What do you really think that marriage will get you?

Marcello: I don't know. The impression of normalcy.

Italo: (laughs) Normalcy.

Marcello: Yes. Stability, security. When I'm dressing in front of the mirror, I see myself. And compared to everyone else, I feel I'm different.

Italo: What do you see in Giulia?

Marcello: I don't know, maybe her body, her sensuality. The minute we're alone she wants to fool around and usually ends up rolling on the rug.

Italo: And the maid with the big breasts?

Marcello: She's part of the dowry.

Italo: So, you're getting married and I'm losing my best friend. That's okay.

(Music: "Chi è più felice di me?")

Italo: Everyone would like to be different from the others, but instead you want to be the same as everyone else.

Scene 2 – Marcello and Giulia at home (sexuality, priest and absolution)

Giulia sexually provokes Marcello; he invokes the confessor and the risk of not receiving absolution.

Giulia: (kissing him on the couch) If you want… want to…

Marcello: If I want to…?

Giulia: Yes, right here… on the floor… on the carpet… Do you want to?

Marcello: Better think about the priest. He may not grant absolution.

Giulia: They grant everyone absolution.

Scene 3 – The confession in the church (normality, sin and "correction")

Marcello frames his future life as "normality" and as a price to be paid to society.

Confessor: You have been living like an animal.

[…]

Marcello: I'm going to build a life that's normal. I'm marrying a petty bourgeoise.

Confessor: Then she must be a fine girl.

Giulia: Speak out. Go ahead.

Marcello: Mediocre. A mound of petty ideas. Full of petty ambitions. She's all bed and kitchen.

Confessor: You have no right to use such expressions.

Marcello: No malady. I intend to construct my normality, but it won't be easy.

[…]

Confessor: The one thing you have to do is repent and humbly ask His pardon today.

Marcello: I've already repented. I want to be excused by society. Yes. I want to confess today the sin I'll commit tomorrow. One sin atones for another. It is the price I must pay society. And I shall pay it.

Scene 4 – Marcello meets Professor Quadri (Plato's cave and memory)

Marcello recalls a lesson on Plato's cave allegory and offers it back to Quadri as a "gift" of memory.

Professor: Yes, I remember.

Marcello: Now try to imagine some other men walking behind that low wall, carrying statues made of wood and clay. The statues are higher than the wall.

Professor: You could never have brought a better gift than these memories – Plato's chained prisoners.

Scene 5 – Manganiello's monologue (collapsing different Others)

After Marcello fails to act during the assassination attempt, Manganiello explodes in a violent rant.

Manganiello: (disgusted) How disgusting! I've always said so. Make me work in the shit – sure, but not with a coward! It's up to me!

Cowards, homosexuals, Jews – they're all the same thing! If it were up to me, I'd stand them all against a wall!

(He blows on his fingers in the stinging cold.)

Manganiello: Better yet – eliminate them when they're born!

Scene 6 – The night of Mussolini's fall (duty and the fall of dictatorship)

On the night the regime collapses, Marcello and Giulia talk about what will happen next.

Giulia: What are you going to do now?

Marcello: The same as everyone else who thought like me. When there are so many of us, there's no risk.

[…]

Giulia: Marcello, don't go out. They could hurt you.

Marcello: I won't be in danger. After all, what have I done? My duty.

Giulia: But why do you want to go?

Marcello: I want to see how a dictatorship falls.

Scene 7 – Marcello recognises Lino and betrays Italo (shifting the blame)

In the final sequence, Marcello recognises Lino in the street and publicly denounces him – and Italo – to the crowd.

(A street vendor calls out his goods.)

Lino: Chickens, butter, fresh cheese…

[…] (Marcello recognises him.)

[Marcello points Lino out to the crowd as a fascist, and then also denounces Italo, shifting responsibility for the past onto them while presenting himself as an ordinary victim of the regime.]