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EUGENIO BOLONGARO

INTRODUCTION: CAUGHT IN BERTOLUCCI'S WEB

BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI'S *THE SPIDER'S STRATAGEM* IS A WATERSHED WORK. Produced in 1969 for the Italian public television network RAI and broadcast the following year, the film is the last and most convincing product of that search for a new cinematic form that, as Kolker persuasively argues (1985, 36–67), characterizes Bertolucci's early works (*The Grim Reaper*, *Before the Revolution*, and *Partner*). At the same time, *The Spider's Stratagem* inaugurates the most creative period of Bertolucci's career, and, together with *The Conformist*, *Last Tango in Paris*, and *1900*, must be considered one of the films that define Bertolucci's mature style.

What most clearly distinguishes *The Spider's Stratagem* is the delicate balance that Bertolucci achieves in pursuing three main objectives: the exploration of the expressive possibilities of cinema as a specific medium; the commitment to examining the possible contribution of cinema to the struggle for political change; and the effort to develop a cinematic language that could

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reach a wide audience (such as RAI's). While in Bertolucci's previous work the first two of these concerns were clearly, stridently dominant,¹ in *The Spider's Stratagem* the attention paid to the expectations of an "average" viewer provides the impetus for a much more subtle and unobtrusive integration of experimental techniques and controversial issues within an engaging and relatively accessible narrative. The result is a multilayered film that captivates the viewer while making few concessions to commercial cinema and even fewer to the alleged constraints of the made-for-TV feature. In sum, it was a remarkable accomplishment that played an important role in establishing Bertolucci as one of the leading directors of his generation, not only in Italy but also internationally.

In this context, it is not surprising that *The Spider's Stratagem* has received wide critical attention. A survey of the scholarship provides many valuable insights and discloses an odd yet telling blind spot. Overall, the critics can be divided into three main groups. The first group is composed of critics who focus on what may be termed a "close viewing" of the film. Within this group two main orientations can be detected: on the one hand, the critics who attempt to situate the film within the framework of Bertolucci's opus as a whole,² and on the other those who discuss it primarily as an adaptation of the short story by Jorge Luis Borges upon which it is based.³ Borrowing from Hayden White (1999), whose work is, as we shall see, especially relevant to the study of *The Spider's Stratagem*, I will call this first group the formalists.⁴ The second group is composed of critics who undertake a historical analysis of the film and situate it firmly within the Italian context.⁵ Again borrowing from Hayden White, I will call this group the contextualists. The third group comprises critics who concentrate on what I would call "the economy of desire" in the film. Some of these critics take a psychoanalytic approach and rely on Freudian/Lacanian categories (the Oedipal complex, the mirror stage), while others delve more directly into Bertolucci's biography.⁶ I also include in this group a study like Loshitsky's (1995), which uses the category of gender to discuss many of the issues of sexuality and power that also concern psychoanalysis. Naturally these three groups are not self-contained, but frequently overlap. For example, Kolker (1985) undertakes a contextual and Oedipal analysis of Bertolucci's opus in the last chapter of his book. Some interesting studies of *The Spider's Stratagem* are truly hybrid, combining a biographical approach and a political approach (Amengual 1997; Magny 1979), or a psychoanalytic approach and a historical approach (Delle Vacche 1992).

This brief taxonomy of the secondary literature is designed to demonstrate how wide-ranging the discussion of the film has been. And yet one of the most surprising aspects of this discussion, particularly given the way in which the current critical mood favors a multiplicity of interpretations, is that all the critics substantially concur on the film's fundamental meaning: that *The Spider's Stratagem* is about ambiguity, indeterminacy, undecidability. Whether our focus is on cinematic technique and narrative development, on sexual and psychological identity, or on political ideology what we find is a discourse in which, as Matteo puts it, "there is no answer. The intent of the movie is to articulate the question, not to provide an answer" (Matteo 1988, 23). In the end, everyone explicitly or implicitly agrees that the film places us inside a structure similar to an Escher drawing. Like Athos Jr., the protagonist of the film, we are drawn into the illusion and become its prisoners. In this article, I propose to challenge this consensus, but first it is essential to see how far these approaches take us in developing a rigorous and multifaceted reading of the film. This will allow me to explore the strengths and expose the limits of the extant readings as a prelude to addressing the blind spot that they all share.

In my analysis of *The Spider's Stratagem* I will rely especially on the readings developed by the "formalists" and the "contextualists," while drawing less extensively from the "economy of desire" approach, which I find interesting but less germane to my discussion.

BERTOLUCCI AND THE REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY

The Spider's Stratagem has a rather complicated plot. The film begins with Athos Magnani's arrival in Tara, a small town in the plain of the Po River. Athos's father was born in Tara, where he lived until 1936, when he was murdered under mysterious circumstances while attending an opera performance. Though the murderer and his accomplices were never discovered, the version of the facts promoted by Athos Sr.'s friends and accepted by the whole town was that Fascists were responsible. They had discovered that Athos Sr. was involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Mussolini, who was expected to visit Tara to inaugurate the opera season. The visit never took place, and Athos Sr. was murdered during the opera performance at precisely the instant when the Duce was to be killed. Thirty years later, Draifa, Athos Sr.'s lover, invites Athos Jr. to come to Tara and find those responsible for his father's death so that they can finally be brought to justice. Now in post-World War

II Italy, Athos Sr. has become a symbol of anti-Fascist heroism, celebrated in public monuments all over town. Athos Jr. rather reluctantly takes up the task of investigating his father's murder, but eventually he learns the truth: the conspiracy against Mussolini had been foiled by an informer, who was Athos Sr. himself. Athos Sr. then confessed his betrayal to his co-conspirators and with them orchestrated his own murder in order to help the cause of anti-Fascism by providing it with a hero rather than a traitor. Athos Jr. has an opportunity to reveal the truth in a public speech but does not. At the end of the film, Athos Jr. is waiting at the station for the train that would take him away from Tara. But the train is constantly delayed. As the film ends, Athos Jr. looks at the rails and notices that they are overgrown with tall grass.

The plot of the film has a literary source that is identified in the opening credits: Borges's short story "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero." The circular nature of the plot and the reference to Borges inform us that *The Spider's Stratagem* is a self-reflexive modernist text that focuses on the problem of history and its representation, as well as on the role of intertextuality in fiction/film making. Thus, it is useful and appropriate to begin our analysis by considering in some detail the relationship between the two texts that are most obviously at stake, namely, Bertolucci's and Borges's.

Borges's "Theme" is not really a short story, but rather a mere outline of a story, a sketch which invites further elaboration. It begins as follows:

Under the notable influence of Chesterton (contriver and embellisher of elegant mysteries) and the palace counselor Leibniz (inventor of the pre-established harmony), in my idle afternoons I have imagined this story plot which I shall perhaps write someday and which already justifies me somehow. Details, rectifications, adjustments are lacking; there are zones of the story not yet revealed to me; today, January 3rd, 1944. I seem to see it as follows:

The action takes place in an oppressed and tenacious country: Poland, Ireland, the Venetian Republic, some South American or Balkan State [. . .]. Or rather it has taken place, since, though the narrator is contemporary, his story occurred towards the middle or the beginning of the nineteenth century. Let us say (for narrative convenience) Ireland; let us say in 1824. (Borges 1964, 72)

There is much that would warrant comment in this rather extraordinary opening. Let us consider a few key points. First, Borges is flaunting the literariness of his text. He immediately invokes the tutelage of two important

figures in the European intellectual tradition (Chesterton and Leibniz), to whom must be added Yeats, whose verses are printed immediately below the title and before the body of the text. In addition, the discourse issues from a narrator who identifies himself as a writer. In the "Theme," this author/narrator sets out his plans to write a story about a historian who is writing a biography of a historical (but fictional) figure.⁷ Mirrors within mirrors within mirrors, or, as Cisneros would put it, circles within circles within circles. The procedure is typically Borgesian. The issue here is, however, how Bertolucci responds to these suggestions.

The "formalists" are quick to point out that the Italian director begins his film in a manner that in many respects mimics Borges's radically self-reflexive style. However, the devices that Bertolucci uses are primarily, though not exclusively, visual; for example, as many critics have pointed out, the opening shots of the train that brings Athos Jr. to Tara clearly evoke the famous sequence by the Lumière brothers of a locomotive pulling into the station, one of the inaugurating moments of cinema and a sophisticated way to remind the viewer of the presence of a narrating camera, as well as of a self-conscious discourse about cinema. And, as we follow Athos Jr. out of the station, we enter a visual environment strongly reminiscent of Hopper's and Magritte's works.⁸ All these elements confer on Bertolucci's filmic text a self-conscious quality strongly reminiscent of the incipit of Borges's story.

The "contextualists" point out that Bertolucci's citations, unlike Borges's, have a clear referential function. They situate the narrative within a framework that is geographically precise (the opening titles scroll over images of paintings by Antonio Ligabue, a painter of the region of Italy where Tara is located), historically (the debate about realism in art, to which Hopper's and Magritte's works made important contributions, was a dominant feature of Italian cultural life after World War II), and cinematically (in the aftermath of neorealism and of the early work of French director Jean-Luc Godard, the Lumière brothers are seen as the precursors of the postwar argument against the normalizing use of montage).

In sum, these references anchor the filmic text in a spatially and temporally specific context. This represents a departure from Borges's opening, the intent of which is precisely to discount the importance of any precise setting, whether literary (the connections between Chesterton, Leibniz, and Yeats are tenuous) or geographic and historical. Borges in effect tells his reader that the story could take place anywhere at anytime provided certain formal characteristics obtain: it is a mystery (Chesterton) having to do with

universal harmony (Leibniz); its characters are members of an oppressed and tenacious group caught in the cyclical dance of time (Yeats).

The contextualizing effect of Bertolucci's citations is further strengthened by a series of images that produce a strong sense of place. There is a neorealistic quality to the initial sequences. As Kolker stresses: "The basic cinematic source for the film is neo-realism. Not the neo-realism of working-class characters but the *idea* of neo-realism that builds its texts out of precise and detailed observations of character in landscape" (1985, 107; emphasis Kolker's). The town is immediately identified: the name Tara appears on a sign. The camera lingers on its architecture, street signs, and monuments. We soon find out that Tara is not far from Pavia, another detail that situates the narrative within a specific geographical and historical context: we are in a region of Italy (the Emilia-Romagna) that was the breeding ground for Fascism and anti-Fascism, as well as the theater of a great deal of political violence before, during, and after Mussolini's regime. These elements do not merely provide a backdrop but are integral to the plot. Athos Sr.'s story is that of an anti-Fascist's struggle against the regime, a struggle that had to take a particular form in 1936 (political assassination), when Fascism was at its apex. Beccaccia, the suspected murderer of Athos Sr., and the largest local landowner, was a Fascist fanatic like most of the members of his social class. In other words, unlike Borges's sketch, this story could not have taken place in just any time or place: its full intelligibility depends upon our grasping a specific historical and social situation.

And yet formalist analyses of the film would gloss this argument by noting that the name Tara also has at least three other pertinent dimensions. First, it suggests a congenital defect (one of the literal meanings of the word in Italian), a flaw passed down from generation to generation, and that would foreshadow the fact that Athos Jr. is doomed to repeat Athos Sr.'s choices. Second, "Tara" is a fictional name (the real town where the film was shot is called Sabbioneta), composed of the first two syllables of the most feared spider found in Italy (the tarantula) as well as of the famous dance that both manifests and attempts to fight off the paralyzing effect of its bite (the tarantella). The allusions to the title and to Athos Jr.'s predicament are obvious. Third, Tara is also the name of the plantation to which the protagonist of *Gone with the Wind* retires at the end of her tribulations, suggesting an intertextual link that might open up another, though by no means obvious, avenue of interpretation. In any case, these considerations draw our attention to the polysemantic nature of the film.

Thus, we encounter a fundamental dynamic that sees contextualist and formalist critiques engaged in a dialogue that gradually discloses an apparently irresolvable tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces. The former push the interpretation toward an emphasis on the sociohistorical context and the political commentary provided by the film, while the latter pull the interpretation toward an examination of the intertextual web that underpins the narrative and the technical devices deployed by Bertolucci to draw attention to his manipulation of the film medium. However, the most interesting observation is that these forces seem to be equally matched and indeed ultimately to draw strength from each other.

One of the merits of the formalist argument is to draw attention to how Bertolucci's editing and montages fragment the narrative. Bordwell's brilliant analysis of the technical aspects of *The Spider's Stratagem* remains paradigmatic (1985, 88–98 and 149–55). He convincingly demonstrates how the conventions that shape spectator expectations of how cinema tells a coherent story are constantly challenged by Bertolucci. The audience is disoriented and ultimately unable to separate the real from the imaginary, present from past actions, and eventually unable even to judge from what point of view—real or imaginary, present or past—the narrative is presented. However, Bordwell does not argue that Bertolucci systematically violates all conventions, making it impossible for the viewer to follow the plot. Rather, the viewer is usually able to make sense of the story, although not with absolute certainty. Despite the narrative's complexities and ambiguities, the story continues to function and remains intelligible. At the same time, the manipulation of images introduces doubt and a constant sense of unease. We never quite see enough, there are unresolved gaps, destabilizing effects, without there ever being total chaos and confusion.

An excellent and much discussed example of this style is the scene of Athos Jr.'s meeting with his father's friend Gaibazzi. The sequence takes place in the room where Gaibazzi is keeping his famous *culatelli*. The conversation between Athos Jr. and Gaibazzi is punctuated by the testing of the cured hams, which adds a dynamic (the two men must keep moving) and a realistic element (local color of a regional culinary specialty) to the exchange. However, Bertolucci divides the sequence with three brief fades to black. This unusual device suggests that a significant amount of time has elapsed between the shots preceding and following the fade. However, in this case, the conversation picks up again more or less where it was interrupted (Kolker 1985, 111), leading the audience to wonder what was deleted. For

instance, it is possible that the conversation took place not all at once but over a few meetings. This would not change the substance of the story, but it raises uncertainty, leaving the viewer with a sense of unease, of perhaps having missed a crucial clue, a particularly distressing prospect in a film about a political conspiracy and assassination.

In this instance form and context clearly reinforce each other. The impact and significance of the fades to black that occur at this point in the film are dependent on the anchoring of the images in a realistically portrayed, well-defined situation strongly connected to the overall development of the plot and to the historical-ideological issues raised by the film. Because we are caught up in the mystery and its symbolic significance, the interruptions at what could be a critical juncture are especially disturbing.

At least two other sequences that are central to the understanding of the film deserve to be examined in light of these observations. The first is the sequence that portrays the initial meeting of Athos Jr. and Draifa. Athos bicycles into Draifa's villa through the courtyard. The arch under which he passes is not shown clearly, even though the camera follows his movements with a 360-degree shot that shows, first, the colonnade joining the front of the building to the main house, then the French windows of the house, then the wall. Then the camera scans the entrance arch (presumably the arch under which Athos Jr. passed) to return to the colonnade. When the camera halts briefly, we see a shadow between the columns. The shadow moves and we realize it is a woman, Draifa, whom Athos Jr. follows, crossing the colonnade and entering the house through a doorway that opens onto the garden. Described in this way, the sequence seems hardly disquieting because it would seem that the viewer has been presented with a complete panorama of the setting. However, because the courtyard is not portrayed 'objectively', in a single shot, spectators must reconstruct the space by mentally holding together the images that flow by smoothly, perhaps too smoothly. The camera is not far enough from the surrounding architecture to provide a solid sense of perspective. The circular motion creates a sense of vertigo and prevents us from seeing well; witness the fact that we do not see Draifa until she begins to move and the camera stops. In short, we do not 'see' what is in fact within our field of vision on the screen. The camera movement hides rather than reveals. As a result, the viewer feels trapped in this ambiguous space and relieved when Draifa appears on the side of the courtyard pulling Athos Jr.—and the spectator—out of the dizzying circle.

In this sequence, the sense that we are witnessing a crucial moment in the film is achieved through the unusual camerawork, particularly the 360-degree

pan, which, together with Draifa's sudden appearance, projects us into the artificial world of cinema as spectacle. A less showy but equally disorienting device is the camera's angle of vision during the 360-degree pan: it evokes Athos Jr.'s perspective without being attributable to it. The camera is too close to what it sees to coincide with Athos Jr.'s point of view, its movement is too smooth and quick. Yet one cannot help but wonder why the camera wanders in this way, if the director's purpose is not to show us what Athos Jr. perceives or could perceive. At the end of the sequence, the camera and Athos Jr. see Draifa at the same time.

However, the tensions and ambiguities in the scene strongly depend, for their emotional and cognitive impact, upon the context within which they take place. Athos Jr. knows that Draifa was Athos Sr.'s mistress, and the expression on the townspeople's faces when her name was mentioned strongly suggested that she has a central role to play in the drama. Moreover, her name (an feminization of Dreyfus, devised by Draifa's father who wanted to pay homage to the protagonist of the famous "affair") points not only to the traitor/hero dichotomy, but also to the issue of the role of intellectuals in national political struggles.⁹

The second sequence in which a striking formal device simultaneously challenges and evokes the historical and ideological discourse is Athos Jr.'s flight through the woods, which occurs after he is taken by Athos Sr.'s friends to the place where the conspiracy to assassinate Mussolini was hatched. As Kolker notes, this scene replicates exactly what happened to Athos Sr. in 1936: the same people who then chased the father are now chasing the son, and the reason is also virtually the same: the perceived or, in the son's case, feared betrayal of the anti-Fascist cause (Kolker 1985, 118). This sequence is remarkable because Bertolucci begins by juxtaposing images of Athos Sr. and Athos Jr. fleeing; it then combines the top of one body with the bottom of the other so that father/son and past/present "become one" (Campani 1998, 38).¹⁰ It might seem that this is precisely the kind of montage that would "de-realize" the narrative, that is to say free it from its sociohistorical moorings, and suggest, perhaps, an unresolved Oedipal complex. But, far from removing the action from a specific time and place, the sequence reminds us that the situation is especially horrible because it is being repeated. Father and son, past and present, are united; and the spectator must simultaneously behold difference and sameness.

In other words, Bertolucci's masterful use of cinematic techniques is striking in its ability to immerse the viewer in the problematic status of history in

Tara (Tara's predicament is symbolic of that of postwar Italy). The town is "frozen" in time, but not just any time, rather a particular moment, indeed a particular night: May 15, 1936 (the date of Athos Sr.'s assassination, which appears on the calendar in the background of the dinner at Draifa's where the surviving conspirators once more confront Beccaccia). This temporal stasis is underscored when Draifa, Beccaccia, and all the characters that appear in the flashbacks to 1936 have not aged a day.

When we move from the examination of the impact of cinematic technique to the issue of intertextuality, we encounter a similar congruence of formal and contextual elements. Bertolucci's indebtedness to Borges extends to a number of conspicuous citations, such as the use of Shakespearean narratives (*Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*) in the construction of the hero myth and the orchestration of a performance that involves the whole town. Like Kilpatrick in Borges's "Theme," Athos Sr.'s death is preceded by the delivery of a warning note that will never be opened. The story of the gipsy who foretold Athos Sr.'s death is also found in the "Theme" and, through the "Theme," alludes to the role of the witches who foretell the fate of Banquo and Macbeth in Shakespeare's darkest tragedy. Borges operates as the most immediate link in an expanding intertextual network.

The historical Julius Caesar, of whom Shakespeare's play was an interpretation, was a central figure in the Fascist myth of *latinità*, which was also an interpretation of Roman history. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (also based on a historical figure) was turned into an opera by Giuseppe Verdi, an artist who played an important role in the history of Italian national self-affirmation, in which both Fascism and anti-Fascism saw themselves inscribed. Verdi's shadow is directly evoked in *The Spider's Stratagem* by the performance of *Rigoletto*,¹¹ which provides the setting for three key events in the film: the planned assassination of Mussolini, which, though never carried out, underlies the whole narrative; the assassination/execution/suicide of Athos Sr.; and, finally, the revelation of the truth to Athos Jr. We might well note that, like *Macbeth*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* is a reworking of a play, Victor Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse*, which was banned on its first appearance for its antimonarchic, republican sentiments. Also, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Rigoletto* all thematize the issues of betrayal and fatherhood in a manner that alludes to the predicament of Athos Sr. and Jr.

Once we embark on this kind of analysis, the citations, allusions, and references multiply, presenting myriad interpretive possibilities. For example, the film contains explicit citations of two other canonical texts in the Italian

literary tradition: Giacomo Leopardi's "Il sabato del villaggio" and Giovanni Pascoli's "La cavalla storna." A few verses of these poems are recited by the boy who brings Athos Jr. coffee in the morning at his hotel, a detail that surprisingly has not drawn more critical attention. The significance of these citations is unclear. It may be that they are justified mimetically merely by the fact that the two poems belong to the repertory schoolchildren were taught to memorize.

Leopardi's poem ends by inviting his interlocutor to enjoy the time of life marked by the anticipation of pleasure rather than its realization, which, it is suggested, may well be disappointing. It may be a warning for Athos Jr. that the "truth" he is after may not be what he expects, that he should focus on the journey rather than the destination, the "investigation" rather than its outcome. Tara does provide a never-ending series of strong, singular characters whose lives are marked by passionate loves and hates; it seems that the self-interest of Athos Jr. would be better served if he just let himself enjoy the show.

Pascoli's poem is about the murder of the poet's father. The circumstances of the crime were never fully clarified and the instigator was never punished. Pascoli was merely a boy at the time of the tragedy, which, not surprisingly, deeply shaped his life and sensibility. Indeed, Leopardi (who, like Bertolucci, had an extremely problematic relationship with his father), as well as Pascoli were sometimes presented (particularly to schoolchildren) as the poets of terminal adolescence. Is this how we should consider Athos Jr.? Indeed, such a reading could easily substantiate a psychoanalytic approach: we know nothing of the son's life, and by the end of the film it is possible to interpret his refusal to expose/reject his father's legacy as a refusal of separation and adulthood. Athos Jr. will remain forever Athos Sr.'s son.

Thus, intertextuality fragments the text and disseminates meaning beyond the possibility of reconciliation within a single coherent interpretation. However, as was the case with the ambiguities introduced by editing and camerawork, here we must not rush to conclude that the centripetal force of intertextuality makes interpretation of *The Spider's Stratagem* impossible. In fact, there is no contradiction between considering Bertolucci's film as the product of a vast network of literary, visual, and aural "texts" that open the way for a wide range of different interpretations, and understanding that all these interpretive suggestions revolve around a clear set of issues: the relationships between fiction and history, ideology and truth, cinema and cognition. Admittedly, these are vast issues that allow for a wide range of positions.

But once the problem has been formulated this way, these three issues provide a frame within which the ambiguities, indeterminacies, and fragmentations of the text acquire a specific meaning. Indeed, the extant scholarship converges toward the articulation of this meaning.

Bertolucci's film is fundamentally about fiction making and the way in which our understanding of the world is replete with fictions, increasingly cinematic fictions. On this, the three perspectives mentioned above agree. When seen in this light, *The Spider's Stratagem* becomes a meditation on the limits of interpretation and how these limits make problematic the cinematic representation of history and, ultimately, of reality. This reading of Bertolucci's film entails an interesting final reversal.

As a mystery, the film has an epistemological telos. Athos Jr.'s task is to find out who killed his father, to discover the truth. But by the end of the film, it becomes clear that the difficulties he encounters are less epistemological than ontological in nature.¹² The question Athos Jr. has to answer is not so much "how do I know what I know?" but "what kind of world is this in which I find myself?" The most serious difficulty for Athos Jr. is not to establish what happened (there is no controversy over fundamental facts—his father was involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Mussolini and was murdered in 1936), but how to interpret what happened. Athos Jr. solves the "mystery" not through the discovery of new clues but rather through a gradual understanding of the world that is Tara. The 360-degree shot in the courtyard of Draifa's house now acquires its full significance: it entraps Athos Jr. by drawing around him a horizon that defines him. Draifa is the agent through which Athos (re)enters that world and (re)acquires an identity. Tara is the circle within which Athos's life is meaningful.

Here we discover the closest similarity between Bertolucci's and Borges's stories. In Tara, the power of fiction is not merely retrospective—emplotting history in a narrative—but also prospective—attempting to encode in the narrative of historical events a given interpretation. Athos Sr. orchestrated his own execution so that it would be interpreted as a hero's story. In this he succeeded, and the anti-Fascist historiography has carved this interpretation in the stone monuments scattered through Tara. Can Athos Jr., who has discovered the lie, undo this interpretation? He can certainly propose another interpretation based on additional facts ignored by the official story, an interpretation that could show his father as a manipulator and his father's friends as willing executioners and accomplices. But what would be the point of this? Athos Jr. can undo historiography but he cannot undo history. And, most

importantly, what would be the use of his revelation? The answer to these questions cannot be found in the facts. The answer depends on Athos Jr.'s ability to formulate a project that would shape his interpretation of history and justify the political decision to destroy the old Tara, built on his father's lies, and begin laying the foundations of a new Tara. This is an ideological issue, and consequently the area in which the contextualists can make the strongest contribution to the discussion.

The reason Athos Jr. cannot find a position from which to challenge his father's legacy has less to do with the problems inherent to interpretation than with the particular sociohistorical context within which he and the film operate. It is true that his father was both a traitor and a hero: he betrayed anti-Fascism but also gave his life for it. But this paradox is not in itself paralyzing; on the contrary, it may be motivating precisely insofar as it beckons the subject to choose a position rather than merely "find" one in the facts. What is paralyzing is the nebulous anti-Fascism that became the "state" ideology in postwar Italy. As Bondanella, one of the most eloquent proponents of the contextualist approach, states:

The Spider's Stratagem appeared in a moment of Italian history when ideological lines were sharply drawn, both in politics and in the cinema. [. . .] Thus, when the film first appeared, it was interpreted as another of the many reinterpretations of Italian Fascism that were to characterize the cinema of the period. [. . .] For in his film, he [Bertolucci] pictured the political mythology of the anti-Fascist Resistance not only as a noble and vital part of post-war Italian culture but also as a fiction, a comfortable illusion consciously created by man and employed to manipulate political opinion. In short, Bertolucci defined the Resistance as not merely a historical "fact" but an *ideological* phenomenon. [. . .]

Going beyond the mere opposition to Fascism by the evocation of an anti-Fascist mythology, Bertolucci also recognized that political beliefs cannot be venerated forever as eternal verities. It is this courageous insight that makes *The Spider's Stratagem* more than just another historical portrayal of the evils of Fascism. (Bondanella 1988, 13–14; his emphasis)

For Bondanella, Bertolucci's film is a criticism of the anti-Fascist ideology that provided the founding myth of the Italian Republic in 1946, an ideological consensus that came to an abrupt end in the 1948 elections. At that point the country was split in two, and the myth continued to operate as an

increasingly weak legitimation of the republican order. By 1970, the myth had become empty rhetoric and paralyzing dogma.

However, the attentive formalist critic would note that there is an ambiguity in the distinction that Bondanella draws between "fact" and "ideology." This is a crucial distinction because it allows Bondanella to say that the anti-Fascism of the Resistance (and, therefore, presumably, Athos Sr.'s) was "noble and vital" because it was a response to an immediate historical reality, namely, the "fact" of Fascism. On the other hand, postwar Italy's (and thus Athos Jr.'s) anti-Fascism is vacuous and anachronistic, that is, it is an "ideological" response to a lingering myth. However, this line of argument runs into difficulties.

Bertolucci does not portray Athos Sr.'s anti-Fascism in a positive light, as Bondanella's argument would require. The conspiracy to blow up the Duce during the inaugural performance of the opera season is clearly childish (and is mocked in the film by the co-conspirators, who mimic the explosion) and doomed to fail. Furthermore, Athos Sr. is presented as a morally ambiguous character. He betrays the conspiracy and exposes his friends to serious reprisals. He also betrays his wife and, although Draifa boldly asserts that she was his "official mistress," the fact that Athos Jr. was conceived just around the time of Athos Sr.'s death demonstrates that the latter was not estranged from his wife. Most fatal of all is the fact that it is precisely Athos Sr.'s elaborate deception that has frozen Tara inside a time warp. The main evidence of the passage of time in the town is the presence of monuments celebrating the myth of Athos Sr.'s heroism, monuments that belie the persistence not only of old hatreds but also of unchanged social relations (the liberation seems to have left Tara largely untouched in terms of class relations, and Beccaccia still rules from his mansion beyond the highway). The film provides no support for the proposition that Athos Sr.'s anti-Fascism is "better" (that is to say, less "ideological"), because it is more historically appropriate than the postwar anti-Fascism of Athos Jr. On the contrary, the film presents Athos Jr. as the victim of his father's actions, and shows an increasing coalescence of past and present. Athos Jr. becomes more and more like his father (the sequence when the two figures fuse is key, as we have seen), and, in the end, the son's lie closely resembles the father's: Athos Sr. committed suicide by orchestrating his own execution, while Athos Jr. commits a symbolic suicide by refusing to reveal the truth, thus locking himself and Tara inside the prison of mystifications his father had built. If there is something inherently "wrong" with anti-Fascism and its ideology, then, following this line of reasoning, it was as wrong in 1936 as it is in 1970.

Moreover, we must also question the notion that the film is primarily about the struggle between Fascism and anti-Fascism. Bertolucci makes no concerted effort to explore Fascism and its ideology, or, for that matter, anti-Fascism.¹³ The Fascist / anti-Fascist dichotomy functions much like the bad guys / good guys in a Western. But this story focuses more on the 'good' guys—showing us that they are more sinister than we might think—than on the struggle between the two factions. In sum, there seems to be ample evidence in the film to justify Matteo's (1988) historical pragmatism: the film only asks questions and points to the fact that history is a web of fictions. From Matteo's perspective, Athos Jr. realizes at the end the impossibility of overcoming the inherently fictional nature of history. This stance is undoubtedly a comment on the cultural and political climate of Italy in 1970 (Bondanella is correct in this regard), but it reaches beyond the Italian context and attacks all attempts to legitimate what Lyotard would call "grand narratives."

At this point, we see how the consensus among the critics has emerged. Athos Jr. cannot reject his father's legacy because both logics of the narrative, the formal and the contextual (and we may add the psychoanalytic logic as well), demand it. The formalist emphasis on epistemological ambiguities rejoins the contextualist emphasis on ideological ambivalence; both are supported by the analysis of an irresolvable psychological and sexual complex (e.g., an unresolved Oedipus complex). The world of Tara, in other words, is a three-dimensional cul-de-sac.

This is the conclusion of the analysis based upon the extant scholarship, which has yielded a rich and multilayered reading. However, I cannot help but feel a profound sense of dissatisfaction with this conclusion. First of all, Bertolucci's profile as a director and an intellectual make it untenable to propose that he would place on an equal footing the "fictions" or "ideologies" of Fascism and anti-Fascism. Second, the film does not provide a justification for Athos Sr.'s or Athos Jr.'s behavior. Indeed, the opposite appears to be the case, as we shall see. Finally, it is impossible to watch the film and conclude that the time warp within which Tara is trapped is a natural, normal, and inevitable situation, given the inherent limits of interpretation and representation. Something is rotten in Tara; something is seriously wrong with Athos Sr. and Jr., and Bertolucci's goal is not simply to fatalistically document this state of affairs. I will argue, in contrast to the critics I have encountered (Bondanella is the exception but his reading does not develop this intuition), that there are much sharper moral and political edges to

Bertolucci's discourse. This dimension of *The Spider's Stratagem* can be reached by pushing the contextualist and the formalist approaches further than their practitioners themselves have attempted.

I contend that *The Spider's Stratagem* is not a film about Fascism or anti-Fascism in general but rather about a particular kind of anti-Fascism, specifically the sort advocated by Athos Sr., an anti-Fascism that was of particular interest to Bertolucci as an Italian intellectual making films in the late 1960s. In other words, the issue for Bertolucci is not to provide a general critique of anti-Fascist ideology but rather to identify something that has clearly gone wrong in a particular manifestation of that ideology, or, to put it historically, something that *went* wrong and has caused postwar anti-Fascism to become a stultifying ideology. Therefore, we must ask what makes Athos Sr.'s ideology (and later his son's adherence to it) problematic. In order to answer this question we cannot simply remain within the web of ambiguous fictions. We need to recover a sense of truth as well as a sense of right and wrong, or, to be a little more precise, we need to find a place for truth in ideology and a place for history in fiction. Let it be clear that the issue is not to transcend dialectically the opposition between these concepts but rather to articulate a fruitful coexistence and complementarity between them. This kind of discussion cannot be broached, however, as long as we attempt to historicize the ethical dimension out of existence. Historical understanding makes us sensitive to the stakes involved in embracing a given set of ethical principles (the predicaments and dilemmas in which these principles may land us), but cannot in and of itself ground those principles or altogether erase the question of ethics and values. Indeed, the notion of emplotment (which the theory of the inherently ideological nature of historical knowledge espouses) puts the question of values on the historian's agenda.

ETHICS AND TRUTH IN *THE SPIDER'S STRATAGEM*

The consensual horizon that the current readings of *The Spider's Stratagem* define eludes the question of morality and truth. For the formalists, truth seems to be merely an effect of power: the myth of Athos Sr. is "true" because it manifests the meaning of Fascism from the point of view of the postwar anti-Fascist hegemony. From the contextualist vantage point, Athos Sr.'s myth is seen as something both true and false because in propagating a false account of what happened it exposes a truth: namely, the ideological dimension of anti-Fascism. Both these stances avoid the fundamental ethical fact:

Athos Sr.'s plan was an elaborate lie, a deliberate manipulation of reality. Undoubtedly this lie reveals many truths (about Fascism and anti-Fascism), but this fact in no way alters the moral character of the act. Indeed, the most important truth that Athos Sr.'s conduct reveals is that no real knowledge, no new practice, no new world can emerge from a web of lies. Indeed, such webs create tangles from which it becomes very difficult to extricate oneself even when the possibility for telling the truth arises. It takes an Alexander to cut through a Gordian knot of mystifications, and Athos Jr. is there to remind us that not many of us have such mettle.

The argument that truth matters in *The Spider's Stratagem* moves from the observation of an important difference between Bertolucci's film and Borges's story. For the Argentine, historical truth is always textually mediated. The protagonist of the story is a historian, Ryan, who is researching the life of the traitor/hero Kilpatrick. Ryan is Kilpatrick's great-grandson. His interest in his forbearers is not due to familial ties but rather to the fact that Kilpatrick is a national hero celebrated by "the *verses* of Browning and Hugo" (Borges 1964, 72; my emphasis). The myth of Kilpatrick is the creation of a certain Nolan, a *translator* of Shakespeare and a theater scholar. Nolan's theatrical disclosure of Kilpatrick's treason leads to Kilpatrick's signing of his own death warrant. This document, however, is unavailable and Ryan finds in another document that the name of the traitor condemned to death by Kilpatrick was deleted from the records. Nolan orchestrates the execution, borrowing freely from his literary and theatrical knowledge. According to Ryan's reconstruction of Nolan's account, even Kilpatrick's last words are scripted. At the conclusion of the "Theme," Ryan's last act is to write a false biography of Kilpatrick that confirms the popular myth of his heroism.

In the end, the reader wonders if it is possible to trust anything these writers have written, since all of them appear determined to lie. The web of lies brings the very notion of truth into question. It is impossible to know if Kilpatrick was a traitor or even if his betrayal was a scheme designed to induce the council to go along with the elaborate lie that would ensconce Kilpatrick as a national hero. After all, Kilpatrick himself asked Nolan to investigate. If everybody is lying, then the only thing that is ascertainable is the effect of the lies. In the "Theme" the effect is to promote the nationalist cause; that is the only "truth" of the situation. And yet, at the end of story, Borges does not present Ryan's decision to rally behind the myth/truth of Kilpatrick's heroism out of an ideological commitment to the cause of Irish nationalism, and not even out of epistemological doubt: at the very end,

Ryan suspects not only that his great-grandfather's death was in fact orchestrated—the ambiguities in the records have if anything confirmed his belief in this version of events—but also that the mastermind of this elaborate deception deliberately left behind enough clues so that someone investigating the events might discover the actual truth *and yet decide to keep silent*.

Borges's logic is stringent up to this point. The obvious question at the end of the "Theme" is not "what is truth?" but rather "why does Ryan keep silent?" And on this question Borges offers a truly "metaphysical" answer: Ryan keeps silent because the logic of the text(s) dictates that the game of deception must continue—the original sin of the ancestor taints Ryan and binds him to silence. But, of course, this is a sophism. Nothing binds Ryan to silence; the decision is his own: it is the ultimate ruse of those unwilling to take responsibility for their own actions to seek refuge in allegedly inescapable external determinations. The fact that Nolan might have anticipated Ryan's conduct may well fascinate the historian with a metaphysical bent but cannot logically constrain anyone's behavior (even Christian theologians have long maintained that divine foreknowledge in no way diminishes free will). Borges's closure of the narrative circle is a surrender to a metaphysical fantasy (which tells us a great deal more about Borges's desire than about the relationship between fiction, history, and reality). One of the many merits of Bertolucci's film is the rejection of such mesmerizing metaphysics.

In *The Spider's Stratagem*, the plot is less convoluted than in the "Theme," and the textual mediations are largely eliminated.¹⁴ Athos Jr. does not learn about his father through texts but through direct conversations with eyewitnesses. Also, the camera sees more than Athos Jr. does; indeed it sees more than any single character, giving it a clear epistemological privilege (though by no means absolute knowledge) that allows it to validate as true a particular version of the facts. We witness Athos Sr. admitting his betrayal and being beaten for it. We witness him orchestrating his own execution. In Bertolucci's film, the truth emerges with difficulty because of the many gaps and contradictions, but in the end it does emerge rather clearly. We are not stuck in an endless maze of mirrors; rather, we are trapped in a web in which legend and reality interact without losing their respective identities. The relationship between these two distinct dimensions (the "truth" and the "lie") raises the ethical issue that is in my view central to *The Spider's Stratagem*.

One of the most important moments in the film is the speech that Athos Sr. delivers from the top of a tower that offers a panoramic view of Tara.

Addressing his friends in a tone and location that strongly evoke Christ's preaching to his disciples, Athos Sr. declares that anti-Fascism needs a hero more than a traitor. His execution can be made to look like an assassination and then it will help the cause by turning him into a martyr. This speech constitutes Athos Sr.'s intellectual testament. It is the essence of his legacy—a profoundly nefarious one. Not only does Athos Sr. demonstrate a typically modern hubris (man can master the world and bend it to his will), but he enlists the power of lying, of deliberate untruth and manipulation, to promote his political project. Athos Sr. eulogizes carefully planned deceit as a means of political struggle. Moreover, the lie is meant to deceive not merely Athos Sr.'s immediate political opponents but the community as whole. When the plan is carried out, it acts as a spell on Tara that becomes the "objective correlative" of Athos Sr.'s fabrication, the material manifestation of Athos Sr.'s perverse logic. Moral failure taints all of Tara's inhabitants. By accepting Athos Sr.'s lie and the logic behind it, they are trapped within a time warp in which the same lies are repeated and celebrated over and over again although everyone knows or at least suspects that they are fabrications. While in Borges's story, Ryan's decision to confirm the lie is presented as an inescapable, metaphysical doom, a willful moral blindness (*una "tara"*) prevents Tara and its people from speaking the truth; this blindness is embraced by a community that, like the general Italian society of the time, does not want to face painful and crucial questions: for example, is the Resistance a "failed revolution" like the Risorgimento? What are the real rather than the rhetorical accomplishments of anti-Fascism? Has the rhetoric of anti-Fascism become a way to avoid addressing current political issues rather than dealing with them?

If the principle of truthfulness is abandoned (Habermas 1990), there can be no useful discussion of these questions, and discourse will only reiterate the same falsehoods. Athos Sr.'s lie is a fiction but, more importantly, Athos Sr.'s fiction is a lie. The two statements are not equivalent because *lie* and *fiction* are not true synonyms. White (1999) would agree that while we can only grasp events through emplotment (i.e., by conferring on events a narrative structure), and while a series of events may be emplotted in a theoretically indefinite number of ways, emplotments that deny ascertained events are demonstrably false. For example, the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 is an ascertained event; any account that denies it is demonstrably false.¹⁵ Obviously, an emplotment that knowingly suppresses certain events and invents others is even more false. Athos Sr.

hijacks the power of fiction and imagination and knowingly warps it to tell an untruth. This is precisely the opposite of the ethical use of fiction and imagination as a means of exploring not only what is (a difficult enough task), but also what ought to be—those human aspirations and utopian possibilities which are at the heart of any hope for real political change.¹⁶

We can now see that what is wrong with Athos Sr.'s anti-Fascism is that it is "ideological" not in the neutral sense of partial and partisan but in the negative sense of false (Hall 1996).¹⁷ The narrative that Athos Sr. produces is not an honest "emplotment" of the past but a deliberately misleading and knowingly manipulative story that liquidates history. It is not an interpretation, it is a demonstrably false account. Moreover, it is a false account that sets itself up as a truthful critique of another account, namely Fascism. One might say that Athos Sr. is fighting fire with fire, Fascist lies with anti-Fascist lies, but the effect is to undermine the basic standard from which any historical judgment can be legitimately made. By reducing history, others, and even himself to mere tools of an ideology of emancipation, Athos Sr. is defeating the principles that sustain that ideology, making emancipation impossible.

Athos Jr. remains stranded in Tara because his discovery of the truth does not lead him to break the circle of lies but to confirm it. Like his father, Athos Jr. does not have the courage, the moral stamina, or the lucidity to denounce the comfortable untruths that paralyze his community. However, the point of the ending is not so much to invite the viewer to escape Tara's narrow horizon but rather to indicate how difficult and painful it is to break away from the reassuring lies that are part of our heritage. The film sounds a double warning: beware of expedient lies and manipulations—they are like a Mephistophelian bargain that buys short-term advantage at the cost of all that truly matters; but also beware of assuming that the mere discovery of those lies is liberating: it is the condition precedent to liberation, which can only be attained through a principled articulation of an alternative project in the present. Athos Jr. is too isolated and vulnerable to be capable of formulating such a project.

From this vantage point, it also becomes possible to push the contextualist analysis further. While Bondanella is correct in asserting that Bertolucci is commenting on Italian politics in the late 1960s, it must be specified that Bertolucci's target is not so much the tired anti-Fascist consensus and the political stagnation to which anti-Fascist ideology contributed. Rather, Bertolucci is attacking the unprincipled and opportunistic way in which the Italian political organizations and institutions of the time, including those on

the left, dealt with the issue of historical truth and indeed of truth in general. From the beginning of the Resistance in 1943 onward, the polarization of political and cultural life nationally and internationally made it virtually impossible for intellectuals and the public to confront honestly both Fascism and anti-Fascism. On the left, over and over again (from the Lysenko affair to the cases of dissidents like Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn, from the Gulag Archipelago to the invasion of Hungary and the crushing of the Prague Spring),¹⁸ Italian progressive intellectuals accepted deliberate manipulation and untruth as valid means of political and ideological struggle.

This led to a political situation so mired in lies and vacuous rhetoric that there was little room for authentic democratic debate, for making real progress in addressing basic human needs. In this world, truth was indeed an effect of power, but rather than congratulating himself on this insight, Bertolucci uses his film to denounce the situation and, implicitly, to challenge as dangerously partial a Foucauldian analysis of truth. If truth is *merely* an effect of power, then truth becomes an instrument of power. And then, it is not enough to observe that the effects of this instrumental approach to truth are never predictable and thus always escape the intentions of those who attempt to wield power. Nor is it enough to say that within a given social world there are always multiple and antagonistic sources of power. The fact is that the effects of power are *sufficiently predictable and coherent* to permit a group to dominate a social world for a long time, certainly long enough to paralyze that world and destroy many lives. As Foucault himself realized toward the end of his life, truth is more than merely what the discourses of power designate as such; it is also an ethical project, a constant striving guided by values and commitments, by ethical principles that, pace Nietzsche, are not reducible to a genealogy of power. At the end of the film, by refusing to confront the truth that power deliberately disfigures, Athos Jr. succumbs to power and becomes merely one of its effects. *The Spider's Stratagem's* final warning is that the dissolution of ethics into politics leads to the dissolution of politics into a kind of total ideological war in which everything is permitted and only winning matters—just as the reduction of truth to an effect of power leads to the reduction of power to a lust for control and domination for its own sake. In the Italian context, Bertolucci is arguing that as long as a cynical disregard for truthfulness, a strategy of rhetorical obfuscation, and plain unprincipled opportunism hold sway over political life, nothing can truly change no matter what labels are used.

CONCLUSION: TRUTH, MEANING, AND CRITICISM

The Spider's Stratagem is an intriguing and complex work that has lost none of its evocative and provocative power with the passage of time. I have attempted to do justice to this power by focusing attention on the ethical issues that in my view are central to Bertolucci's film. My reading exemplifies a renewed interest in ethics and truth in literary criticism. Truth, with or without a capital *T*, has had very bad press in the last few decades, especially in the humanities. The turn to theory in literary studies and other disciplines has led less to a problematization of the concept of truth than to its evacuation. This is certainly not the place to analyze in detail this trend or to challenge its philosophical underpinnings. However, *The Spider's Stratagem* provides us with an excellent opportunity to point out the shortcomings of a critical practice determined to avoid the problem of truth. In particular, Bertolucci's work invites us to ponder the possibility that the power of imagination to undermine reality, and the capacity of narrative to create open fictional worlds, while not admitting of a single and total interpretation, do not negate truth and meaning. Instead, imagination and narrative provide a ground for the constant challenge and, more importantly, rearticulation of truth and meaning. It may be time once again to think of criticism as a practice of truthfulness.

NOTES

1. "Cinema is a matter of style, and style is a moral fact. I remember a 360-degree circular traveling shot in a Nicholas Ray film, which I swear was one of the mostly intensely moral and consequently engaged things in the history of cinema." This statement is part of a short speech by the cinephile friend with whom Fabrizio, the protagonist of *Before the Revolution*, has gone to see Godard's *A Woman Is a Woman*. At the end of the scene the friend says to Fabrizio: "Remember, you cannot live without Rossellini!" These intrusive and rather crude devices to raise fundamental issues about cinema and its cognitive potential are characteristic of Bertolucci's early efforts and will later disappear.
2. The most sustained effort in this direction is made by Kolker (1985, 105–25), whose book, to my mind, remains the best and most thorough discussion of Bertolucci's work up to and including *The Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*. Extremely helpful for this approach is Bordwell (1985, 88–98 and 149–55), who analyzes in detail the narrative techniques used by Bertolucci. In the same vein, see Casetti (1974); Corbucci (1971); Tinazzi (1994); and Tonetti (1995).

3. Cisneros (2000) provides a detailed and provocative discussion in this vein. For a more traditional discussion of adaptation see Acosta (1993), Incledon (1995), and especially Cajati (2002).
4. In White, the formalist approach is characterized by "the effort to construct formal, general representations of social forms and processes," while the contextual approach is characterized by "the effort to comprehend social phenomena interpretively in the context of particular times and places" (1999, 44). While clearly designed to describe approaches to the writing of history, these definitions seem useful in the context of this paper, since history and its representation are the central issues in the film as well as in the scholarship. White himself authorizes the adoption of these categories in a literary environment insofar as he uses them to examine the debate between "new historicists" and "cultural materialists" in literary studies.
5. A persuasive argument in favor of this approach is made by Bondanella (1988); see also Matteo (1988), Lombardo (1994), and Flanagan (1999).
6. The most thorough psychoanalytic studies of Bertolucci's cinema are Kline's (1987) and, more recently, Campani's (1998). Typical of the familial approach is Roud (1971).
7. The point here is that Kilpatrick (the traitor/hero of "Theme") is a historical figure within the diegesis that in turn is a fiction created by Borges's imagination.
8. Kline examines in detail the influence of Magritte's paintings on Bertolucci's visual language in *The Spider's Stratagem* (1987, 66–70).
9. The reader will remember that Emile Zola penned his famous "J'accuse [. . .]"—which served to mobilize the French intelligentsia, giving birth to the modern debate about the political role of intellectuals—in the context of the Dreyfus affair.
10. This effect is greatly strengthened by the fact that the same actor plays both roles.
11. The importance of Verdi in *The Spider's Stratagem* is discussed extensively in Kolker (1985, 105–25) and Matteo (1988, 20–22).
12. I am borrowing the categories developed by McHale in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). McHale identifies two type of narratives. The first is driven by a desire to know *what actually happened* and explores the difficulties in establishing the meaning of events: these are primarily epistemological issues. The second type is driven by the desire to find out *what kind of world* we find ourselves in and how we can function in it: these are primarily ontological issues. McHale then goes on to argue that epistemological concerns are central to modernism, while the ontological concerns are central to postmodernism. I do not invoke the latter part of the argument but only the distinction between the epistemological and ontological dominant.
13. It should be noted that these ideological issues are central to *The Conformist*, which Bertolucci was filming almost at the same time as *The Spider's Stratagem*. The fundamental difference between the two films is that while *The Conformist* confronts directly Fascist ideology, in *The Spider's Stratagem*, Fascism—by which I mean specifically the Italian political regime led by Benito Mussolini—is in the final

analysis, as we shall see, more an element of the background of the story than of the foreground.

14. It is clear that one textual mediation cannot be eliminated, namely the cinematic one. Viewers always know that they are watching a film and consequently that "truth" is established not by reference to the world of actual experience but by reference to the imagined world that the fictional narrative evokes. Accordingly, we can avoid confusion in discussing problems of truth by keeping firmly in mind the ontological levels at which we are operating. "Madame Bovary is an adulterous woman" is a demonstrably true statement within the world of Flaubert's novel. It is of course possible to create fictional worlds in which truth is ambiguous or doubtful. It is also possible to create texts that blur the boundaries between the different ontological levels of reality and fiction (in film, Fellini's *Intervista* comes to mind).
15. The terms *ascertained* and *demonstrably false* raise important theoretical issues. I cannot deal with these issues in this context but let me note that, usually, the difficult question for historians and philosophers of history is not what happened (i.e., did the Battle of Lepanto actually take place?), but rather what is the importance / the significance / the meaning of what happened (e.g., is the battle of Lepanto an important enough event to be worth talking about?). We have developed over time procedures and methods for ascertaining that something happened. These procedures and methods are naturally fallible, as all human constructs are bound to be. But "fallible" here *only* means that they are subject to further verification and, possibly, to falsification. These procedures and methods, as well as the results they yield, can and indeed ought to be subjected to rational scrutiny. On the other hand, to simply refuse to accept the evidence that these methods and procedures yield is not only unreasonable but unethical. Willful blindness, no matter how motivated, is ethically indefensible because it doesn't challenge a truth, but denies it in order to replace it at best with dogma and at worst with deliberate misrepresentations. There are some facts that can be demonstrated (subject to further contrary demonstrations) and there are some statements that are demonstrably false (also subject to further contrary demonstration). On these bases, we can then begin arguing about the significance of what happened, that is, we can begin to write history.
16. My use of the term *utopian* is informed by Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, which was an important intellectual point of reference for the student movement and the New Left in the 1960s.
17. Hall distinguishes between two uses of the term *ideology*. In the more traditional, negative sense ideology is opposed to truth and closely linked to false consciousness. Hall wants to develop a more neutral use of the term to refer to a partial, partisan, and selective view that nonetheless correctly identifies certain aspects of a situation. Hall needs this more neutral definition because he doesn't want to dismiss a priori all that bourgeois culture produces. There is much that is just plain false in bourgeois culture but there is also much that is true, though partial. Clearly, in the case of Athos Sr., the more traditional negative use is appropriate.

18. Trofim Denisovich Lysenko (1898–1976) was the proponent of a Lamarkian theory of evolution. Favored by Stalin for ideological reasons, Lysenkoism seriously retarded the development of genetics in the Soviet Union and was eventually abandoned. Boris Pasternak (1890–1960) and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–) are dissident Soviet authors who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1958 and 1970, respectively. They were bitterly criticized or lionized for political reasons that trumped any serene discussion of their literary achievement.

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