

**Directed** by Luchino Visconti  
**Story** by Luchino Visconti and Suso Cecchi D'Amicom based on the novella by Camillo Boito  
**Screenplay** by Suso Cecchi D'Amico and Luchino Visconti  
**English language dialog** by Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles  
**Cinematography** by G.R. Aldo and Robert Krasker, Giuseppe Rotunno  
**Film Editing** by Mario Serandrei  
**Production Design** by Ottavio Scotti  
**Set Decoration** by Gino Brosio  
**Costume Design** by Marcel Escoffier and Piero Tosi  
**Jean Renoir**... supervisor: French dubbed version

Alida Valli...La contessa Livia Serpieri  
Farley Granger...Il tenente Franz Mahler  
Heinz Moog...Il conte Serpieri  
Rina Morelli... Laura, la governante  
Christian Marquand...Un ufficiale boemo  
Sergio Fantoni... Luca  
Tino Bianchi...Il capitano Meucci  
Ernst Nadherny...Il comandante della piazza di Verona  
Tonio Selwart...Il colonello Kleist  
Marcella Mariani...Clara, la prostituta  
Massimo Girotti...Il marchese Roberto Ussoni

**LUCHINO VISCONTI** (November 2, 1906, Milan, Lombardy, Italy – March 17, 1976, Rome, Italy) directed 14 feature films and wrote or co-wrote the screenplays for all of them: 1976 *L'innocente*, 1974 *Conversation Piece*, 1972 *Ludwig*, 1971 *Death in Venice*, 1969 *La caduta degli dei*, 1967 *The Stranger*, 1965 *Sandra*, 1963 *The Leopard*, 1960 *Rocco and His Brothers*, 1957 *Le Notti Bianche*, 1954 *Senso*, 1951 *Bellissima*, 1948 *La Terra Trema*, and 1943 *Ossessione*.

**G.R. ALDO** (b. Aldo Rossano Graziati – January 1, 1905 in Scorzè, Veneto, Italy – November 14, 1953, Italy) has 15 cinematographer credits: 1954 *Senso*, 1954 *Via Padova 46*, 1953 *Indiscretion of an American Wife*, 1953 *The Wayward Wife*, 1952 *Three Forbidden Stories*, 1952 *Othello*, 1952 *Umberto D.*, 1951 *Miracle in Milan*, 1951 *Domani è un altro giorno*, 1950 *Tomorrow Is Too Late*, 1950 *Sins of Pompeii*, 1949 *Heaven Over*



*the Marshes*, 1948 *La Terra Trema*, 1948 *La Chartreuse de Parme*, 1947 *Couleur de Venise*.

**ROBERT KRASKER** (August 13, 1913, Perth, Western Australia, Australia – August 16, 1981, London, England) won a best cinematography Oscar for *The Third Man* (1949). He has 41 cinematographer credits, some of which are 1980 *Cry Wolf*, 1965 *The Heroes of Telemark*, 1965 *The Collector*, 1964 *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1963 *The Ballad of the Running Man*, 1962 *Billy Budd*, 1961 *El Cid*, 1961 *Romanoff and Juliet*, 1960 *Concrete Jungle*, 1958 *The Doctor's Dilemma*, 1958 *The Quiet American*, 1957 *The Story of Esther Costello*, 1957 *The Rising of the Moon*, 1956 *Trapeze*, 1955 *That Lady*, 1954 *Senso*, 1954 *Romeo and Juliet*, 1952 *Cry, the Beloved Country*, 1950 *The Angel with the Trumpet*, 1949 *The Third Man*, 1948 *Bonnie Prince Charlie*, 1947 *The Inheritance*, 1947 *Odd Man Out*, 1945 *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1945 *Brief Encounter*, 1944 *Henry V*, and 1942 *Rose of Tralee*.

**MARCEL ESCOFFIER** (November 29, 1910, Monte-Carlo, Monaco – January 9, 2001, Ariccia, Italy) designed costumes for 48 films, among them 1977 "Jesus of Nazareth", 1974 *The Voyage*, 1968 *Mayerling*, 1968 *Phèdre*, 1967 *Woman Times Seven*, 1965 *Lady L*, 1965 *La Bohème*, 1964 *Time of Indifference*, 1961 *Madame*, 1961 *Princess of Cleves*, 1960 *Blood and Roses*, 1959 *The Big Night*, 1958 *Les Misérables*, 1958 *King on Horseback*, 1956 *Michael Strogoff*, 1955 *Andrea Chenier*, 1955 *Nana*, 1954 *Madame du Barry*, 1954 *Senso*, 1953 *La belle de*

*Cadix*, 1953 *Lucrece Borgia*, 1951 *Savage Triangle*, 1950 *Dream Ballerina*, 1950 *Orpheus*, 1949 *The Secret of Mayerling*, 1948 *L'aigle à deux têtes*, 1948 *Ruy Blas*, 1946 *Beauty and the Beast*, 1946 *L'idiot*, 1945 *Carmen*, and 1939 *Pasha's Wives*.

**PIERO TOSI** (April 10, 1927) has costume designer credits for 51 films and TV programs, among them 2004 *The Keys to the House*, 2003 "La Bohème", 1991 "Bride of Violence", 1985 *La Cage aux Folles 3: The Wedding*, 1982 *La traviata*, 1982 *Beyond the Door*, 1981 *La pelle*, 1981 *Lady of the Camelias*, 1979 *Hypochondriac*, 1977 *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1974 *The Night Porter*, 1972 *Ludwig*, 1971 *Death in Venice*, 1969 *Medea*, 1969 *The Damned*, 1967 *Arabella*, 1967 *The Stranger*, 1966 *After the Fox*, 1963 *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, 1963 *The Leopard*, 1960 *Love in Rome*, 1960 *Rocco and His Brothers*, 1959 *Polcarpo*, 1959 *You're on Your Own*, 1957 *Le Notti Bianche*, 1954 *The Art of Getting Along*, 1954 *Senso*, and 1951 *Bellissima*.

**JEAN RENOIR** (September 15, 1894, Paris, France – February 12, 1979, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California), who supervised the French dubbed version, was director of 41 films, among them, 1959 *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1954 *French Cancan*, 1952 *The Golden Coach*, 1951 *The River*, 1946 *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, 1945 *The Southerner*, 1943 *This Land Is Mine*, 1941 *Swamp Water*, 1939 *The Rules of the Game*, 1938 *La Bête Humaine*, 1938 *La Marseillaise*, 1937 *Grand Illusion*, 1936 *The Lower Depths*, 1936 *La vie est à nous*, 1936 *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, 1936/I *Partie de champagne*, 1933 *Madame Bovary*, 1932 *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1931 *La Chienne*, 1931 *On purge bébé*, 1928 *The Tournament*, and 1927 *Marquitta*, 1926 *Nana*.

**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS** (b. Thomas Lanier Williams – March 26, 1911, Columbus, Mississippi – February 25, 1983, New York City, New York) has 79 writing credits, among them 2010 *Orpheus Descending* (story), 2009 *Rain*, 2008 *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond* (screenplay), 2004 *Akale* (play "Glass Menagerie"), 2003 "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone" (novella), 2000 *The Night of the Iguana*, 1976-1998 "Great Performances" ("A Streetcar Named Desire: From the San Francisco Opera" (1998) (play), "Suddenly, Last Summer" (1993) (play), "Eccentricities of a Nightingale" (1976) (play)), 1995 "A Streetcar Named Desire" (play), 1990 "Orpheus Descending" (play), 1990 "American Playwrights Theater: 27 Wagons Full of Cotton" (1990) (writer), 1990 *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, 1989 "Sweet Bird of Youth" (play), 1987 *The Glass Menagerie* (play), 1984 "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" (play), 1984 "A Streetcar Named Desire" (play), 1977 "The Glass Menagerie" (play "The Glass Menagerie"), 1976 "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" (play / screenplay), 1973 "The Glass Menagerie" (play), 1972

"BBC Play of the Month: Summer and Smoke" (play), 1968 *Boom!* (play "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" / screenplay), 1966 "CBS Playhouse: The Glass Menagerie" (play), 1966 *This Property Is Condemned* (play), 1964 *The Night of the Iguana* (play), 1962 *Sweet Bird of Youth* (play), 1961 *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (novel), 1961 *Summer and Smoke* (play), 1959 *Suddenly, Last Summer* (play "Suddenly, Last Summer" / screenplay), 1959 *The Fugitive Kind* (play "Orpheus Descending" / screenplay), 1958 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (play), 1956 *Baby Doll* (screenplay), 1955 *The Rose Tattoo* (play / screenplay), 1954 *Senso* (dialogue collaborator), 1951 *A Streetcar Named Desire* (play / screen play), 1950 *The Glass Menagerie* (play / screenplay).

**Paul Bowles** (December 30, 1910, Queens, New York – November 18, 1999, Tangier, Morocco) is a fiction writer with 7 screen credits: 2001/I *Café de la plage* (translation), 2001 *Baptism of Solitude: A Tribute to Paul Bowles*, 1995 *Paul Bowles - Halbmond* (novels "The Story of Lahsen and Idir", "Call at Corazon" and "Allal"), 1994 *Drug-Taking and the Arts* (documentary) (novel "Let It Come Down"), 1990 *The Sheltering Sky* (book), 1981 *You Are Not I* (short story), and 1954 *Senso* (dialogue collaborator).



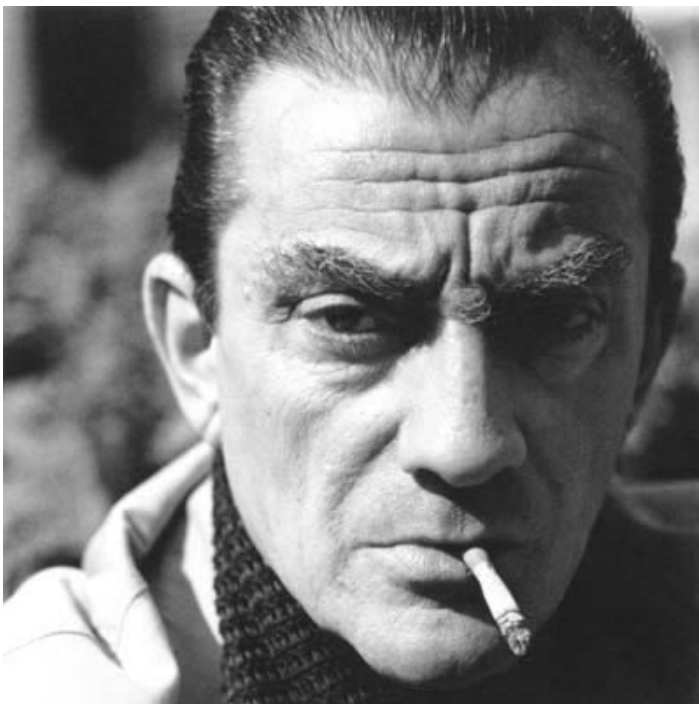
**ALIDA VALLI**...La contessa Livia Serpieri (b. Alida Maria Laura von Altenburger, May 31, 1921, Pola, Istria, Italy [now Pula, Istria, Croatia] – April 22, 2006, Rome, Lazio, Italy) appeared in 131 films and TV series, among them, 2002 *Angel of Death*, 2000 "Vino santo", 1999 *Il dolce rumore della vita*, 1996 *Fatal frames: Fotogrammi mortali*, 1990 *Ritual of Love*, 1990 *La bocca*, 1985 *Aspern*, 1981 "Illa: Punto d'osservazione", 1981 "La casa rossa", 1980 "L'eredità della priora",

1979 "L'altro Simenon", 1978 *Porco mondo*, 1977 *A Simple Heart*, 1977 *Suspiria*, 1976 *The Cassandra Crossing*, 1976 *1900*, 1974 *L'anticristo*, 1974 *Tender Dracula, or Confessions of a Blood Drinker*, 1974 *Lisa and the Devil*, 1972 *Indian Summer*, 1970 *The Spider's Stratagem*, 1967 *Oedipus Rex*, 1964 "Dr. Kildare", 1963 *The Castilian*, 1963 *Ophélie*, 1961 *The Long Absence*, 1960 *The Gigolo*, 1960 *Eyes Without a Face*, 1959 *Signé Arsène Lupin*, 1958 *This Angry Age*, 1957 *L'amore più bello*, 1954 *Senso*, 1954 *La mano dello straniero*, 1953 *Il mondo le condanna*, 1953 *The Lovers of Toledo*, 1951 *Miracles Only Happen Once*, 1950 *Walk Softly, Stranger*, 1949 *The Third Man*, 1948 *The Miracle of the Bells*, 1946 *Eugenie Grandet*, 1945 *Life Begins Anew*, 1943 *Laugh Pagliacci*, 1942 *Two Orphans*, 1941 *The Secret Lover*, 1941 *Schoolgirl Diary*, 1941 *Luce nelle tenebre*, 1941 *Piccolo mondo antico*, 1940 *I Was to Blame*, 1940 *The Last Enemy*, 1940 *Manon Lescaut*, 1939 *Ball at the Castle*,



1937 *Il feroce Saladino*, 1936 *The Two Sergeants*, and 1935 *Three Cornered Hat*.

**FARLEY GRANGER**... Il tenente Franz Mahler (b. Farley Earle Granger II, July 1, 1925, San Jose, California – March 27, 2011, Manhattan, New York City, New York) appeared in 84 films and TV series, among them 2001 *The Next Big Thing*, 1990 “Murder, She Wrote”, 1986-1987 “As the World Turns” (14 episodes), 1980-1984 “The Love Boat”, 1984 “Tales from the Darkside”, 1979-1980 “The Edge of Night”, 1976-1977 “One Life to Live”, 1975 “The Invisible Man”, 1975 “Matt Helm”, 1975 “Ellery Queen”, 1974 “The Six Million Dollar Man”, 1973 *The Man Called Noon*, 1972 *The Red Headed Corpse*, 1970 *My Name Is Trinity*, 1969 “Hawaii Five-O”, 1967 “Get Smart”, 1967 “Hondo”, 1967 “Ironside”, 1960 “Dow Hour of Great Mysteries”, 1955-1958 “The United States Steel Hour”, 1956-1957 “Playhouse 90”, 1955 *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*, 1955 “Schlitz Playhouse”, 1954 *Senso*, 1953 *Small Town Girl*, 1953 *The Story of Three Loves*, 1952 *Hans Christian Andersen*, 1951 *Strangers on a Train*, 1950 *Side Street*, 1949 *They Live by Night*, 1948 *Rope*, 1944 *The Purple Heart*, and 1943 *The North Star*.



**VISCONTI**, From *The St. James Film Director's Encyclopedia*, ed. Andrew Sarris, Visible Ink Press, 1998

The films of Luchino Visconti are among the most stylistically and intellectually influential of postwar Italian cinema. Born a scion of ancient nobility, Visconti integrated the most heterogeneous elements of aristocratic sensibility and taste with a committed Marxist political consciousness, backed by a firm knowledge of Italian class structure. Stylistically, his career follows a trajectory from a uniquely cinematic realism to an operatic theatricalism, from the simple quotidian eloquence of modeled actuality to the heightened effect of lavishly appointed historical melodramas. His career fuses these interests into a

mode of expression uniquely Viscontian, prescribing a potent, double-headed realism. Visconti turned out films steadily but rather slowly from 1942 to 1976. His obsessive care with narrative and filmic materials is apparent in the majority of his films.

*Osessione*, a treatment (the second and best) of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In it the director begins to explore the potential of a long-take style, undoubtedly influenced by Jean Renoir, for whom Visconti worked as an assistant. Having met with the disapproval of the Fascist censors for its depiction of the shabbiness and desperation of Italian provincial life, *Osessione* was banned from exhibition.

Like Gramsci, who often returned to the contradictions of the Risorgimento as a key to the social problems of the modern Italian state, Visconti explores that period once more in *Il gattopardo*, from the Lampedusa novel. An aristocratic Sicilian family undergoes transformation as a result of intermarriage with the middle class at the same time that the Mezzogiorno is undergoing reunification with the North. The bourgeoisie, now ready and able to take over from the dying aristocracy, usurps Garibaldi's revolution; in this period of *transformismo*, the revolutionary process will be assimilated into the dominant political structure and defused.

**from *World Film Directors V. 1*, Ed John Wakeman, H.W.Wilson Co., NY, 1987**

Count don Luchino Visconti di Modrone was born in Milan, Italy, the third son of Giuseppe Visconti and the former Carla Erba. His mother was the daughter of a millionaire industrialist and his father was the son of the Duke of Modrone. His father's family, wealthy landowners, had received their dukedom from Napoleon. They trace their ancestry to the Visconti who ruled Milan from 1277 to 1447, and on back to Desiderius, father-in-law of Charlemagne.

With his six brothers and sisters, Luchino Visconti grew up in his father's *palazzo* in Milan. His education was supervised by his mother. She was a talented musician and he first envisaged a musical career also, studying the cello for ten years in childhood and adolescence. His delight in the theatre and opera also developed in childhood, inspired by the plays and entertainments his father liked to arrange in the *palazzo*'s private theatre. From the age of seven, he attended performances at La Scala opera house in Milan, which his grandfather and then his uncle had helped to support. Although Visconti usually described his childhood as idyllic, there was discord between his parents. In 1921 they separated for good, and a bitter court battle over Carla Visconti's share of the Erba fortune ensued. She eventually regained her property but lived thereafter in retirement, the children staying sometimes with her, sometimes with their father.

As a youth Visconti was restless and discontented. He ran away repeatedly from home, and once from a college in Geneva. Hoping that military discipline might bring him under control, his father sent him to the cavalry school at Pinerolo, where he conceived a passion for horses.

For some ten years after that the breeding of racehorses was Visconti's principal interest—he often remarked on the similarity between the problems involved in schooling horses and directing actors (and said that horses were on the whole preferable because they didn't talk). During this period Visconti dabbled in the arts but remained uncertain of his direction. He

painted, designed sets for one or two plays, and tried his hand as a film scenarist. He was nearly thirty when in 1936 he left Italy with the intention of working for the cinema in England or France. The same year, having been introduced by Coco Chanel to Jean Renoir at a racetrack, he found himself on the great French director's production team. At first in charge of costumes, Visconti then served as Renoir's third assistant director on *Une Partie de Campagne* (1936) and *Les Bas Fonds* (1937). Escaping in this way from the claustrophobia of Italy, home, and Fascism, and finding himself accepted by a group of dedicated and talented artists in the heady atmosphere of the Popular Front, permanently changed Visconti's life. Of Renoir himself he said: "His was a human influence, not a professional one. To be with Renoir, to listen to him, that opened my mind."

After a brief, disillusioning visit to Hollywood in 1937, Visconti went home. In 1940 he was able to work once more with Renoir, who had gone to Italy to film an adaptation of *La Tosca*. Renoir had to abandon the movie when Italy declared war on France and it was completed by Charles Koch. Visconti himself remained in Italy, where he joined the editorial staff of the magazine *Cinema*. The young critics and filmmakers associated with *Cinema* were in vigorous revolt against the insipidity and conformism of the contemporary Italian film industry. Their aim was to make cinema an extension of the literary realism that had developed in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century, notably in the work of the Sicilian novelist Giovanni Verga.

Visconti's first film was *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1942), based on James M. Cain's starkly naturalistic thriller *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, with the action translated from America to the Romagna region of Italy. Visconti had been looking for a subject that would not invite the hostility of the Fascist censors, and the Cain novel had been suggested to him by Renoir (whose stylistic influence can be detected in this but in none of Visconti's later films). *Ossessione* is about the destructive passion that develops between Giovanna, wife of an aging innkeeper, and Gino, a young wanderer who takes a casual job at the inn. Gino begins to suspect that he has been used and goes to another woman, a young dancer with whom his relationship is purely physical, uncomplicated by financial greed or sexual politics. But the police are closing in, and Gino and Giovanna, reconciled, die together as they try to escape arrest.

Several members of the *Cinema* group had a hand in the script of *Ossessione*, which thus became a kind of manifesto. At its first showing in Rome in 1942 it had an effect that was described as "explosive." Appearing at a time when the Italian cinema was devoted to optimistic trivia, *Ossessione's* social and psychological authenticity and sexual frankness outraged the Church and the Fascist censors, and terrified the commercial distributors. When the censors tried to ban it, Visconti and his friends appealed to Mussolini himself, who passed it with only a few cuts. In the confusion following the Allied invasion, the film was destroyed. Visconti managed to preserve a duplicate,

however, and a somewhat mutilated version of *Ossessione* was finally released some years after the war. It was almost universally hailed as the first masterpiece of Italian neorealism. Pierre Leprohon has called it "a great film, the portrait of a miserable, greedy, sensual, obstinate race at grips with the daily struggle for existence and with instincts they are unable to master. For over and above the neorealism, this film has the ingredient indispensable for its lasting greatness, poetry."

For a time during the war, Visconti was imprisoned by the Fascist authorities, charged with aiding the Resistance. Moved from jail to jail and threatened with shooting, he was only reprieved by the Allied invasion. After the liberation of Rome, he filmed the trial and execution of several Fascist officials, including his jailer, and the death of another at the hands of an angry mob; these sequences appear in *Giorni di Gloria* (*Days of Glory*, 1945), a documentary produced by the Allies.

In 1945 Visconti began another and immensely successful and influential career as a theatre director. No one did more to free the Italian stage from outworn conventions, techniques, and attitudes or to modernize its repertoire, to which he added the works of such contemporary French and American writers as Sartre, Cocteau, Anouilh, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Hemingway and Erskine Caldwell. Visconti built up a repertory company which later provided acting and technical talent for his films, and whose best-known products are the actor Marcello Mastroianni and the director Franco Zeffirelli.

There were no professional actors at all in Visconti's next film, however. Visconti was a Marxist, though an unorthodox one, much influenced by the Italian socialist leader and theorist Antonio Gramsci. In 1947 he went to Sicily with some funds advanced by the Communist Party, intending to make a short documentary. What he saw there inspired a far more ambitious project—a vast fresco of the Sicilian poor, in three parts dealing respectively with the fishermen, the peasants, and the sulfur miners. In the event, only one part was completed—*La terra trema: Episodio del mare*.

The film is loosely based on Verga's novel *I malavoglia*, but in Visconti's Marxist adaptation the great enemy of the poor Sicilian fishermen is not the sea but the local wholesalers, who own the boats and pay the fishermen derisory prices for what they catch. One family, the Valastro, try to free themselves from this pernicious system. They mortgage their house and buy their own boat, but are ruined when it is destroyed in a storm. The film centers around two key episodes in the development of the political consciousness of the young 'Ntoni Valastro—when he leads a spontaneous if short-lived revolt against the wholesalers, and when, at the end, he recognizes the need for concerted rather than individual action against exploitation.

*La terra trema* is performed entirely by the people of the village of Aci-Trezza, who contributed in important ways to Visconti's scenario and who say what they have to say in their



own dialect (which is so obscure that it was necessary to overlay the dialogue with a commentary in standard Italian.). There is an elemental quality in the film that has reminded critics of Flaherty and Eisenstein. It has occasional longeurs, and purists have complained of certain hauntingly beautiful shots whose only function is aesthetic. Nevertheless, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has said, “the chiseled beauty of its images, the simplicity and rigour of its narrative, and its unbending concern with social realities have all cause *La terra trema* to be hailed as a masterpiece of the propaganda film.” It received first prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1948. It was nevertheless not popular with audiences used to lighter fare, was not widely distributed, and is said to have cost Visconti almost \$200,000 of his own money.

For some years after that Visconti restricted his activities to the theatre, presenting among other things a number of innovatory interpretations of the classics like his celebrated 1948 production of *As You Like It* (with additional scenery and costumes by Salvador Dalí), and an equally famous version of John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* produced in Paris in 1951. The excessive visual effects and self-indulgent *coups de théâtre* that had marred some of his earlier productions gave way to a more purposive and disciplined use of all the resources of the theatre, but he never lost his love of spectacle or his meticulous concern for realistic detail (luxuries that he was prepared to pay for himself if necessary).

The same qualities distinguished his operatic productions, which were often lavishly staged, but in which his singers were required to curb the traditional extravagance of operatic gesture and to “act like people.” Many considered Visconti the greatest operatic director of his day, especially in a triumphant series of productions with Maria Callas. “The real reason I have done opera,” he once asserted, “is the particular opportunity of working with Mme. Callas, who is such a great artist.” His operas were produced not only at La Scala and elsewhere in Italy but at Covent Garden in London (where he staged an unforgettable production of Verdi’s *Don Carlos* in 1958) and in other foreign countries. In 1958 he helped Gian-Carlo Menotti to launch the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds, for which he directed a number of operas over the years.

Meanwhile Visconti had made his third film, *Bellissima* (*The Most Beautiful*, 1951), starring Anna Magnani as a working-class woman befuddled by the movies. She enters her small daughter in a competition to find “the prettiest child in Rome,” who will star in a new film. The child eventually wins the competition, but by that time her mother has seen something of the ruthless commercialism of the movie industry; she rejects the proffered contract and is restored to her long-suffering husband. The director himself collaborated on the script, as he always did, along with Suso Cecchi d’Amico, who was thereafter his principal writer, and Francesco Rosi, himself now an important director. *Bellissima*, the first of Visconti’s films to be released in the United States, is an amiable satire on the petty

greeds and snobberies of Italian society and on the parasitic nature of the cinema. It is all the same a minor work in the Visconti canon, and an atypical one.

It was followed by *Senso* (*Feeling*, 1954), widely regarded as one of his greatest films. Set in the *risorgimento* of the mid-1860s, it opens with a brilliant scene in a Venetian theatre where a performance of Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* disintegrates into an Italian nationalist demonstration against occupying Austrian forces. The story (from a novella by Camillo Boito) turns on the love affair that develops between an Italian countess—a nationalist, played by Alida Valli—and a young Austrian officer (Farley Granger) for whom she betrays her husband, her brother, and her political allegiance. This personal drama resembles that of *Obsessione*, not least in the way that emotional responses and moral standards are shown to be influenced by class and historical factors—notably in the

complex characterization of the Austrian officer Franz. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith points out there is, moreover, “an implicit parallel between the events of 1866 and those of 1943-1945. In each case, one élite replaced another, and the new élite came to look suspiciously similar to the old.”

It has often been pointed out that Visconti brought to the theatre the skills of a film director, and to the cinema those of a stage (and especially operatic) director. From the beginning his films were in some respects operatic in form, made up of scenes involving two or at most three people, with occasional interventions by larger groups having the function of chorus. This is particularly true of *Senso*, which actually begins with an operatic performance, and whose plot would look perfectly at home in a romantic opera (though in fact it escapes melodrama because of the subtlety of the characterization). *Senso* is operatic also in the opulence of its technique. It was the first of Visconti’s films in color, which he used with absolute mastery, making *Senso*, as Pierre Leprohon says, “a landmark as important in its day as Renoir’s *Carrosse d’or*.”

Visconti used three different cameramen to achieve the effects he sought at different points in the film—effects that were often derived from various styles of nineteenth century Venetian painting. Admired as it was and is by the critics, *Senso* was nevertheless a failure commercially. A dubbed and shortened version was shown in Britain as *The Wanton Countess*, with English dialogue by Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles.

With a growing reputation for extravagance in production and failure at the box office, Visconti was unable to find producers. In an effort to vindicate himself, he shot his next film in seven weeks with a relatively small budget provided by himself and some friends. This was *Le notti bianche* (*White Nights*, 1957) adapted from Dostoevsky’s short story....

Visconti’s retreat from naturalism was reversed in his next film, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960). It may be seen almost as a continuation of *La terra trema*, examining the fate of the widowed Rosaria Pafundi and her five



sons, a peasant family from the impoverished south trying to make a new life in the northern industrial city of Milan....*Rocco and His Brothers* was the first of Visconti's films to gain worldwide distribution and not to lose money. It won a special jury prize at the 1961 Venice Film Festival and several other international awards. Though the version seen in the United States was damaged by extensive cuts, it was warmly received by most American critics....This success made possible Visconti's ambitious screen version of Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963). A return to the *risorgimento*, it is a study of an ancient family of Sicilian aristocrats at a time of rapid social change. This theme, and the fact that Visconti undertook it with a multi-million dollar budget provided by 20<sup>th</sup>

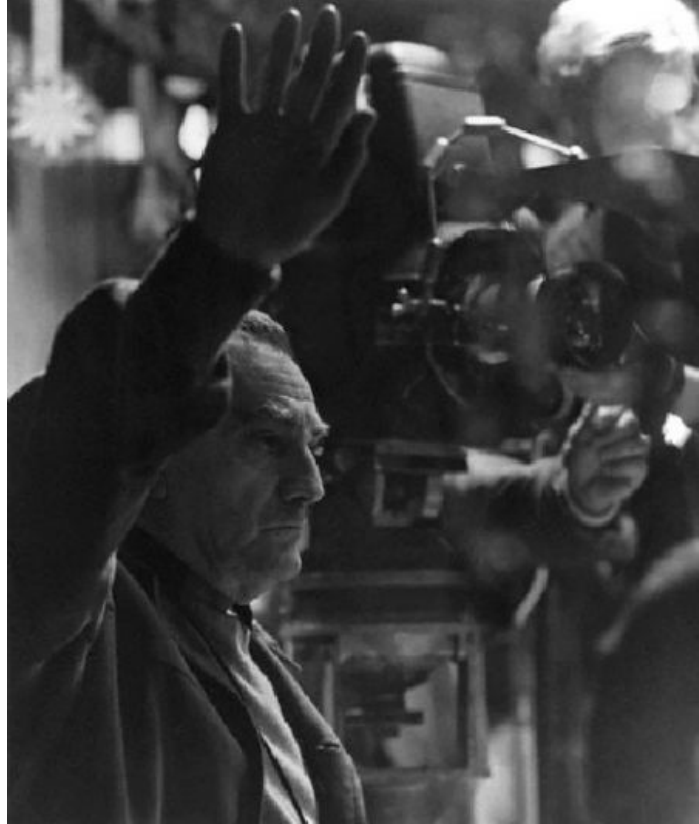
Century-Fox, using a wide screen and Technicolor, greatly disquieted the nostalgics of neorealism. In fact, Visconti recreates the story in his own way. Where the Prince of Lampedusa accounts for the survival of the House of Salina in almost mystical terms, the "Red Duke" Visconti attributes it to political and economic cunning—as another example of the way the old order perpetuates itself in the face of revolutionary ferment. He shows the old Prince (played by Burt Lancaster) coming to terms with the changing social order. Over the timid objections of the family priest, the Prince gives his blessing and a bag of gold to his nephew Tancredi (Alain Delon), off to join Garibaldi's forces, and upon Tancredi's return, arranges a marriage between this fiery young

opportunistic and the beautiful Angela (Claudia Cardinale), daughter of a rich bourgeois. In the brilliant and immensely long ball scene at the end, the alliance between aristocrats and parvenus is sealed, amid rumors of reprisals against Garibaldi's peasant followers and intimations of the old Prince's mortality. Politically the film is highly ambiguous. The stratagems by which the privileged class will survive are set forth with unsparing realism, but as we see through the Prince's eyes what endures and what is lost of the past, the dominant note is unmistakably one of nostalgia.

The film won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival and had splendid reception in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. The version shown in the United States, however, was shorn of several important scenes, badly printed on inferior color stock, and insensitively dubbed. Visconti, denying paternity of this version, remarked: "It is our destiny to be always in the hands of assassins....We work for months and months to create material that is then torn to shreds by ravaging dogs."

...Even thus mutilated, the film seemed to David Robinson "a beautiful and fascinating spectacle....The *mise-en-scène* is superb. Each scene is staged with the rhythm of a choreographer and the composition of a painter" and "it is a film of enormous virtuosity and brio."...

Visconti's perfectionism is legendary, and his attention to authenticity of detail was carried to extreme lengths in *Morte a Venezia* (*Death in Venice*, 1971)....Georges Sadoul called it "unquestionably [Visconti's] most perfect film....a richly textured, obsessional study of passion and social putrefaction." Soon after completing *Death in Venice* Visconti collapsed with "nicotine poisoning." He never fully recovered his health but continued to work, making three more films....Directed from a



wheelchair [*L'innocente*/ *The Innocent* 1976] this ravishingly elegant movie" was Visconti's last. He was editing it when he died in his sumptuous Roman villa of influenza and heart disease.

Luchino Visconti was a stocky, elegant man, deep-voiced, dark-eyed, with heavy eyebrows and the prominent nose of his great ancestors. He was said to be liable to sky-rending rages" on set but in conversation was a person of "totally disarming courtesy and sly, laconic wit." Often accused of 'voting Left and living Right,' he remained a communist all his life, though he would not join the party. He was also a Christian, though often anticlerical. As a young man, he said: 'I was impelled toward the cinema, by, above all, the need to tell stories of people who were alive, of people living amid things and not

of the things themselves. The cinema that interests me is an anthropomorphic cinema. The most humble gestures of man, his bearing, his feelings and instincts, are enough to make the things that surround him poetic and alive. . . .And [his] momentary absence from the luminous rectangle gives to everything an appearance of still life [*natura morta*]."

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, to whose study of Visconti this note is much indebted, says that "the commonly held stereotypes about Visconti are that he is totally humourless and incapable of self-irony, that his imagination is sensual rather than intellectual, and that he is a crude social realist with a taste for 'positive heroes,' and an antifeminist who neither likes nor understand his women characters." And elsewhere Nowell-Smith writes: "Aristocratic, temperamentally aloof, conscious of the advantages and anomalies of his privileged position, he remained unaffected by the general atmosphere of passionate outgoing concern for immediate questions in which so many of his contemporaries were caught up....His Marxist commitment was different in kind from the diffuse leftism of many of his colleagues. It had its source in a sense of history, and of his

personal situation in the historical process, rather than in sentiment, and it expressed itself in historical reflection mediated by a sense of artistic form.”

Long recognized as one of the three masters (with Fellini and Antonioni) of contemporary Italian cinema he has recently [this is published in 1987] been denigrated and called “trivial, ornate, and unconvinced,” a director who made his name by his “flamboyant treatment of a few prestigious ventures.” Even those who continue to admire Visconti’s work reserve their praise for his early films. An artist’s reputation often slumps after his death, however, and the visual brilliance of his late films may yet receive its due.



**From *Luchino Visconti, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition*. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. bfi publishing, London, 2003.**

Luchino Visconti belongs, with Welles and Resnais, to a select company of major directors whose international reputation was established early in their careers and has been maintained, on the basis of a relatively small output, ever since. Among his Italian contemporaries he is unique. Unlike Antonioni or Fellini he did not have to wait for recognition. Unlike Rossellini he has never been a prolific director, and has managed to concentrate his energies over a quarter of a century on less than a dozen meticulously prepared productions. Unlike De Sica he has not degenerated as an artist with the decline of the movement that first thrust him into prominence. His early films are now classics, and each new film he makes is an eagerly awaited cultural event. [Written in 1967] And yet he has remained obstinately impervious to changes in intellectual fashions. A lonely and unassailable giant, his work has a devious consistency paralleled, on the world scale, only by Fritz Lang and Orson Welles.

Visconti’s interest in the cinema developed late. At an age when Orson Welles was directing *Citizen Kane*, when Alexandre Astruc could complain that he was ‘already twenty-six and had not yet made *Citizen Kane*’, and when most aspirant directors would be starting as documentarists or serving a long and laborious apprenticeship in the industry, Visconti was still living in seclusion and undecided about the future nature of his artistic interests. An accomplished musician, interested also in painting (interests which remain latent in his film work for a long

time to emerge again more fully with *Senso* in 1954), his only foray into the world of spectacle was as set-designer for a play by G.A. Traversi in 1928. He was nearing thirty when in 1936 he left Italy with the intention of working in the cinema in England or France.

As luck would have it, and thanks to a chance meeting with Coco Chanel, he found himself, shortly after his arrival in France, attached to Jean Renoir’s semi-permanent production team in charge of costumes and then as assistant director on *Une partie de campagne* and *Les Bas-Fonds*. In an interview on BBC Television in 1966 he has recalled this experience mainly in terms of what it meant to him politically, to escape from a Fascist country and to find himself working on equal terms with a group of left-wing enthusiasts, many of them Communists, in the heady atmosphere of the Popular Front. That this part of his experience had a lasting effect on him and helped to shape his future political commitment there can be no doubt. What is harder to assess is Renoir’s influence on him as an artist. There is an obvious, if superficial, analogy between the French Popular Front and the post-war Italian left-wing bloc, to which Visconti belonged. Visconti’s career seems therefore like a bridge between the two. But on a personal level the differences between the two artists are far more striking than the similarities. Visconti’s debt to Renoir is mainly stylistic and is confined to one film, *Ossessione*, which he made during the war. After that, when Visconti begins to find his own feet and establish an independent personality, all traces of Renoir’s influence disappear. They are, however, present in *Ossessione*, in the method used to establish a character, in the relationship of character to landscape, in the use of a fluid and yet probing camera, and, on a more generic plane, on the shared debt to the naturalist tradition—in Renoir’s case Maupassant and Zola, in Visconti’s Giovanni Verga and Italian regional literature.

In 1940 it was Renoir’s turn to come to Italy to make a film of *La Tosca* which was a cross between Sardou’s original melodrama and Puccini’s opera. For this film Visconti worked on the adaptation and then as assistant director. Renoir was not able to finish the film himself. He had just directed the opening sequences when Italy declared war on France, and Renoir left for the USA, leaving the film in the capable but uninspired hands of Carl Koch. Opinions differ on the subject of the finished film. In distant retrospect, Visconti regards it as mediocre and banal, falling far short of what he himself had envisaged and what Renoir might have made had he stayed on. But something of *La Tosca*, whether echoes of the realization or images of how he himself would have made the film, remained lodged in Visconti’s imagination to appear in the making of *Senso*, the most ‘operatic’ of Visconti’s films, fourteen years later...

### *Senso*

Frustrated in his contemporary concerns [a project on Italian divorce laws was forbidden by the censors], Visconti, with the active encouragement of his producers, turned his attention towards history. The producers’ brief was for a ‘spectacle, but ...of a high artistic level’ and the precise story chosen by Visconti was a novella by Camillo Boito, entitled *Senso*. Like *Ossessione*, *Senso* was started as a result of the rejection of a more blatantly contentious subject, and, like *Ossessione*, it soon encountered censorship difficulties of its own. But again, even more perhaps than with *Ossessione*, we



must avoid falling into the trap of seeing second choice as second bets, resorted to exclusively as a result of censorship and production difficulties. Whatever the contingent factors affecting Visconti's decision, there is no doubt that his choice of a general subject—the Italian Risorgimento—and even of that particular story of Boito had more than accidental significance. Even if the choice were partly an accident, the accident itself was both significant and lucky. For *Senso* is beyond question one of the greatest, and also the most Viscontian, of all Visconti's films.

The choice of Boito's novella is, at first sight, surprising. The tone of the story is cool, neo-classic, and detached. The character of the Countess as revealed by the interior monologue is inconsistent and lacking in depth—possibly as a result of the moralism inherent in the tone. The observation of the background is superficial and uninteresting—again a result of Boito's uncertain attitude to his subject.

But Visconti has usually preferred (*Bellissima* is an exception) to work from a literary original, however mediocre and apparently uncongenial. This procedure has the advantage of providing a firm point of departure, but he always claimed the right to maximum freedom in working towards the point of arrival. It is only recently, with *The Leopard*

and now *Lo straniero*, that he has accepted the discipline of literal and respectful adaptation of a major literary text.

Q By his own account what first attracted Visconti to Boito's novella was the potential contained in the extreme situation of the story, rather than its actual content. The elaboration of the film went through several stages, each of which diverged further from the original and developed suggestions latent there but whose significance Boito had either not seen, or interpreted differently. In the story the Countess, now middle-aged, is seen looking back over a youthful aberration. The film shows her already no longer young when the events took place and (in what little remains of the rhetorical monologue) as still quite close to the events as she describes them. In the place of the frigid distancing of the story, Visconti makes it more immediate—and more anguished. But he adds a distancing of his own, partly by a stylistic trick at the beginning, relating his story to that of an opera, and partly by taking the story away from the Countess and setting it firmly in the external historical world.

The opening sequence, which is in itself a quite amazing tour de force, makes both of these points clearly. The titles come up against shots of a performance taking place at the La Fenice Theatre in Venice. After the final credit there is a title which reads, Venice, spring 1866. The last months of the Austrian occupation of the Veneto. The Italian government has made a pact of alliance with Prussia, and the war of liberation is imminent." As this title disappears Manrico launches into his famous aria 'Di quella pira' and as that ends the camera pans to reveal the audience, first the Austrian officers in the stalls, then the crowds above and behind. There is a cut to the stage again, and then, as the chorus begins "All'armi, al'armi" ('To arms, To arms'), a cut back to the audience: one or two patriots moving to

and fro; the furtive passing of objects from hand to hand. The music comes to an end. There is applause, formal from the military, enthusiastic from everyone else. Then a girl shouts out 'Foreigners out of Venice! And suddenly the theatre is full of rosettes and streamers in the Italian national colours. The colour effects are stupendous: the rich romantic browns of the stage set, the brightly coloured crowd in the balcony contrasting with the black evening dress of the bourgeois and the white uniforms of the officers in the stalls and boxes; then finally, the red, white, and green streamers everywhere. ...

It is against this background, which combines profusion an density of detail with extreme historical precision and clarity, that the personal drama is set off....

But this distinction between opera and real life is not intended to be maintained in a simple and rigid form. Already a



parallelism has been established between the world of the audience and that of the stage.

The style of the film is itself operatic, a pictorial-musical recreation of a human drama. It differs from the opera in that the reduction to essentials is less complete. It is less 'pure.' The drama that is to be played out between Livia and Franz is a degenerate melodrama....

Against Franz's

instructions, Livia follows him to Verona, and finds him, a drunken and guilt-ridden but lucid wreck, entertaining a prostitute. He drives Livia out, and she takes a final brutal revenge by denouncing him as a deserter. The Austrian general to whom she denounces him urges her to think again, rigidly loyal to the officer code. If denounced, Franz will have to be shot, but morally denunciation is the worst infamy. But Livia is not an officer and a gentleman. The code is even more alien to her than it was at the beginning when she was trying to save Ussoni [her patriot cousin whom she begs Franz not to duel]. Franz goes to the firing-squad, and the last shot of Livia shows her creeping away through the streets, calling his name, surrounded by drunken soldiers celebrating a victory. It is almost as if she never existed. The indication in the script says 'perhaps she has gone mad'. The story is left in suspense, and never reconnected with the hypothetical present tense of the voice off. Presumably Livia survives. But what she survives to or for is as irrelevant as the survival, after the tragedy, of Oedipus or Lear.

The personal drama, then, is self-contained. It ends with the death of Franz and the annihilation of Livia. But they are casualties of a wider process which does not end with their disappearance from the scene. At the end the film the Austrians have just won at the Battle of Custoza, but on the world scale they are in retreat. They have already lost most of northern Italy. They have lost to Prussia at Sadowa; and in the international political game this means that they will soon lose the Veneto as well. As the Austrian Empire declines, its place in the scheme of things is being taken by nascent bourgeois nationalism. ...

There is an implicit parallel between the events of 1866 and those of 1943-5. In each case, by a mysterious process of *transformismo*, the Italy which emerged from the upheaval was



not substantially different from what it had been before. One elite replaced another, and the new elite began to look suspiciously similar to the old as the loyalists to the former regime came to reassume their positions under the new. More than a parallel, however, there is, here in *Senso*, a search for causes. The question that Visconti, as a Marxist, is asking himself is double. Did the revolution that might have happened in 1943-7 fail in the same way and for the same reasons as that of 1860-70? Or did it not also fail *because* the first one had failed, because the ruling class was allowed to establish a tradition of continuity, and *transformismo* was allowed from the start to mask the conflicts that, objectively, seem to demand a revolutionary response?

Visconti does not produce a clear-cut answer. Nor does he force the parallel further than it can go. The lines along which he was thinking are suggested in a scene which unfortunately never saw the light of day but was cut out, so he claims, at the special request of the Ministry of the Armed Forces. In this scene Roberto, who is trying to bring in the irregular Partisan forces he has organised to outflank the Austrians at Custoza, is curtly informed by the Italian command that their services are not required. The army will win, or lose, alone. Roberto's reply is to the effect that if this is the victory, or defeat, the Italians want they can keep it. The substance of this scene is perfectly historical. The Venetian Partisans, like Garibaldi himself, were a political embarrassment to the Italian government, and like Garibaldi they were got out of the way. The final victory was therefore doubly remote from popular revolution. Not only did the Italian authorities reject the participation of the people, they didn't even score victory for their own, limited cause. That was done for them by the Prussians at Sadowa.

Visconti's attitude to the myth of the Risorgimento is therefore straightforwardly critical, and at times polemical. But the polemic does not interfere with the main burden of his analysis, which is concerned with the relationship of personal and class attitudes, rather than with political forces external to the main drama. If, for the purpose of analysis, one abstracts from the wider historical situation, the formal pattern which emerges is curiously similar to that of *Ossessione*. There is the same dynamic running through, from husband to wife to lover to mistress. Serpieri, Livia, Franz, and the prostitute Clara are doubles of Bragana, Giovanna, Gino, and Anita. There is also the same opposition between guilty passion and easy love as in the earlier film, and a similar pattern of impulse and betrayal. But behind these similarities there are also profound differences of form and content which reveal both a greater technical mastery and a vastly enriched vision of the world....

I would not wish to maintain that Visconti's approach is totally analytic and detached. He is involved with his material, and has a personal stake in what he is saying. As an aristocrat who has thrown in his lot with a cause which ultimately implies his own destruction and that of his class, his focus of interest is quite naturally (though not inevitably) the points at which the theoretical analysis which he accepts encounters his own personal situation. In *Senso* this focus is in fact double—the 'decadence' of Franz and the stumbling and erratic 'progress' of the world around. It is this antithesis of progress and decadence which has been particularly misunderstood and fetishised by Visconti's critics. ...It seems best to carry the narrative forward to *The Leopard*, a film in which the historical themes of *Senso* are taken up again and treated, perhaps with less brilliance, but

with a subtler awareness of the issues; in which, also, the double focus of *Senso* is fused into one.



**Mark Rappaport, "Senso and Sensibility" (Criterion notes)**

*Senso*, Luchino Visconti's extraordinarily lush 1954 movie, was never truly released in America. Even though an American star, Farley Granger, and a European star, Alida Valli, familiar to international audiences for her role in the very successful *The Third Man* (1949), were cast specifically to help guarantee the expensive production's success in the States, it was shown only at the Italian-language cinemas of the day, which catered to immigrant audiences. It wasn't until 1968, five years after the disastrous release of *The Leopard*—shortened by a good half hour, in a mangled, clumsily dubbed English-language version, and printed on inferior De Luxe rather than the proper Technicolor stock, and in CinemaScope instead of Technirama—that *Senso* got a very limited run of nine days at the repertory Elgin Theater (now the renowned dance theater the Joyce) in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. In the interest of full disclosure, I went to see it five times during that period. I thought it was the most beautiful movie ever made, and have had no reason during the intervening years and after many subsequent viewings to change my mind. After this unofficial New York debut, it played at the Bleecker Street Cinema, another vaunted repertory movie house, and was reviewed by the *New York Times*. It was massacred.

Originally, Visconti wanted even bigger stars, Marlon Brando and Ingrid Bergman, for the roles played by Granger and Valli. Roberto Rossellini, who was married to Bergman at the time, wouldn't let her do it. Visconti was, after all, the competition, and Bergman was his trophy wife and star. Brando, who flew to Rome to do a screen test, was ultimately rejected by the producers—for reasons that have never been entirely clear—in favor of Granger (perhaps the success of *Strangers on a Train* was a deciding factor). Needless to say, if Brando and Bergman had been in it, the movie would not have disappeared off the radar. In his autobiography, Tab Hunter, who was a young heartthrob at the time, says that he, too, was approached by Visconti (Visconti wanted the Austrian officer to be blond and even tried to dye Granger's hair), but his agent, who had never heard of Visconti, threw the telegram in the wastebasket. Hunter found out about it only years later. (Visconti also wanted him to

play Claudia Cardinale's American husband in the 1965 *Sandra*, but the producers felt his name didn't have enough clout at the box office and, strangely enough, chose Michael Craig, whose name meant decidedly less, instead.)

Since Granger's scenes with Valli were to be shot in English, Visconti engaged Tennessee Williams (whose work he'd directed onstage) and Paul Bowles to write English dialogue for them. The authors' joint credit, one of the most intriguing in film history—"Dialogue in Collaboration with Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles"—is as big as that of the scriptwriters, Visconti and Suso Cecchi D'Amico. Still, this didn't help the film in the United States any more than in the United Kingdom, where a butchered English-language version was released, but cut by nearly a half hour and called *The Wanton Countess*.

The checkered history of Visconti's films in America didn't start with *Senso*, however. Nor did it end with *The Leopard*. His first film, *Ossessione*, made in 1942, was censored by the fascists in Italy. It was based on James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and since Visconti had never acquired the rights, it couldn't be shown in America. Its first official screening in the U.S. was in 1975, at the New York Film Festival. His second film, *La terra trema* (1948), a documentary-style, three-hour epic, in Sicilian dialect, about the lives of struggling fishermen, had to be subtitled even in Italy. It was excoriated by Italy's highly political film critics, on both the right and the left (despite the fact that Visconti was a Communist and the party had helped fund the project—apparently, the final result was not uplifting enough for them), and was shown in America only very briefly, in 1965. Even after the huge success of *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), the seven-episode portmanteau film *The Witches* (1967), produced by Dino De Laurentiis as a vehicle for his wife, Silvana Mangano, was shown for just one week, on a double bill at the Apollo, the only foreign-language grind house on Times Square's Forty-second Street. The film, which contains Visconti's blistering, forty-minute feminist comedy of manners "The Witch Burned Alive," also stars familiar art-house regulars like Annie Girardot, Francisco Rabal, and Massimo Girotti, and marks the debut of Helmut Berger, an important figure in Visconti's private as well as artistic life. (Other episodes are by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Vittorio De Sica, and Mauro Bolognini.) This haphazard release of Visconti's films in America—including the belated nonrelease of *Senso*—made it very difficult for critics to assess his work in any coherent way.

*Senso*, Visconti's fourth film, was received with howls of outrage by Italian film critics. It was seen as a betrayal of neorealism, which, ironically, had been ushered in by his seminal *Ossessione*. However, if one looks closely at *Ossessione* and *La terra trema*, they are very different kinds of realism from those depicted by fellow neorealist filmmakers Rossellini and De Sica. In their films, unlike Visconti's, the camera is more of an

impartial observer, recording ordinary lives with an objectivity tempered with humanism and playing a secondary role. As early as *Ossessione*, Visconti was as concerned with the way the movie looked as with its content. And, of course, the pulpy, melodramatic plot of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is the structuring device of *Ossessione*, in contrast with the episodic, picaresque plotting of the films we think of as neorealist. In *La terra trema*, the characters may be poor Sicilian fishermen played by poor Sicilian fishermen, but their situation is explored on a stage as grand as that of any Greek tragedy. It is more of an epic than a neorealist document. Visconti, from the very beginning, was an operatic director, even before he directed opera.

He began working in theater in 1945, and had a huge succès de scandale with Cocteau's *Les parents terribles* before making *La terra trema*. During the postwar period, he directed for the Italian stage groundbreaking productions of, among many other plays, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In short, he was a master of melodrama, even in his films of this period. But it was in the operatic *Senso* that he found his true cinematic voice. Coming right before he directed his first opera—the long-forgotten *La vestale*, at La Scala, undertaken primarily so he could work with Maria Callas—*Senso* was the prelude to his full-throttle operatic works, like *Rocco and His Brothers*, *Sandra*, *The Damned* (1967), and *Ludwig* (1972), and also to his career as one of the great opera directors of his time. Under his guidance and tutelage, and in his productions, Callas would become the most famous opera singer of the twentieth



century.

In fact, the very first scene in *Senso* takes place in an opera house. It is the time of the Risorgimento, the fight for the unification of Italy, in Venice, during the rebellion of that region (one of the final battlegrounds of the nationalist effort) against its Austrian occupiers. The opera being performed is Verdi's *Il trovatore*; the aria is "Di quella pira," which ends with a call to arms: "All'armi, all'armi!" After the aria ends, revolutionaries in the galleries drop a blizzard of tricolor leaflets, the colors of the Italian flag, down into the orchestra, occupied chiefly by Austrian officers. When one of the officers, Franz Mahler (Granger), casually insults the Italians by making fun of their amusing and colorful methods of resistance, the plot kicks into motion. The opera onstage spills over into the lives of the characters. The Countess Livia Serpieri (Valli), an Italian patriot, and the Austrian Mahler begin a clandestine affair set against the backdrop of an occupied country in turmoil. Visconti's strategy was a very carefully calculated one. "I like melodrama because it is situated just at the meeting point between life and theater. I wanted the melodrama onstage to reflect the melodrama in the film," he said in a 1958 interview.

The countess's passion for Franz and his increasing indifference toward her, and ultimate exploitation of her love,



could easily have been the plot of a Hollywood movie. Visconti fleshes out an 1866 novella by Camillo Boito, only the broadest outlines of which remain. In Boito's tale, the countess is a devastatingly beautiful but vain, self-centered mantrap who is concerned only with herself. Visconti had more on his mind than the degradation of a noblewoman by an unworthy object of her love and her ultimate revenge, however. He embeds this story in a historical framework, and it becomes a Racinian conflict between passion and duty, personal desires and social imperatives. Visconti always brackets the personal in the larger historical context: Livia's degradation, as important as it is in her life, is only a detail in his epic canvas.

The love affair begins at the opera house, which is in fact the historic Teatro La Fenice in Venice, still a world-famous opera venue today, as it was when the movie was made more than fifty years ago, as well as when the story takes place, a century before that. Similarly, the use of the Palladian Villa Godi Malinverni, near Vicenza, the palatial ancestral estate to which the Serpieri retreat to escape the war—without much luck, as the war finds them, as does Franz—adds a depth, a physical presence, and a historical gravity to the scenes that no studio sets could hope to emulate. The villa is not merely lived in, it's inhabited, and even haunted, by the characters and their predecessors. They belong to it, and it belongs to them and defines them. All of the furnishings and artworks, all the props—the statues, the draperies, the frescoes on the walls—situate them in a very specific time and place that, let us say, Hollywood movies of that era had absolutely no interest in. Indeed, the sublime gorgeousness, the sensuousness of the locations and the props that fill them are every bit as important as the characters. These things give us information about the characters that neither they themselves nor the script could possibly articulate. This is true of practically all of Visconti's movies but especially the period films. One would also have to include his nonperiod sketch film "Il lavoro," in *Boccaccio 70* (1962), one of his most beautiful and most perfect works. The sets and costumes bespeak wealth, privilege, and especially the casual acceptance of them in a way that no dialogue could adequately convey. If decor is as important an element as characters, camera work, and plot in many films, in Visconti's, the ante is upped—decor is destiny.

Visconti himself was of noble birth and from a very wealthy family. Objets d'art, luxurious trappings, and opulent furnishings were part of his heritage, upbringing, and natural surroundings. In fact, on many of his films, he supplemented the sets with art and objects from his home. With *Senso*, Visconti becomes the Visconti we know and are just now learning to appreciate—a perfectionist who could not rest until each detail was in place. He was a tyrannical set designer, art director, and production designer, the bane of producer after producer. His cost overruns were legendary. According to Granger, for *Senso*, he was hired for a three-month shoot that lasted for nine. The film bankrupted Lux Films, just as *The Leopard* would Titanus Films nine years later. Producers shrieked when a film like

"Il lavoro" went over budget, but today, when all the accountants are long forgotten and the heartaches of production no longer remembered, we are the happy beneficiaries of his efforts. Only Visconti's glorious images remain on the screen to ravish us again and again with their sensuousness and precision. Not that he didn't have help from the best people available. He had two great cameramen on *Senso*—three, really. Aldo Graziati (a.k.a. G. R. Aldo), who had shot *La terra trema*, Orson Welles's *Othello*, and De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* and *Umberto D.*, started the film but unfortunately died in a car crash during the shoot. He was replaced by Robert Krasker (who had shot Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* and Carol Reed's *The Third Man*). But Visconti and Krasker didn't get along. The third cameraman was Giuseppe Rotunno, who started out as the camera operator but replaced Krasker toward the end of filming. (Rotunno subsequently shot many of Visconti's and Fellini's films.) But the look of the movie is all Visconti.

Visconti's photographic memory for the decorative arts was certainly matched by his extensive knowledge and



appreciation of the fine arts. It is not exactly an accident that the film brings to mind Manet, Veronese, Tintoretto, and Titian, among others. It is as if we were in a Manet painting twenty-four frames a second. Which is not to say that it has the studied, frozen, waxwork, art-directed quality of a period film like *Barry Lyndon* (1975), about which critics raved that each frame was a masterpiece. *Senso* is much more fluid than that. You don't want to hang the images on the wall. You want to live *in* them. The figures move in architectural surroundings

with the grace and elegance of Veronese figures come to life. They inhabit the backgrounds as if they and history are one. Which also explains the lack of close-ups in *Senso*. The characters are always surrounded by the splendid objects that formed them and that they are so accustomed to seeing. They are never isolated from their backgrounds. Visconti was equally attentive to the costumes, since the clothes the characters wear define them as much as the spaces they move through do. Let us not forget that he got his first job in films, before he was even interested in them, when his good friend Coco Chanel introduced him to Jean Renoir, as a result of which he wound up designing the women's clothing for Renoir's *A Day in the Country* (1936).

Visconti's attention to detail extends to the battle scenes as well. These are, if it's not too distasteful an oxymoron, the most beautiful battle scenes ever put on film, on a par with the spectacular ballroom climax in *The Leopard*. In a sense, this movie is a companion piece to *The Leopard*, taking place in the same historical period. Even though *The Leopard* is more autobiographical, *Senso* is definitely the film in which story elements relating directly to Visconti's life start to appear. Franz's speech at the end of the movie, in which he declares that it is the end of an era for him and his kind, foreshadows the major themes of *The Leopard*, in which the Prince of Salina comes to the realization that he is the last of his line, that he and aristocrats like him will soon be replaced by a rising middle class of grasping shopkeepers and merchants. In virtually all of



Visconti's films subsequent to *Senso*, there is an aching sense of yearning for what is passing or has already passed, a malaise of regrets, a mourning for an era of privilege that is coming to an end. This elegiac plaint reaches its fullest expression in his next-to-last movie, *Conversation Piece* (1974), in which Burt Lancaster plays an old man, a reclusive scholar who lives in the past—surrounded by books, art, and memories that he realizes are of no use to anyone else—and neither understands nor likes nor wants to know where the modern world is headed. To say that Visconti would have been the ideal director for a film adaptation of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*—a project that he in fact worked on for many years but that proved impossibly expensive and was unfortunately aborted—is to state the obvious. He was the only filmmaker ever who knew firsthand what Proust's world looked like. It is, without doubt, one of the

greatest movies never made.

As consolation, however, we now have a fully restored version—minus the five minutes of battle scenes removed by the Italian censors—of his great *Senso*, which ranks among his and the world's most beautiful movies. Even more importantly, this version will undoubtedly reach more people in the English-speaking world than have ever seen the film before. Like with many great movies that were unjustly neglected, misunderstood, or rejected at the time of their making (like *The Leopard*, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and *Under Capricorn*, Dreyer's *Gertrud*, Ophüls's *Lola Montès*, Leone's *Once upon a Time in the West*, Welles's *Touch of Evil*), time has vindicated *Senso* and revealed it to be the masterpiece that it is.



### **SPRING 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIV**

Feb 21 Stanley Kubrick, **Paths of Glory** 1957  
 Feb 28 Sidney Lumet, **12 Angry Men** 1957  
 Mar 6 Satyajit Ray, **The Music Room** 1958  
 Mar 13 spring break  
 Mar 20 Clint Eastwood, **The Outlaw Josey Wales** 1975  
 Mar 27 John Woo, **The Killer** 1989  
 Apr 3 Krzysztof Kieslowski, Kieslowski, **Red** 1994  
 Apr 10 Terrence Malick, **Thin Red Line** 1998  
 Apr 17 Fernando Meirelles, **City of God**, 2003  
 Apr 24 Christopher Nolan, **The Dark Knight** 2008

### **CONTACTS:**

...email Diane Christian: [engdc@buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@buffalo.edu)...email Bruce Jackson [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)

...for the series schedule, annotations, links, **handouts (in color)** and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send either of us an email with **add to BFS** list in the subject line.

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center  
 and State University of New York at Buffalo

With support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News

### **MIDNIGHT BEACON: A FILM SERIES FOR THE SENSES**

Friday Midnights February 10<sup>th</sup>—April 13<sup>th</sup>

Market Arcade Film and Arts Centre (639 Main St.)

Gen. \$9/ Students \$7/ Seniors \$6.50

Contact: Jake Mikler (716)668-6095 [jake.mikler@gmail.com](mailto:jake.mikler@gmail.com)

Midnight Beacon is a new midnight movie series harking back to the golden age of art houses, when cinema was a vessel for exploration and audiences were transfixed by a diverse platter of celluloid equally jarring and dismembering the mind. The films are linked by a commonality of genre, themes or origin, showcasing New German Cinema, the death of the sixties, Eastern Bloc oddities, Road Movies, and Plastic Surgery Nightmares.

Feb. 17- **In a Year of Thirteen Moons** (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978) Feb. 24- **Zabriskie Point** (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1969) March 2- **Panic in Needle Park** (Jerry Schatzberg, 1971) March 9- **Valerie and Her Week of Wonders** (Jaromil Jires, 1970) March 16- **Possession** (Andrej Zulawski, 1981) March 23- **Two Lane Blacktop** (Monte Hellman, 1971) March 30- **Radio on** (Chris Petit, 1980) April 6 **Seconds-** (John Frankenheimer, 1966) April 13- **The Face of Another** (Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1966)