



The Melodramatic Realism of Luchino Visconti

David Gariff



(front cover) *La terra trema*
(above) *Morte a Venezia*
(back cover) *Senso*
Courtesy Photofest

Notes to accompany the film series
Luchino Visconti at the National Gallery of Art
November 3 through December 16, 2018

nga.gov/film

I like melodrama because it is situated just at the meeting point between life and theater.

— Luchino Visconti

In 1948 the Italian film director Luchino Visconti (1906–1976) made *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*), the story of the rituals and hardships of life in the small Sicilian fishing village Aci Trezza, near Catania. Based on the nineteenth-century *verismo* novel *I malavoglia* by Giovanni Verga (1840–1922), *La terra trema* is, in part, Visconti's response to films by French directors like Jean Renoir (1894–1979) and René Clair (1898–1981). More importantly, the film is a vibrant example of the tenets of neorealism advocated in Visconti's 1941 article "Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema," which was published in the Italian avant-garde journal *Cinema*. The article calls for Italian filmmakers to return to the rich tradition of Italian realist literature that extends back into the nineteenth century, specifically the novels and stories of Verga. Visconti praises Verga's stark, impersonal, and often fatalistic portrayals of human experience, as well as his sensitivity to regional dialects and customs, as inspiration for a relevant cinema that would confront the problems of modern Italy in the 1940s.

With the fall of Fascism in 1943, Italian filmmakers embraced a new freedom that encouraged this direct and authentic style of movie making. Beginning with the films of Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977) and continuing in the work of Vittorio De Sica (1902–1974) and the early films of Visconti, neorealism sought a more democratic spirit, telling stories of ordinary people with little or no moralizing. The settings are the streets and buildings of real cities, many of which still bore the scars of war when they were filmed. The performers are often nonprofessional actors, including those cast in major roles. If the films have a "style," it might loosely be termed documentary (or realistic), eschewing subjective camera work and editing as well as romantic effects of lighting. Of particular importance to their production was allowing scenes to play out in real time, however slowly or

methodically. Dialogue is composed of everyday conversations of people on the street, even when the scripts are inspired by a literary text. Indeed, those literary texts themselves are often written in a vernacular style stressing common speech patterns and regional dialects. (*La terra trema*, which features the Sicilian dialect spoken in Aci Trezza, played in the rest of Italy, and even in other parts of Sicily, with Italian subtitles.)

This period in Italian film history—from roughly 1943, with Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*) and Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*), to 1952 and De Sica's *Umberto D*—is a golden age in the history of Italian cinema. The neorealist films produced during this period are among the greatest in world cinema and include *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) and *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1947), the final two chapters in Rossellini's War Trilogy; *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946) and *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) by De Sica; and *La terra trema* by Visconti. Italian films of this time also confront the history of Italy's nineteenth-century struggle for national unity and independence from foreign domination known as the Risorgimento. *1860* (1933), directed by Alessandro Blasetti (1900–1987); *Viva l'Italia* (1960), by Rossellini; and *Senso* (1954) and *Il gattopardo* (1963)—sometimes referred to as the Italian *Gone with the Wind*—by Visconti are among the most prominent examples of this phenomenon.

Visconti is arguably the Italian neorealist director most influenced by the thought of two twentieth-century Italian writer-philosophers whose ideas directly shaped modern attitudes toward Italian history and film: Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Both men emphasized the inextricable links between art, history, and the art of history (as opposed to the science of history). For Croce and Gramsci knowledge derives from intuition and emotion.

Cinema, especially films about history, expresses itself through human emotion. We transport ourselves back in time to experience events as if we had been there, while at the same time we derive modern meaning from the historical events depicted.

For filmmakers such as Blasetti, Rossellini, and Visconti, Italian history (especially modern history) was a never-ending debate about fundamental problems that still exist today: class struggle; regionalism (especially the divide between north and south); the role of the Catholic Church in Italian life; and the basic responsibilities and obligations of the individual and the state. The difference between *Gone with the Wind* and *Il gattopardo* is, in part, Visconti's pointed commentary (visually translated through the novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and personally expressed through the character of Don Fabrizio) that “things have to change in order to remain the same.” The struggles of Don Fabrizio and his family mirror the threatening political, cultural, and social climate of the time. It is important to remember that Visconti himself was both an aristocrat (descended from the noble Visconti family of Milan) and a Marxist.

Situated halfway through Visconti's filmography, which spans the years 1943 to 1976, is *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960). In this work Visconti's abiding neorealism melds with a melodramatic story worthy of the *verismo* operas of Puccini, Leoncavallo, and Mascagni, which themselves return us to the stories of Verga. Exploring the ongoing issue of the *mezzogiorno*, the term used to describe the history of economic and social inequality between northern and southern Italy, the film follows members of the Parondi family (a mother and her four sons) who arrive in Milan from Lucania (Basilicata), a mountainous region in southern Italy.

Even into the 1960s Basilicata remained one of Italy's most impoverished regions. Many individuals and families were forced

to migrate north in search of work. Over the course of *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, each brother charts a different course representing aspects of the migration experience within Italy. These events and experiences are rooted in Visconti's (and Gramsci's) views of the feudal life of the south, the racism against southern Italian peasants by northern workers, the importance of family, and the realization that, despite the prejudice, injustices, and hardships faced in Milan, returning to the south is not an option. All things change, but a regeneration of the economic, social, and moral order can only be achieved through the creation of new structures in society (especially an alliance between northern workers and southern peasants) and faith in the future. *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* is in some ways the fullest and most complicated exploration of Visconti's realist vision coupled with his dramatic, even operatic, examination of good and evil.

If *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* explores the tension between social progress and a nostalgia for the past, Visconti's *Morte a Venezia* (*Death in Venice*) is among the director's most personal explorations of love, desire, and the tension between beauty and intellect. Thomas Mann's 1912 novella and the Visconti film based on it are studies in the fatal charm that has long been associated with La Serenissima. Few films in the history of modern cinema so well capture Venice's threatening presence as the seductress of the northern European visitor, labyrinth, and locus for *liebestod* (love-death). Visconti took many liberties with the original Mann novella in his adapted screenplay. Among the most important was changing the character of Aschenbach from a writer to a composer, thereby strengthening the ties to the figure of Gustav Mahler (1860–1911). Visconti wove Mahler's music—the Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony and excerpts from the Third Symphony—into the soundtrack. His use of the Adagietto helped create a new audience for Mahler's music in the later twentieth century.

The allure of Venice for nineteenth-century British, American, German, and French painters is well known. But the list of “northern lights” attracted to Venice also includes Lord Byron, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Herman Melville, Robert Browning, Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, Richard Wagner, Marcel Proust, Henry James, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Ezra Pound, to name only a few. All saw Venice as a city with a dual nature, stressing such contrasts as beauty and vacancy; voluptuousness and weariness; radiance and fatality; ecstasy and dissolution; health and disease. For all these individuals Venice was the nexus between north and south, east and west; it was a unique confluence of all desire.

At the heart of Venice's distinct geography, history, culture, and psychology lies the archetype of the labyrinth. In his *Italian Journey* (1786–1788), the German poet Goethe wrote, “I have often sighed longingly for solitude, and now I can really enjoy it.... Perhaps there is only one person in Venice that knows me, and we shall not soon meet.... Toward evening, again without a guide, I lost my way... I tried to find my way out of this labyrinth without asking anyone... but it is an incredible maze.”¹ In Visconti's *Death in Venice*, Tadzio's mother (portrayed by Silvana Mangano) confidently leads her family through this diseased labyrinth, which enables the seduction and destruction of Aschenbach. Unlike men, women, it seems, instinctively know how to negotiate this confusing maze.

Visconti also captures the tragedy of Venice as the locus for *liebestod* or love-death. Both Nietzsche and Wagner had deep and long-lasting attachments to Venice. Thomas Mann, in turn, was fascinated by the works of both these individuals. Their thoughts were formative influences on his *Death in Venice* and, by extension, on Visconti's film adaptation. Writing about

Venice in his *Ecce homo* (1908), Nietzsche states, “Seeking to find another word for music, I inevitably come back to Venice. I do not know how to distinguish between tears and music. I do not know how to think of joy, or of the south, without a shudder of fear.”² Much of Mann’s novella and Visconti’s film deal with the polarity between the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of art and human nature articulated by Nietzsche in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*. Aschenbach’s Dionysian rebirth and his impending *liebestod* are both referred to in the barber shop scene, when he is simultaneously “rejuvenated” and symbolically “embalmed” (an event that is presaged aboard the steamship in the opening moments of the film).

Personal and artistic polarities reside at the heart of Luchino Visconti’s life and work: aristocrat and Marxist; formalist and stylist; gay man and Catholic; realist and aesthete; polemicist and apologist; nostalgic for the past and advocate of a new, modern future. His films occupy a position of prestige and honor in the rich history of Italian cinema. The range of their themes and the variety of their visual styles attest to a director deeply affected by the achievements of European history and culture. Few directors have been as sensitive as Visconti to the many and varied forms of Western art, including opera, theater, painting, sculpture, architecture, film, literature, dance, and music. That it is sometimes difficult to reconcile his neorealist roots with his melodramatic flair only entices us all the more.

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Essential Goethe*, ed. Matthew Bell (Princeton, NJ, 2016), 788 and 792.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1968), 17.

Visconti Directorial Filmography

Osessione (*Obsession*, 1943), also writer

Giorni di gloria (*Days of Glory*, 1945)

La terra trema (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948), also writer

Bellissima (1951), also writer

Appunti su un fatto di cronaca (1953)

Siamo donne (*We, the Women*, 1953, segment *Anna Magnani*), also writer

Senso (1954), also writer

Le notti bianche (*White Nights*, 1957), also writer

Rocco e i suoi fratelli (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960), also writer

Boccaccio '70 (1962, segment *Il lavoro*), also writer

Il gattopardo (*The Leopard*, 1963), also writer

Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa... (*Sandra*, 1965), also writer

Le streghe (*The Witches*, 1967, segment *La strega bruciata viva*)

Lo straniero (*The Stranger*, 1967), also writer

La caduta degli dei (*The Damned*, 1969), also writer

Morte a Venezia (*Death in Venice*, 1971), also writer and producer

Ludwig (1973), also writer

Gruppo di famiglia in un interno (*Conversation Piece*, 1974), also writer

L'innocente (1976), also writer

