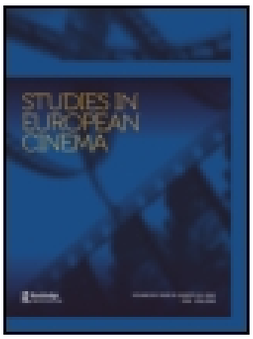

Studies in European Cinema

ISSN: 1741-1548 (Print) 2040-0594 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rseu20

Representing the un(re)presentable: Homosexuality in Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*

Eugenio Bolongaro

To cite this article: Eugenio Bolongaro (2010) Representing the un(re)presentable: Homosexuality in Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*, Studies in European Cinema, 7:3, 221-234, DOI: 10.1386/seci.7.3.221_1

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1386/seci.7.3.221_1

Published online: 03 Jan 2014.

Studies in European Cinema
Volume 7 Number 3
 doi: 10.1386/seci.7.3.221_1

EUGENIO BOLONGARO
McGill University

Representing the un(re)presentable: Homosexuality in Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*

ABSTRACT

The representation of homosexual desire in Luchino Visconti's films has been consistently neglected by critics, who have justified their disinterest by arguing that Visconti's homosexuality is a personal matter of little or no relevance to the study of his oeuvre. *Challenging such a position, this article argues that the representation of homosexual desire is a central problem in Visconti's films. In representing homosexual desire, Visconti encounters issues of repression both at the collective level (the homophobia in Italian culture and society) and at the personal level (Visconti's deep ambivalence about his own homosexuality). In this context, denial and disavowal play a key role in the development of a highly indirect cinematic language in which words and images are charged with simultaneously hiding and disclosing that which cannot be named/shown. The discussion focuses on the short sequence in* Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers *that concludes the 'Simone' chapter and presents the meeting of Simone with his boxing manager Duilio. Simone has asked to see Duilio because he needs money, and accepts an invitation to the latter's apartment. Once there, the conversation quickly degenerates into a brawl, which ends when Simone is knocked to the ground. In film, this kind of violence is a common means of releasing*

KEYWORDS

Visconti
Italian film
male homosexuality
gender
indirect representation
censorship
repression

sexual tension that cannot be acknowledged, but in Rocco *the sexual element is 'elaborated' on no less than three levels of representation: in the dialogue (which barely alludes to homosexual desire and primarily by indirect denial); in the physical interaction between the two characters (which Visconti goes to great lengths to disguise under the rhetoric of boxing); and finally and most unexpectedly in the uncanny images appearing on the brightly lit television screen that is at the centre of many of the shots. These images and their strange behaviour intimate to the spectator that this is not a banal homosexual encounter, but a crucial moment in the tragedy of Simone (and Rocco) and in the attempt by Visconti to forge a cinematic language adequate to that tragedy.*

INTRODUCTION: VISCONTI'S CRITICISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Over the last decade, the literature on Luchino Visconti has undergone a noticeable revival on both sides of the Atlantic. Since the beginning of the new millennium, no less than fifteen new book-length studies have appeared, and looking further back at the years since Visconti's death, Lino Micciché (2000), a leading Italian film critic, reminded us that, contradicting the opinions voiced in an ill-advised 1976 issue of *Bianco e nero*, 'not only we never stopped talking about Visconti, but indeed we are talking about him more and more.' One of the important events in this revival, especially in the anglophone world, was the publication in 2003 of an updated edition of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's *Luchino Visconti*. Peter Brunette's review of this publication occasioned an exchange that clearly identifies the situation this article begins to address. Brunette (2005) notes:

> The single biggest problem with the third edition [of Nowell-Smith's book] is that the new chapters on Visconti's last three films are written with hardly a reference to the director's homosexuality. [. . .].
> For some reason, Nowell-Smith saves a discussion of Visconti's gayness until the new conclusion, where he offers some intelligent, if limited, general observations, to-wit that the principal manifestations of Visconti's homosexuality lies not so much in the display of homoerotic desire (though I think there is much more of this in the films then he realizes), but rather in the sadness that comes in not having had a family. Readers can make of this what they will. Interestingly, he criticizes Italian critics in his conclusion for having neglected this aspect of Visconti's life and creative production, but he has done the same himself, even in chapters written in 2002.

Nowell-Smith (2005) replies:

> Visconti's homosexuality is a known fact. During his life it was something which, as Richard Dyer elegantly put it recently: 'Everybody knew, and nobody knew.' [. . .]. But how relevant is Visconti's personal life to this? Like many directors, homo-or heterosexual, Visconti liked to get off with his leading players. But for a critical work, as opposed to a biography, it only seems to me relevant in the case of his relationship with Helmut Berger [. . .]. Brunette also refers to Visconti's 'gayness.' Is this just another word for homosexuality, or does it mean something different? I presume that the point of the word is to take Visconti's homosexual orientation out

> of the realm of simple same-sex object choice and into that of the way this choice is experienced, lived, and expressed in certain cultures. The problem is that the paradigm culture for 'gayness' is the Anglo-Saxon world (or parts of it) today. You cannot talk about Ancient Greek homosexuality as gayness. Even for the relatively near culture of Italy in the 1950s and 60s I think the term can only mislead. None of this is to imply that there should not be gay (or better, queer) readings of Visconti's films, but they would have to be either cross-cultural studies, or exercises in intersubjectivity [. . .].

On a first reading, these comments may seem unremarkable: Brunette blandly suggesting or perhaps rather wishing that current discussions of homosexuality in literary and film studies be brought to bear in contemporary analyses of Visconti's work, and Nowell-Smith feebly recognizing that his work does not make a major contribution to that project which, in any event, appears to him a relatively peripheral trend even in Visconti literature, past and present.[1] And yet Nowell-Smith's claim about the marginality of homosexual desire in Visconti's film seems not only almost offensively cavalier ('like many directors, homo- or heterosexual, Visconti liked to *get off* with his leading players' [emphasis added]), but also, I would contend, nothing less than extraordinary to any modern film viewer. I will not examine here how it is possible for a critic of unquestionable talent and sensibility such as Nowell-Smith to hold such a view – this will be left for later. For the moment I would just like to make a simple but fundamental point: the representation of homosexuality is a central *cinematic* issue in Visconti's pivotal film *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers* (henceforth *Rocco*). This is a first step in reversing Nowell-Smith's thesis and demonstrating that male homosexual desire is central to Visconti's *oeuvre*, and any reading of his work that ignores this fact or relegates it to a tangential consideration is deeply flawed. This being the first salvo in the argument, I will conduct what could be termed a 'close watching' of a single sequence in *Rocco* – a sequence that takes place at a critical moment in the film and that, when fully elucidated, contributes key insights into the problem of homosexual desire and its representation in Visconti's cinema.

1 Nowell-Smith raises an important terminological issue. The terms homosexual, gay and queer are not equivalent, and the differences between them are subject to much debate. I will not engage these debates in this context, but will rather limit myself to specifying that for the purposes of this discussion the term 'homosexual' and its derivatives, which I use extensively, refer to a man's sexual desire for another man. I do not always accompany this term with the adjective 'male', since it is clear from the context that I am not discussing in any way female homosexual desire. I have also avoided using the terms 'gay' and 'queer' because they bring into play cultural and theoretical issues that will be examined more usefully on another occasion.

SIMONE, MORINI AND THE TELEVISION SCREEN

The year 1960 was an *annus mirabilis* in Italian cinema: Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* and Luchino Visconti's *Rocco* are all pivotal works not only in the *oeuvre* of the respective directors, but also in the history of Italian culture. Masterful expressions of the very different styles and sensibilities of their authors, these films nonetheless share one common function: moving beyond neo-realism and its narrowing horizon. From this point of view, Visconti's work is the most significant, since of the three directors in question he was undoubtedly the more involved in the neo-realist project.

The way in which *Rocco* both is still and is no longer a neo-realist film has been analysed in detail in the literature (Bondanella 2003; Brunetta 2000; Marcus 1986; Micciché 1996; Nowell-Smith 2003). For my purposes here the key point is that at the centre of Visconti's discourse in this film are intimate relationships between men. These relationships emerge from the two basic settings that confront each other in the film: family and work. While a thorough gender analysis of the film would explore both these settings, I will focus on

this occasion on the work front, and specifically on the relationship between Simone and the boxing impresario Morini. This relationship is especially interesting from my perspective because its sexual nature is very thinly veiled, and thus raises in a particularly acute way the issue of the representation of male homosexual desire.

We first encounter Duilio Morini at the gymnasium where Simone and Rocco have begun to box. Morini enters the gym escorted by two women. Greeted by one of the trainers, he notices Simone. The physical nature of Morini's interest is underscored as the impresario proceeds to slap the young man on the shoulder, then punches him on the chest to test his muscles, and finally grabs his lips to check his teeth. Morini's domineering manner so far is consistent with that of a horse-trader checking a new animal for his stable. Still, Morini's excessive swagger and his flaunted virility already hint at a sexual dimension, which becomes explicit in the ensuing 'shower' scene.

Simone and Rocco are washing up after their training session. The showers are at the end of a narrow dark corridor, from which Morini emerges with his eyes fixed on Simone. Moving against the wall opposite the showers, the impresario figure fades into the darkness. We cannot see his eyes, though by his posture we know that he is facing Rocco and Simone, who remain under the water, naked throughout the conversation. When in due course Morini gets around to saying that he will give Simone a chance at a boxing career, a close-up of Rocco looking a little puzzled at Simone is followed by a close-up of Simone, who winks at his brother. The wink is a kind of 'we've got it made' sign from Simone to Rocco, but in the circumstances it also acquires a sexual dimension: not only 'we've got it made' but also 'Morini likes me/us'. Simone and Rocco are aware of the fact that Morini is looking at their naked bodies and that his gaze has a quality that can be alluded to but not openly talked about, and thus the wink. It should be noted that the reticence/obliqueness of the wink has a cinematic dimension: the camera 'cannot' show Simone and Rocco's full nakedness, only their torsos, which Morini, as a boxing impresario, is after all 'entitled' to examine. In sum, the ambiguity of Morini's gaze is preserved by the camerawork.

We see Morini again on a few occasions as Simone's boxing career gets under way, but we have to wait almost another hour and a half before the episode that is the focus of this analysis suddenly brings Morini to centre stage. The sequence begins with Simone, whose downhill trajectory is by now established, arranging to meet Morini in a brightly lit bar on the ground floor of a cinema – a detail that begins to establish a key theme: the problem of representation, the double role of the image that can simultaneously reveal and conceal. The initial interaction between Simone and Morini makes clear the desperate situation of the former: Morini pays for the shots Simone is gulping down, Simone asks for a cigarette and takes some extras for later. Morini leads the conversation, which revolves around the fact that a boxer sooner or later must confront his fear of being hit. There is a double edge to this discourse: on the one hand, Morini is humiliating Simone by calling him in effect a coward; on the other hand, by attributing Simone's behaviour to the fear of damaging his 'bel profilo'/'beautiful profile',[2] the impresario is also beginning to speak a desire that his whole demeanour is already manifesting. Morini repeatedly touches Simone on the shoulder and on the arm, moving closer and closer to him. His expression keeps fluctuating from the arrogant swagger that is his hallmark to a more subdued and even friendly attitude. There is a palpable sense of pleasure in the smiles Morini cautiously flashes, pleasure at having

2 In translating the dialogue, I mostly follow the subtitles, introducing minor modifications when necessary. Interestingly in this case, the subtitles do not translate the adjective 'bel', and merely refer to 'profile'.

been proved right (about what exactly?), but also pleasure at the intimacy that Simone's request (not yet articulated) is establishing between them.

The conversation has not gone very far before Morini says that they do not have to continue talking in the bar, and Simone agrees that he will feel better when they leave the place. When it comes to deciding where to go, it is Simone who suggests they repair to Morini's apartment. The latter's reply is telling: 'I was sure that one day you were going to ask me that'. Simone looks away, obviously ill at ease, and then Morini comments, 'If I'm not mistaken, it looks like you are getting your courage back'. The courage for what? Not for boxing, obviously. Without looking at him, Simone replies, 'in the end one learns'. Learns what? To ask for money?

The first part of the sequence ends here, and a few things are by now clear, though nothing about them has been explicitly stated: Simone desperately needs money, and has decided to ask Morini. Morini knows this and is using the power he has over Simone to take him home. We therefore face a first layer of obliqueness: financial need is embarrassing and cannot be discussed explicitly in public. This explains Simone's unease and the need to find a more private space, though choosing Morini's apartment seems to shift the ground from privacy to intimacy. A money transaction is contemplated, but perhaps not precisely the one revealed by the first layer of unspoken meaning, the one that is good enough for the bartender and any other possible onlooker. Simone and Morini know better, however.

Morini is not a generous man. Why this patent delight at Simone's proposition? What can Simone offer him in exchange for the money? He has nothing. His only capital, as the film has shown us from the beginning, is his body: the body he puts on display in the boxing ring, the body he used to 'borrow' a shirt from the dry-cleaner, the body he used to steal the broach when he made love to the dry-cleaner to compensate her for the use of the shirt. In sum, by this point in the sequence, the suspicion that Simone is prostituting himself to Morini and that, therefore, what we are witnessing is a homosexual encounter is well-nigh overwhelming, though the reality of the situation has been carefully buried under two layers of indirection. It should be noted that in the published script of *Rocco*, the sequence ends here, when in fact the film does not. On the set, Visconti decided to probe the situation further, and in doing so he raised the stakes: how could the intimacy between Morini and Simone be shown and its significance explored circumventing censorship, not only the external one enforced by the state, but the internal one enforced by Visconti's own identification with a relatively tolerant but fundamentally homophobic cultural tradition and milieu?[3]

The second part of the sequence begins with an abrupt cut. We are looking at two French windows at a 90° angle. The glass panes are ribbed and translucent: we can see the dim light beyond, and in it only the shapes of objects and the shadows of people. Morini's voice is calm and reassuring: 'Here we are. This is my home, do you like it? Come in, come in, don't be afraid. It's the first time you come here, isn't it?' Morini's shadow moves past the windows; Simone, who was hesitating at the far right of the frame, gradually moves past the glass panes. Morini turns on another light. The windows brighten, making it almost impossible to see through them. Simone remains silent throughout.

There are two remarkable elements in this shot. First, the use of light, which veils rather than reveals the characters and setting. Light is a glare that captures the eye, turning attention away from the penumbral places where human shadows move, where what really matters is happening. Second, the camera is fixed

3 That the culture of the communist Left was as homophobic in the 1950s and beyond as the culture of the Catholic right can be easily ascertained by perusing some of Togliatti's notorious intemperate incursions in the field of literary and cultural criticism (Vittoria 1992). Pier Paolo Pasolini's difficult relationship with the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party) is also eloquent in this regard.

outside the apartment as if reluctant to enter it. The angle formed by the window, the translucent glass panes, the somewhat distant voice of Morini, all draw attention to our paradoxical proximity to and distance from the scene. Where exactly are we? The place occupied by the camera is in darkness, unclear and therefore a little disorienting: a balcony? A hall? Unable to see clearly, we are forced to confront our voyeurism, our desire to see. But there is an ambivalence in this desire: Simone hesitates to enter the light, the camera hesitates to enter the apartment. Do we really want to see? Morini's reassurances are not only for Simone's benefit, and are bound to backfire: acknowledgment brings Simone's unease (and ours) into the open but does not give us any reason to relinquish it. Morini's clumsy attempt at nonchalance exposes the widening gap between literal meaning and deeper significance.

In the second shot of the apartment, the camera cuts without further ado to the interior. Morini stands beside the table lamp he has just lit. Though partially illuminated, his figure fades into the dark background. He is facing Simone, whose black silhouette is at the left of the frame. Between them, a clutter of furniture. The camera is not perfectly aligned with any of the visible objects. The brightness of the lamp draws the eye to the centre of the frame, but nothing of special significance falls within the light's compass. Indeed, the most visible object is not the incandescent light bulb but the shade that dims its light, making it rather ineffectual: the room remains for the most part in darkness. Morini and Simone keep silent, and the music, which began playing unobtrusively when the characters arrived at the apartment, now becomes noticeable. It is a low, slow, repetitive motif, conveying a sense of expectation that will be underscored by a higher phrase from a synthesizer. Morini begins to move to the right of the frame into the darkness. The camera follows his movements and we see the outlines of more furniture and two more unlit lamps. There are large paintings and prints on the wall, knick-knacks on all available horizontal surfaces and an unusual number of photographs in picture frames: all of them, as we will soon discover, are pictures of women. Morini speaks again to reassure Simone. He goes to the liquor cabinet and gets two glasses, and then moves back to where Simone is standing in the shadows and picks up a bottle from one of the ubiquitous coffee tables. He moves back towards Simone, hands him a glass and then pours them each a drink. As he does so, he stands in front of the lamp, accentuating the darkness that engulfs the room. He puts the bottle down and with his free hand he gently slaps Simone on the side of the face. Simone does not react in any way to this gesture, perhaps because Morini's body is already moving away from him, a motion that continues as Morini, followed by the camera, crosses the darkness once again and positions himself at the opposite end of the room. Standing there Morini says, 'sit down', and the take ends as he is taking his jacket off.

This first interior shot establishes a pattern. The camera is fixed and pans to follow the movement of the characters from a certain distance. It may zoom in for a close-up at crucial moments but the angle is fairly constant, producing a sense of constriction and limit. The clutter that characterizes the over-furnished apartment, and the abiding darkness within which the characters move, also contributes to the sense of being trapped in a relatively small space. The characters begin to move like caged animals or boxers in a ring. In spite of his calm tone, we can see the tension in Morini's back-and-forth movement. The fact that he takes the jacket off and moves to the opposite corner alludes to the beginning of a boxing match. But what does this mean? Once again we have to expose the layers.

Morini's calming discourse and the drinks he produces are the facade of normalcy, of conventional sociability between men. Behind it there is the narrative of financial need and dependence, a matter whose unpleasantness can be masked by sticking to the social convention of basic hospitality. However, once they are ensconced in the apartment, the tension rises and Morini's tone becomes more aggressive. Once again he resorts to the boxing narrative, which both characters understand well and can easily pretend to believe in, but also, and more importantly, this is the kind of narrative that allows Morini to talk about and provoke a more physical though still socially acceptable interaction between men. And yet, behind this layer, there is another narrative, that of homosexual desire, without which all this elaborate staging would have no reason to exist. In fact, the altercation between Simone and Morini, which is about to erupt, is on one level incomprehensible. Why would Morini need to bring Simone home if what he wanted was merely to insult him? What glory can there be in winning a fight with a washed-out boxer like Simone? On Simone's side, it is clear that he is very reluctant to be dragged into a physical confrontation that he cannot win, not only because he is in bad shape physically and psychologically, but also because he wants Morini to give him the money he desperately needs. And yet, Simone ultimately takes the bait, and one of the important dimensions of this sequence is the elaboration of the complex reasons for his counterproductive (or is it?) behaviour.

In the next shot Simone finally shakes off his inertia and moves towards the centre of the frame. He is briefly in the light, and we see him swallowing the drink Morini has poured him. After a few steps, however, he stops and sits down in an armchair that faces away from the impresario. Simone has to twist his back and turn his face away from the light to meet the other's eyes. The camera moves closer to Simone than in the previous shots, and then moves further in for a close-up when he actually begins to speak: 'Listen, I need money. A lot of money'. We can barely see Simone's eyes looking up at Morini across the room. Simone is begging, but his voice conveys less a sense of shame and humility than one of apprehension. What is Morini going to do?

So far we have been dealing with the preliminaries, but Simone has finally broken the spell and spoken his need. His words tear away the veil of amiability, and the confrontation can begin. The camera turns on Morini. He is still standing across the room. The camera angle has changed in order to approximate Simone's perspective: we see Morini a little from below, and as a result his face is completely hidden in shadow while his brilliant white shirt and black tie stand out from the darkness. We should note that while the camera zooms up to Simone's face establishing empathy and closeness, Morini is kept at a distance and 'decapitated'. To Morini's right we see one of the women's pictures scattered all over the room. The impresario's erect posture conveys control, confidence, mastery, just as Simone's crouching posture conveys submission, apprehension.

When Morini speaks, his tone remains calm, but arrogance begins to creep in: 'I know, I know'. He moves away from the camera, takes a few steps to his right but not directly towards Simone, to whom in fact he is half turning his back. Morini sighs, shaking his head, and then does something totally unexpected. He goes to a TV set that has remained hidden in darkness until now and switches it on. A bright image appears, from a Renaissance painting. Though the definition is poor, the image portrays a knight on a rearing white horse. Still fiddling with the TV, Morini adds, 'And it isn't the first time, is it?' Then he

slaps his own head in a contrived gesture of exasperation. We see the outlines of his mocking face. Then he moves towards Simone.

This is a crucial moment. The two men are finally side by side. They are not facing each other and therefore there can be no eye contact between them. They are facing the camera, us, but we cannot see their eyes: Simone's are in shadow while the whole of Morini's face is lost in darkness (this is the second time that Visconti decapitates the impresario). There is nothing between them but empty space, but this space is occupied by the image broadcast on the TV screen. It is to this bright image, which appears dead in the centre of the frame, that our eyes are inevitably drawn. Moreover, something rather strange has begun to happen to this image. When Morini approaches Simone, his body briefly covers the screen, and when he moves away the image behind him 'moves' as if it were floating 'behind' the TV frame and responding somehow to the movement of the character. The effect of this mimetically unjustifiable movement (which will reoccur and become more conspicuous) is to draw even more attention to the TV screen while disorienting the viewer, who cannot reconcile the panning of the camera inside the apartment with the 'sliding' of the images on the TV. In this way, the bright TV screen becomes the centre of a luminous vortex that sucks our attention away from its surroundings, particularly since the characters are 'blind': we cannot see their eyes, the orientation of which would open up alternatives to the perspective taken up by the camera. Deprived of other compelling points of reference, our gaze is marooned in the space between the two men.

What do we encounter in the eye of the vortex? The sequence includes seven recognizable images. The first two are not particularly remarkable, and serve to establish the uncanny presence of the TV screen. The third, however, is a nude, which appears just as Morini says, 'If I think of the day I first saw you at the *Lombarda* [the boxing club]. An Apollo'. The nude is that of a woman reclining on her back. Her pose, which exposes her breast and thighs, is erotically charged. This image is still on the screen when Morini touches Simone again, first on the shoulder, provoking a slight start in the younger man, and then on the side of the face, which Morini this time is clearly trying to caress. This causes Simone to jump up from the armchair and leave the frame with a gasp, while Morini's mocking gasp in response is the prelude to an exasperated tirade: 'It's all over for you'.

At this point, a new image appears on the TV screen. Another nude, this time of a man standing by a tree. Only half of the man's upper body and his left arm are shown – tellingly this figure is also 'decapitated'; the head is beyond the TV frame. It is a muscular body, and though there is nothing particularly erotic in his pose, the dark colouring conveys something slightly demonic. The image remains on the screen just as Morini continues berating Simone: 'As a boxer you're finished. As a man only someone like me can have certain interest in this wreck you have become'. The camera cuts to Simone to show us that he is stung by Morini's words. But his reaction only leads him to reiterate his demand for money: 'I need money!' His regional accent resurfaces as the tension mounts.

Morini is not impressed. When the camera cuts back to him, he is exactly where he was. He responds, 'To give it to whores'. Then he laughs, adding, 'Sounds like a good idea. A great way to save face'. This is a double-edged accusation: save face for what? To hide financial need or homosexual desire? Simone does not clarify the issue, and merely replies, 'Can I have another drink' – his tone is suddenly one of complete submission and defeat. And when

the camera turns towards him, we see Simone drinking directly from the bottle. This is the end of round one. What has happened?

Morini's sexual advances have become explicit. He has reminded Simone of the first time he met him in what I have described as the 'shower scene'. Morini has now clarified that his attention was drawn by Simone's beautiful body, which he observed at leisure in the showers: this is the Apollo Morini is now remembering. The quality of Morini's touch has changed, and Simone can no longer ignore its sexual content, which clearly frightens him. And yet Simone stays and asks again for money, when by now he can have little doubt about what Morini wants in exchange. When Morini explicitly raises the issue of prostitution, Simone accepts defeat and looks for comfort in the bottle. Why? Is it because Morini has given him a way out? He is going to have sex with Morini but it is just for money, like a prostitute. It is a dirty job that needs to be done, nothing more. But if this is really what he thinks and feels, why would he need a way out in the first place? Was there ever any doubt that whatever would go on between them would be anything other than a business transaction? Unless, Simone's motives are in fact more complex and Morini has come to represent for him something more than a mere 'John'. Simone admires success and Morini is successful; Simone desires the life Morini seems to have. Morini took Simone under his wing. Is Morini the father figure so notably absent in the Parondi family? Perhaps the circulation of desire between these two men is not as one-sided as it may appear. These questions are raised at this stage in the sequence but cannot yet be resolved. At the core of these questions is Simone himself: he is the enigma, now that Morini has put all his cards on the table.

And what about the images that keep disturbing our gaze? On reflection, it emerges that the function of the images is not to distract, but rather to help the viewer to see through the veils of oblique language and behaviour and understand the meaning of the situation. The nudes expose the erotic dimension of the narrative unfolding before our eyes, and yet this too is only a partial truth. The nudes do not merely reflect but also interpret what is happening. Simone is associated with the seductive female while Morini is aligned with the threatening male. These icons do tell a truth, about the sexual nature of the transaction and about the power relations between the two characters. But they also tell a lie: homosexual desire is recast in the mould of heterosexual desire, a mould that reinforces and is simultaneously reinforced by Morini's discourse about (female) 'whores.' This lie is comforting to Simone insofar as it reduces the complexity of the situation to a humiliating but well-known and straightforward narrative of prostitution. And yet Morini (and Visconti) cannot stop here.

As he drinks from the bottle, Simone walks away from Morini towards an ornate *trumeau* placed against the wall between the windows with translucent glass panes. Above the furniture we see clearly another picture of a woman. Morini's voice interrupts the silence and the second round begins. 'And do you want me to tell you what I think? You disgust me'. The camera cuts to Morini when he utters the second sentence, but his face remains hidden in the dark. Then the camera goes back to Simone, who slowly murmurs something in dialect and then turns to face Morini, saying in clear Italian, 'That's enough. You shouldn't have said that. Do you understand? Enough, Dui!' Simone's tone is pleading rather than aggressive. He has come right up to Morini, and grabs the collar of his shirt, but in doing so he calls Morini by his nickname 'Dui', for Duilio. This is the first time Simone touches Morini, and the gesture is

appropriately ambiguous, half threatening and half beseeching. The TV is now at the left of the frame, and the image on the screen is that of a madonna nursing her child. Such an archetypical image of tenderness and care, of physical and emotional intimacy, underscores Simone's needs, but, once again, re-inscribes them within a solidly heterosexual context.

Morini's reaction is another rejection. He slaps Simone hands away and the fight begins. In this shot the camera angle is quite different. We have been pulled farther away from the characters and we observe them from above. Morini is at the centre of the frame, his white shirt glaring, while Simone is barely visible at all in his dark clothes. The TV is suddenly at the right of the frame, and the images on the screen literally 'go wild': as the camera pans to follow the fight, the eye of the TV also inexplicably and swiftly pans over the painting floating 'behind' it. The fight ends when Morini catches Simone, who was trying to get away, and knocks him down for the second time, and definitively, causing the latter to topple the lamp. The room is enveloped in darkness. The only bright spot is the TV screen, and on it appear, as the camera follows Morini moving away, the arms and midsection of a figure, probably a close-up detail of an earlier image. The second round is over. Morini once again has emerged victorious, and the TV images have been removed from the centre of the shots and marginalized; apart from meaningless, almost undecipherable, details, only one figure emerges clearly, though briefly, in this sequence: the tilted head of a young woman who looks on from the right of the frame as Morini delivers the last punch. This may be a comment on the situation, but it aligns the image with us the viewers and no longer with the characters and their desires, aspirations, motives. However, even from this marginal position, the gaze of the female figure attempts to enforce, like the pictures scattered across the room, a heterosexual framing of the situation. The fight has swept the centre of the frame, but its edges are still well guarded.

In the two shots that immediately follow the fight, Visconti dares to look at the centre that has been cleared. Two extreme close-ups: the first of Simone and the second of Morini. The shot of Simone cuts-off most of his forehead and his chin, and shows his face half hidden by a hand, which slowly moves away. Simone's eyes, at first closed, then looking away, finally turn towards Morini, though they do not quite meet his gaze yet. His heavy breathing, his open mouth and his fingers lingering on his lips lend to his expression an unambiguous sensuality. In the shot of Morini, the framing is identical: most of the forehead and the chin are cut-off. Though nothing hides Morini's features, his face fades in and out of the darkness, leaving us barely enough time to see the tension of desire in his eyes. The fight was foreplay, and both characters know it and know that the other knows it. This is how far representation can go, but no further. The next frame is a close-up of the TV screen, slightly off-centre, showing another detail from a painting. The angle of vision is unusual: the women are portrayed from above, and the reason for this choice seems to be that it affords an advantageous perspective on the female bodies represented: the cleavage of one of the women, and the right shoulder and back, which a loose garment leaves exposed, of the other. As if in a moment of homosexual panic, the heterosexual gaze reclaims its centrality. And yet, something has changed.

There are two women in the image. The one whose cleavage is revealed is looking up at the other figure. Without disingenuously speculating on the precise nature of this gaze, it is clear that the painting represents an emotional as well as physical proximity between the two women. There is nothing

necessarily transgressive about this, but it is an odd image to choose when the objective is to restore heterosexual normativity. Furthermore, in the final moment of this shot, which concludes the whole episode, Morini's hand does glide, as it 'ought' to, across the breast of the woman whose image is projected on the TV screen, but the goal of the motion is to turn the TV off, leaving the room in utter darkness. The frame remains black for a few seconds, and then at the top right-hand corner, we see a glimmering triangle of light that reminds us that we are still in Morini's apartment. Then a totally new sequence begins, focused on Ciro, Simone's antagonist in the geometry of the film.

The ending of the sequence is suggestively ambivalent. The darkness invites us to ask questions that are not always easy to answer. Reminding us that we remain at Morini's apartment forces the viewer to think of what may be happening next in this place. This answer is easy: Morini and Simone will both get what they want. But this answer raises more questions. Morini wants to satisfy his sexual desire for Simone and Simone wants money. That much is clear. But is that all? If matters were so simple, all these elaborate manoeuvres seem excessive and, especially, Visconti's interest in presenting them would be hard to understand. In particular, the rather astounding and disorienting use of the TV set would emerge as a rather exorbitant device to make a simple and straightforward point: Morini is an unscrupulous man and Simone has degenerated to the point of prostituting himself to whoever can afford to pay. As soon as we describe the situation in this manner, however, we realize how utterly insufficient this characterization is – indeed how utterly untrue to what has in fact happened.

Let us begin with Simone. He knows from the start what Morini is after. His unease is not connected to his financial need – he never seemed embarrassed by it before, and one of Morini's comments makes clear that by this point Simone has had some practice asking for money: 'Besides, this is not the first time, is it?' But Simone had not yet asked Morini. Why? Because he knew what Morini would want in return, namely, sexual favours. Simone waits until he is desperate to play this card. This reluctance fits easily within a heterosexual logic: Simone finds homosexual behaviour so revolting that he does not consider it until he is desperate and has no other choice. And yet Simone never shows contempt or disgust at the situation; rather he finds it deeply unsettling. His feelings for Morini are not simple; his feelings towards Morini's desire are not simple. The film has consistently shown Simone's need to seduce everybody, men and women alike, but while from the latter he merely requires acquiescence (witness his relationship with Nadia), from the former he demands emotional commitment – indeed in the case of Rocco, nothing less than unconditional love. Simone's reluctance to ask for Morini's help is rooted in Simone's unwillingness to confront an uncomfortable truth: he knows that Morini desires him sexually, but this knowledge does not prevent him from caring about Morini's opinion of and affection for him. Though this cannot be fully canvassed relying only on this scene, Simone fears that the confrontation with Morini's desire will open the Pandora's box of his own desire, and force him to confront fully what he was doing/hiding when he forced Rocco first to witness Nadia's rape and then to submit to a devastating beating.

Morini's motivations seem more straightforward. He knows from the beginning what he wants, and pursues his object with steadfast determination, though not without circumspection. However, once his 'cards are on the table' – when his touch becomes a caress and is rejected – Morini too is confronted

with an unpleasant truth. His exasperated tirade tells more than he might have wanted to say, more than he might have wanted to hear himself say. His contempt for Simone spills out, but with it also the fundamental contradiction in his desire: he wants Simone but also despises Simone for succumbing to him. Morini faces the dilemma of the homophobic homosexual (a paradoxical figure produced by the contradictions of patriarchy): his touch degrades the object of desire, which therefore can only be obtained through a tragic and mutual loss of self-esteem. The defiled object is still desired, and once obtained defiles the desiring subject as well. The look on Morini's face is just as desperate as Simone's, and suggests that, after all, his attachment to Simone was not merely erotic. Morini has triumphed, but does he really get what he wants? His house is cluttered and empty. Who are the women in the picture frames? How many men have they seen come through the apartment and leave no trace behind? Morini's swagger is the facade of a lonely and unhappy man who will not allow himself to love another man.

CONCLUSION: 'PEINDRE QU'ON NE VOIT PAS' (MARCEL PROUST, *JEAN SANTEUIL*)

This analysis has merely begun to examine the centrality of male homosexual desire in *Rocco*. It can be readily conceded that the relationship between Simone and Morini remains, in spite of the interest and importance of the sequence examined, a relatively marginal one, and that the corroboration of the thesis will depend on an in-depth analysis of the film as a whole and specifically of the relationship between the two main characters, namely Rocco and Simone. However, one fundamental point has been established: Visconti's camera wants to explore homosexuality, and deploys a highly sophisticated cinematic apparatus to do so. Statements such as 'There is also [in *Rocco*], as in other Visconti's works, a rather ambiguous intimation of homosexuality (here between Simone and his manager)' (Kanoff 2007) must be exposed as due to a persistent wilful blindness. In fact, at the risk of seeming disingenuous, I would suggest that in formulations such as the one just cited, it is the word 'ambiguity' that is itself ambiguous. If ambiguity is taken to mean that we cannot ultimately be sure in the case of Morini and Simone that we are dealing with a homosexual encounter, then the statement is false. There can be no reasonable doubt that homosexual desire is not only involved but centrally the issue of the whole episode. On the other hand, if the claim of ambiguity refers to the manner of representation, then it is literally undeniable: Visconti's camera does not show us physical intimacy between men. This literal truth is, in fact, fundamental. One of the essential features of male homosexual desire is that, in 1960s Italy as in many other cultural contexts, it cannot be explicitly shown. The issue is not only one of standard censorship, which obviously involves all kinds of sexual activity, but of a more radical and pervasive censorship that encompasses not simply sexual acts but virtually any sign of physical intimacy between men, which can only appear disguised as a form of violence. Touching Simone's face in a mock slap is acceptable, but if the gesture turns into a caress it is intolerable, and Simone promptly interrupts it. But then clearly representation becomes a central problem: how to put on the screen what cannot be seen. The solution adopted by Visconti in the sequence we have examined reminds us of Proust's (1971) comment about Monet's ability to paint what (represent the fact that) we do not see. The images do not show physical intimacy between Morini and

Simone, and yet they constantly remind us of the complex sexual and emotional needs that drive the narrative. What our eyes see is a fist fight, but in the end we know that this is how foreplay must be disguised not only to pass the film censors, but also to pass the self-censorship internalized by Morini and Simone, as well as, ultimately, Visconti, at least at this point in his development. What our eyes see are erotically charged images of women offered to the heterosexual male gaze, but we realize that they are not telling us the real story, the full story. In fact these images are blinding us, making it impossible for the difference of the real to emerge. The TV screen attempts to interpret for us and shield us from the transgression of the real. And this is why this sequence is so important. The unrepresentability of homosexuality pushes Visconti to tackle the single most important issue for a film-maker: what do I want/need/have to show that has not yet been shown? One of the first steps in opening up a new horizon is likely to be a recognition of the fact that something is missing: something that calls for representation is barred from representation. Visconti's journey is a struggle to forge a cinematic language that insists on showing us what we do not see. Yet. And this discussion is a first step in retracing that struggle and vindicating Visconti's achievement.

REFERENCES

Bondanella, P. (2003), *Italian Film: From Neorealism to the Present*, 3rd ed., New York: Continuum.

Brunetta, G. P. (2000), *Storia del cinema italiano*, 4 vols, Rome: Editori Riuniti.

Brunette, Peter (2005), 'Nowell-Smith Meets Visconti, Redux: The Old and the New', *Film-Philosophy*, 9:16, http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol9-2005/n16brunette. Accessed 29 February 2008.

Kanoff, J. (2007), 'Film Reference: Directors', http://www.filmreference.com/Directors-Ve-Y/Visconti-Luchino.html. Accessed 8 March 2008.

Marcus, M. (1986), *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.

____ (1993), *Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*, Baltimore: John's Hopkins UP.

Micciché, L. (1996), *Luchino Visconti: un profilo critico*, Venezia: Marsilio.

____ (2000), 'Visconti oggi', *Luchino Visconti: webside dedicato interamente a Luchino Visconti e la sua opera*, 10 May, http://www.luchinovisconti.net/visconti_al/lino_micciche_visconti.htm>. Accessed 29 February 2008.

Mulvey, L. (1975), 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16:3, pp. 6–18.

Nowell-Smith, G. (2003), *Luchino Visconti*, 3rd ed., London: British Film Institute.

____ Nowell-Smith, G. (2005), '"It Ain't Me Babe": A Response to Brunette', *Film-Philosophy*, 9:17, http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol9-2005/n17nowell-smith. Accessed 29 February 2008.

Proust, M. (1971), *Jean Santeuil: Précédé de Les plaisirs et les jours*, Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (eds), Paris: Gallimard.

Schifano, L. (1987), *Luchino Visconti: les feux de la passion*, Paris: Perrin.

Servadio, G. (1980), *Luchino Visconti*, Milano: Mondadori.

Vittoria, A. (1992), *Togliatti e gli intellettuali: storia dell'istituto Gramsci negli anni cinquanta e sessanta*, Roma: Editori riuniti.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Bolongaro, E. (2010), 'Representing the un(re)presentable: Homosexuality in Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*', *Studies in European Cinema* 7: 3, pp. 221–234, doi: 10.1386/seci.7.3.221_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Professor Eugenio Bolongaro teaches contemporary Italian literature and film at McGill University. His research has focused on the work of Italo Calvino, a central figure in twentieth-century Italian literature and culture. In his book *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature*, Bolongaro examines the fictional works published by Calvino during the 1950s and early 1960s and relates them to the intellectual debates that took place in Italy at the time, such as the debate surrounding neo-realism and the commitment of intellectuals. More recent work on Calvino has focused on ethics and in particular on the 'question of the animal' as it emerges in the Italian author's later work.

A growing interest in the ethical function of literature has led to an ongoing, wide-ranging study of post-1995 Italian writers (the 'cannibali', Genna, Wu Ming, etc.) that attempts to situate contemporary Italian prose fiction within a post-structuralist ethical questioning originating in the work of Deleuze, Levinas and Derrida. A book-length manuscript on these topics should be completed shortly.

Bolongaro's work on film has focused on the theory of adaptation, on the exploration of history and narrative in Italian cinema (specifically, in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Spider Stratagem*), and, most recently, on the representation of homosexual desire in Luchino Visconti's films.

Contact: Department of Italian Studies, McGill University, 688 Sherbrooke St. W., Suite 425, Montreal (Québec), H3A 3R1, Canada.

E-mail: eugenio.bolongaro@mcgill.ca