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# Visconti's *Bellissima*: The Diva, the Mirror and the Screen

*Millicent Marcus*

I was extremely *emozionata*, and humbled, by the invitation to participate in this tribute to Gergory Lucente's brilliant career in Italian studies. I decided to present the following paper because it was inspired by Gregory's compelling use of the concept of *méconnaissance* in his analysis of *Il gattopardo*.[1] My own essay applies the term to a very different medium, but with results that, I hope, show the power of Gregory's cognitive and moral vision for an approach to Italian culture across the disciplines.

"I had wanted to make a film with Magnani for a long time," Visconti said of Producer Salvo D'Angelo's proposal that he direct a subject written by Zavattini in 1951. "And since she was in fact to play the lead in *Bellissima*, I accepted. I was interested in working with an authentic 'character,' with whom many more interior and meaningful things could be expressed. And I was also interested in knowing what relationship would be born between myself as director and the *diva* Magnani. The result was very felicitous."[2]

Though the personal outcome was *not* very felicitous for Magnani, who fell madly in love with Visconti, producing tension, storminess, and quarreling behind the scenes, the professional results were indeed fortunate, yielding a running commentary, at one remove from the literal level of the narrative, on the relationship

between *diva* and *auteur*—a commentary which I will label, for want of a more elegant term, *meta-performative*. Throughout *Bellissima* we are made conscious, by a number of devices, that Maddalena Cecconi who has displaced all her own thwarted acting ambitions onto her daughter, is being played by the *diva* who is precisely what her character aspires to become. When Maddalena primps before a mirror and conjures up a glamorous image of herself while at the same time explaining to her daughter that acting is "pretending to be someone else," the viewers are invited to consider that this "someone else" is indeed Magnani—both the alpha and the omega of her on-screen character, the creator and the goal of all Maddalena's wish-fulfillment fantasies. In this crucial reflection on the art of acting, Visconti creates a dizzying specularity, linking the literal to the meta-performative level of *Bellissima* in a way which asks us to interpret the entire film as a mirror of Mangani's *divismo*.

To do so, we must look ahead two years to the episode film *Siamo donne* (1953) in which Visconti contributes a portrait of Magnani entitled "Anna." The other four episodes of the film, directed by Roberto Rossellini, Alfredo Guarini, Luigi Zampa, and Gianni Franciolini, respectively, tell stories about *divas* whose private lives and public personas are in dramatic conflict, where "essere donna" and "essere attrice" are shown to be incompatible, and irreconcilable, states of being. The exception to this rule is Visconti's portrait of "Anna," for whom "essere attrice" is shown to be a natural consequence of her "essere donna," where a dynamic continuity is established between the public and private selves of Magnani. What Visconti ultimately reveals in this episode is that "essere attrice" and "essere donna" is a false dichotomy: *diva* and woman both emerge as expressions of Magnani's genius for inventing and publicly projecting a powerful image of self. For

Visconti, the question of an authentic biographical essence is relegated to the unknowable—the mystery and privacy of the *human being* Anna Magnani remain intact. In an approach to identity that we could label "post-structuralist," Visconti reveals that the Anna of his title will remain always a signifier, a mask, whose referent or signified is located beyond the confines of representation. Or, in the most cynical of readings, the sign of *divismo* refers only to itself, in the hermetically sealed universe of spectacle that the *diva*, in turn, both reflects and defines.

It is in the mirror scene that Visconti subjects the myth of Magnani's *divismo* to its most sustained critical scrutiny. The transfer of thwarted ambitions from mother to daughter is made explicit not only in dialogue ("You, yes you, can be an actress. I could have too if I had wanted") but also by a series of cinematic and theatrical devices: Maddalena's turning her gaze from her idealized mirror image to Maria herself, the all-engulfing shadow that her advancing form casts on the daughter in the mise-en-scene, and the styling of the girl's hair so that she will be coiffed "come sta mamma."

It is important to note that the mirrors in Maddalena's dressing area are two: a large, frontal glass on the wall before her, and a smaller one, angled to the left, standing on the top of bureau. This doubling of looking glasses—of surfaces that receive and reflect back images—invites us to consider our own positions as viewers of images and to explore the psychoanalytic processes which link mirror to screen. Several film theorists—most notably Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey[3]—have argued that the cinema situation replicates what Jacques Lacan has termed *the mirror phase*—the moment of development between six and eighteen months when the child first grasps that the image reflected in the mirror is his or her own. But since this is the stage when children's physical skills lag far behind

their motor ambitions, they will endow the mirror image with those qualities of competence and wholeness in which they feel so desperately lacking. The resulting combination of recognition ("that image is me") and simultaneous misrecognition ("that image is my better self") lays the groundwork for two psychic events: the emergence of the ego; and the ability to identify with others in later life, inaugurating what Lacan terms "the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment which decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through desire of the other." [4] Because the mirror phase involves identification with an image, understood etymologically as *imago*, or effigy, likeness, copy, Lacan insists on locating this development in the realm of the imaginary, in the pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic sphere of primary processes. Here is an especially turgid quote from Lacan: "This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nurseling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject."[5]

When read in Lacanian terms, the mirror scene contains the key both to Maddalena's psychology, and Magnani's *divismo*. Gazing at her reflection in the looking glass, primping and posing to make that image ever more glamorous as she fantasizes about the acting career she never had, Maddalena both recognizes herself yet sees the image as the more accomplished woman she longed to become. Acting, the art of pretending to be someone else, leads her to believe that she could thereby embrace that better self—could remedy the split between the disappointing reality of her life and the glamorous image in the looking glass. Clinging to this

belief, Maddalena has remained in a state of arrested development, caught up in the process of narcissistic identification which keeps her hostage to the imaginary and will not let her progress to a mature identification with others as autonomous beings possessing their own distinct consciousness and needs. To get beyond the mirror phase, to transcend infantile narcissism, is to use the process of *misrecognition*, of perceiving the image to be a better self, as a step on the road to intersubjectivity. In Laura Mulvey's analysis, the child's perception of her mirror image as superior "projects this body outside itself as an ego ideal, the alienated subject which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future."[6] Refusing to relinquish the belief that through acting she will be able to heal the split in her being and reappropriate her better self, Maddalena cannot make the transition to the next phase in her psychic development—to acknowledge the link between the ideal image in the mirror and an autonomous other with whom she can some day identify and relate. Thus when she turns from the looking glass to confront Maria with her thwarted dreams, her daughter simply becomes another mirror, a surface onto which Maddalena will displace her frustrated desire to embrace an ego ideal through acting. Maria will never function as a separate, autonomous subject for Maddalena as long as the woman remains trapped in the realm of the imaginary, unable to detach the ideal image in the mirror from her own dreams of fulfillment and wholeness. And the cinema is her willing accomplice, both at the level of the narrative of *Bellissima*, which is set in motion by Maddalena's desire for vicarious stardom, and at the level of deep psychological mechanisms mobilized by the medium, which "quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror" according to Mulvey, "has structures of fascination strong

enough to .... [recall] the pre-subjective moment of image recognition."[7]

Visconti's genius in *Bellissima* is to turn the cinematic apparatus back on itself, to use its structures of fascination in order to expose and remedy the processes which have held Maddalena so long in their thrall. This occurs, of course, in the projection booth toward the end of the story, where mother and daughter see the screen-test of Maria's catastrophic audition for a part in Blasetti's film. In this scene, the mirror has been replaced by the screen and Maddalena is made to see, both physically and intellectually, the results of what she has been doing to her daughter all along. It would be no exaggeration to claim that the crisis of *Bellissima* hinges on a psycho-cinematic pun, where the technological and emotional meanings of projection come together to expose the abuses of cinematic enchantment.

Of utmost importance is the fact that Maddalena and Maria are not the only viewers at the screening. Concealed in the projection booth, mother and daughter cannot see Blasetti and his entourage as they view the screen test, but they are privy to the men's explosions of derisive laughter. In constantly cross-cutting between Maria's image on screen, the mother in the projection booth, and the men down below, Visconti enacts Maddalena's burgeoining awareness that her gaze is by no means the whole story, that by forcing her daughter to audition for the part, she has exposed the child to a visual regime of the most degrading, and exploitative sort. The disparity between the mother's spectatorship and that of Blasetti's men shocks Maddalena out of her narcissistic investment in her daughter, forcing her to see that Maria is not an extension of her own fond imaginings, but an object, in the world, open to the most humiliating of visual appropriations. It is here that the cinema employs its medium-specific properties to the greatest advantage, for by projecting the image of Maria

on screen and submitting that image to such public abuse, the technology externalizes Maddalena's inner process of psychological projection and forces her to confront its moral consequences. It is a form of Dantesque contrappasso, a literalization of the metaphor on which her psychology had been so disasterously based. In this way, the cinematic apparatus enables Maddalena to get beyond the impasse of the mirror phase, to acknowledge her error in identifying her idealized self-image in the looking glass with that of her daughter on screen. Proof of her conversion is her insistence to Blasetti that his men cease ridiculing Maria because "è una ragazzina come tutte le altre"—a statement which vindicates her daughter's right *not* to be extraordinary, *not* to have to live out her mother's dreams of celebrity. With this announcement, Maddalena reveals her acceptance of the child as other, "come tutte le altre" and thereby signals her passage beyond the looking glass, to the other side, or to put it more appropriately, to the side *of the other*, where reflection gives way to relation, and daughters can become autonomous selves.

Cinema, for Visconti, is thus profoundly double in nature—at once elixir and true cure (remember that the operatic subtext of *Bellissima* is Donizetti's *Elisir d'amor*), exploiter of public inclinations to glamor, romance and escape, and exposer of its own basis in illusionism and greed. By utilizing its structures of fascination to reflect on its dubious means, the elixir of cinema offers a homeopathic approach to cure—one in which Magnani's *divismo* plays a crucial role. For it is the illusory nature of her public persona, her mythic continuity between private and professional selves, which gives her on-screen presence its authenticity and power. In acting the part of Maddalena, Magnani puts her own divistic myth of unity to the service of a character who must learn to do the opposite—to dissociate and differentiate herself

from her ideal mirror image, and from the daughter onto whom she has displaced her dreams of unattainable stardom. To further complicate matters, when Maddalena looks into the mirror and conjures up her ideal self, at the meta-performative level, Magnani is looking into the mirror of the film and seeing the image of Maddalena, the authentic woman of the people, the basis of her own mythic continuity between professionalism and popular instinct, between *essere attrice* and *essere donna*. But Maddalena's experience in *Bellissima* serves to critique the myth of Magnani by revealing the danger of arrested development at the mirror phase, the risk of identifying with the idealized mirror image rather than mis-recognizing it and thus moving on to relations with others as full-fledged, autonomous subjects. Thus Maddalena deconstructs Magnani, just as the cinematic apparatus calls into question its own indigenous structures of fascination, offering itself up as both elixir and cure.

If "*Bellissima* is one of the first and most knowledgeable acts of death of the neorealist Utopia," as Lino Micciché has argued,[8] we can see this death as a cathartic one, a necessary prerequisite to the rebirth of a post-neorealist cinema of conscience. In order to herald this renewal, *Bellissima* had to exorcize the demons of melodrama at the level of story, of corruption and bad faith at the level of industrial practice, and of narcissistic self-involvment at the level of the meta-performance, by showing the disasterous effects of all of the above on a mother-daughter relationship. In so doing, however, Visconti revealed the considerable power of the cinematic apparatus to serve as an instrument of cognitive and moral transformation, preparing the way for the medium to reclaim its status as "the bearer and interpreter of the national-popular consciousness"[9] in the body of historical reconstruction films, *cinema politico* and politically progressive commedies of the decades to

come. And it is here that I would align Visconti's achievement with Gregory Lucente's own powerful vision of culture as the instrument of cognitive and moral transformation—a vision which Greg generously shared with us throughout his brilliant, and too-short life as teacher, scholar, and friend.

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## End Notes

1. Gregory Lucente, *Beautiful Fables: Self-Consciousness in Italian Narratives from Manzoni to Calvino* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
2. See the interview *"Bellissima:* Storia di una crisi," in *Visconti: Il cinema*, ed. Adelio Ferrero (Modena: Comune di Modena, 1977), pp. 42-43
3. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 51, and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 18.
4. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 5.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 17.
7. Ibid., p. 18.
8. Lino Micciché, *Lino Visconti: Un profilo critico* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), p. 26.
9. Lino Micciché, *Visconti e il neorealismo* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), p. 201.