

IN MEMORIAM: LUCHINO VISCONTI

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**IN MEMORIAM:  
LUCHINO VISCONTI**  
by James McCourt

Count Luchino Visconti, Duke of Modrone, was born November 2, 1906, in Milan.... Young Luchino became acquainted early with painting, music and theater.... He played cello and often visited La Scala.... His father organized plays and entertainments in a local theater.

—*The New York Times*, March 18, 1976

**OPERATIC VISCONTI**

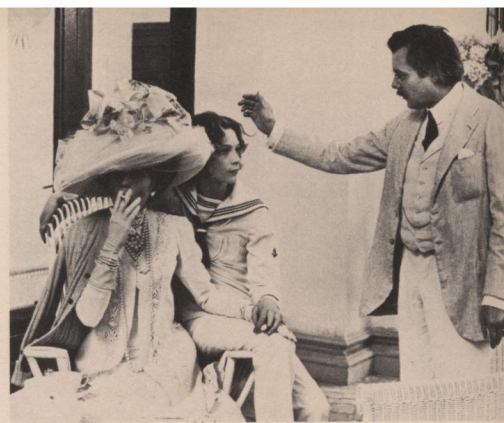
All epitaphs are killing; they nail life down. ("So that was what it was all about, that life.") Similarly evaluations of the works of geniuses (in the case of Visconti, *le opere*). Nevertheless, Verdian Visconti; the association does support.

Visconti was operatic in his cinematic creation not merely as a parallel/consequence of his grand successes in the lyric theater, or of his intimate work shaping the career of the ultimate singing actress of the mid-century (Callas), but as a consequence of his inheritance. Operaphile Viscontiani, reversing the terms of the metaphor ("like opera"), see in his stage work the mark of the filmmaker, the adaptation of cinematic *trompe-l'oeil* ("tracking" revolves, flicker-lighting, pin-spot "iris" close-ups) to that arena in which a kind of spastic puppetry is the iron convention and theatrical m.o. (As if to comment on this convention, Visconti makes a great deal out of it in the opening scene of *SENZO*, in which the flaming spirit of Verdi's music is being acted out in the gallery of the Teatro Fenice in Venice by a "chorus" of Italian patriots—and only

PHOTOS: MOMA/FILM STILLS, MOVIE STAR NEWS



**Above:** Luchino Visconti with Charlotte Rampling on the set of *THE DAMNED*. **Right top:** Silvana Mangano, Bjorn Andresen, Dirk Bogarde in *DEATH IN VENICE*. **Right bottom:** Helmut Berger in *LUDWIG*.



trumpeted and mimed by the ham singers.)

Visconti's debt to opera, or rather his inheritance of its glorious abandon, is simply a function of his northern Italian aristocratic-ness. What happens in the soul of every Visconti film is that the spirit of music-and-mimicry (called *musicry*), tutored in twentieth-century celluloid mysteries, becomes immortal-aneu (as all "immortal" things depend upon reelection, to be brought back by popular demand). Polyhymnia and Melpomene, enlisted for screen tests, emerge in the Visconti canon as Magnani, Valli, Paxinou, Giradot, Cardinale, Bell, and Berger/Thulin, each the diva.

**THE PAST: LONTANI GIORNI**

"Time's relentless melt." The dissolve; the fade.

Director Visconti deals with that which is over, with that which is lost (including out the abandoned project, *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*). All cinema can deal with in any case is the past. The Forties are now regarded as Byzantine-distant, and the phrase "only yesterday" applies with literal force every time any important film is re-released. It was given to Visconti to trumpet the truth of passing and the past, musically in motion, and pictorially in the revival of Renaissance painting in terms of acting bodies and vibrant backgrounds—and in so doing, so performing, that we are not only reminded but assured, not merely convinced but convicted as well. Visconti's art is in this way the veriest Italian art, for in Italy the past, all of it, is everywhere to be seen and felt,

corroded but enduring (like Visconti locations and situations).

Even in "contemporary" films, like *LA TERRA TREMA*, *BELLISSIMA*, *ROCCO*, and *CONVERSATION PIECE*, the whole weight of the past hangs heavy. The Sicilian fishermen are reincarnations of an ancient, heroic race, engaged in brutal conflict with "modern" commerce, torn as they are out of the original context of the pagan communal world and enslaved by "capital" interests. *LA TERRA TREMA* is also, in formal terms, a tribute to the silent cinematic past and to montage, to Eisenstein, and to realism. The beautiful little girl in *BELLISSIMA* is Anna Magnani's neurotic version of her own lost self, a constellated *puella aeterna*; and the satire on Cinecittà and the "old-fashioned" mechanics of studio moviemaking (Visconti sees the future vistas: locations, panoramas) are surely to be read against the "new" cinema, of which Visconti was a founding genius (the romantic division). *Rocco* is a tragic dialogue between the illusory Arcadian past and the image of the dead father pinned to the mother's widow's-weeds, and the violent contemporary urban present (memories of a perpetual Sicilian sunshine summer shrouded in the falling snow of a Milanese winter). It is also an elegy on Christ, on classical notions of sainthood, and on the death of the religion whose dancing ground is Italy. *CONVERSATION PIECE* is a frantic collision between the outside (now) and the indoors (then) in now/then Rome, a poem of a gentle man's privacy, of its invasion by a gang of inchoate babblers and hellions ducking in





Left top: Maria Schell and Marcello Mastroianni in *WHITE NIGHTS*. Left bottom: Alain Delon in *ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS*. Above: Tina Apicella and Anna Magnani in *BELLISSIMA*. Right: Alida Valli and Farley Granger in *SENSO*.

out of Pandemonium (the traffic). It is also an elegy on the Italian Renaissance and on Idealism, both all over.

*WHITE NIGHTS* is a film about childhood. The sound-stage sets and the snow are like a toy city and the third act of *La Bohème*; and the love pledges and betrayals are as arbitrary as the Eden games and expulsion games of the very young, playing at growing up. Maria Schell is a child-waif, a Melisande. The game of waiting for the lover's return is a ritual of a return to the time of waiting, to latency, to the time between the injuries of birth and the fall.

*SANDRA (VAGHE STELLE DELL'ORSA)* is in the mode of classical tragedy, played on the ancient volcanic precipice of the town of Volterra, where the stage is set for a replay of an Orestean situation melodrama, cloaked in the mannerisms of Jacobean tragedy, in which however the situations are each and all differing versions (the brother's, the sister's, the mother's, the step-father's) of what the secret past contains. The film is full of Pirandellian resonances: ambiguity, shifting memorial ground, and operatic touches—a mad scene, duets, crashing pianistic chords accompanying the outsize acting.

The short, shattering episode called *LA STREGA BRUCIATA VIVA* (from *LE STREGHE [THE WITCHES]*) presents Mangano, the actress, in desperate flight from her accumulated past, ending up on some Alp, trying desperately to paste some of her past back on her face, to look like someone again, unwilling to be present (she knows the company in the lodge are slicing her to bits and tossing her into the

flames of the open hearth), trapped without time.

### THREE EPICS

*SENSO* is the first Visconti color spectacular, and the first of his pictures to engage every level of his taste and passion: for music, for painting and architecture, for panoramic outdoor movement, for classical tragedy (revenge, madness), for the entwinement of political and personal destiny, and for surfeit, opulence, extravagant gesture (long shots of doors opening upon doors until there is a long hallway passage cut through the endless rooms, through which the heroine pursues and escapes). The Countess Livia Serpieri (Alida Valli) is all majestic supplication crossed with Maenad fury, an Italian Melpomene. Italian history is her history; she contributes to its fulfillment (*risorgimento*) and it enlists her doom (events conspire). Italy becomes all idea, compelling, symbolic. Livia becomes all role, all Revenge, sensation. The Italian inheritance, pagan sensation, *Luxuria*, dooms.

*THE LEOPARD*, mangled in distribution, survives in a series of immense cinematic panels, which could be run in any order, and which serve as emblems for the decay of a society. There are brilliant living friezes and frescoes, baroque groupings of stars and extras, intimate single portraits and elegant formal family groupings. There is the hot, dry pulse of sexuality; there is feasting and dancing, and talk of both natural and political philosophy. It is a portfolio, partially reclaimed, a series of gorgeous reminiscences of a

great, doomed project: the epic of collapse, itself capriciously wrecked by enemies of movies.

*THE DAMNED*, the first of the late-period Visconti, is a film in which each of the major characters is informed as much by archetypal symbolic content as by idiosyncratic, personal trait, and in which the maestro (able to summarize and distill, juxtapose and fuse, play, contort, and surround) investigates the origins of that conflagration which consumed European culture, leaving the very ashes and rubble out of which, among other aesthetics, that of neo-realism would rise. Visconti, presenting the day-before-yesterday, splashes the screen with lurid and combustible effects and situations, elicits brilliant corrosive performances (neo-Jacobean Guignol). From the lush family banquet to the mephitic cyanide wedding breakfast, where annihilation is the potion, Visconti, in the guise of Mephistophelean puppeteer-ventriloquist, mimes and voices, in socio-political costume (high fashion, low drag, uniforms, fetishes), those passions and terrors in which every sentient personal history abounds.

### ASCHENBACH AND LUDWIG: PORTRAITS OF THE CREATOR

First-person dramaturgy in the cinematic medium, *DEATH IN VENICE* and *LUDWIG* and Visconti's letters to The World and to Time, coded messages and glances at a reality, a one-time life, the compass of which cannot be geometrically-confessionally drawn, whose truth forbids con-

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## IN MEMORIAM: HOWARD HUGHES

by Andrew Sarris

Howard Hughes died as strangely as he lived, and perhaps as fittingly as well. In an airplane high over Texas his life-support systems finally failed him. The sketches drawn from the description of his charter pilot made him look like something out of the last scene of 2001. (Kubrick may be turning out to be more of a prophet than I ever realized.) The dead man's fingerprints had to be flown to the FBI for verification. But who can be sure any more that the FBI and the CIA are not subsidiaries of the Hughes Empire? His obituaries dealt with his aeronautical and financial exploits, the incredible range of his "romances," and his mysterious quirks. Rumor has it that a "double" has been impersonating him for many years. Orson Welles declared in FAKE that CITIZEN KANE started out as the story of Howard Hughes.

And what about his influence on the cinema? Back in 1963 I wrote: "Hughes has been caricatured and vilified from THE BAREFOOT CONTESSA TO THE CARPET-BAGGERS. He has been accused of destroying the American career of Jean Simmons, and of rejecting Bette Davis as an actress because she lacked sex appeal. The fact remains that his record as a director and a producer is far more interesting than his lurid reputation would indicate. Anyone who has produced SCARFACE, JET PILOT, MAD WEDNESDAY, ANGEL FACE, and TWO ARABIAN KNIGHTS cannot be all bad. To his credit, Hughes has never been as sanctimonious about his 'art' as have those revered oracles of mediocrity, Samuel Goldwyn and Dore Schary. At the very least, Hughes is entitled to a sociological footnote for sponsoring the bosom craze that swept the world through Jane Russell's sullen bus-tiness in THE OUTLAW. (Two good

reasons why every red-blooded American boy should see the movie are self-evident; the third exploded over Hiroshima in 1945.)"

Do I have anything to add to my earlier remarks? I note that, in the Summer 1971 issue of FILM COMMENT, Gary Carey speculated on Max Ophuls's CAUGHT as a *film à clef* on Hughes, the background knowledge having been supplied by the very knowledgeable screenplay of Arthur Laurents. Pop biographers will undoubtedly be working on Hughes for decades, and particularly on all the remarkably beautiful and talented women with whom he was associated. I don't



Ernst Lubitsch smiles at Howard Hughes's inability to button his jacket.

want to subject FILM COMMENT's flimsy financial foundations to the possibility of libel suits by naming names, but it is interesting that Hughes's black book contained a low percentage of out-and-out tootsies. Indeed, he seemed to have more in common with the discriminating Grand Duke in *Rigoletto* than with the devouring Don Giovanni. By comparison, Barrymore, Flynn, Gable seem like gourmands at his table. Of course, he was rich and famous and handsome and reportedly articulate, but that doesn't explain why most of his women friends have remained so fantastically loyal to his memory by not desecrating it with scandalous revelations. There seems to be a discrepancy here between different aspects of the same legend.

Hughes, like Zanuck, was a WASP in a largely Jewish industry, and it would take someone with Leslie Fiedler's ethnographic audacity to construct a theory on this fact. I can only hint at the most tremulously tentative hypotheses. I have always found it strange that it would be Zanuck, and not Mayer or Warner or Cohn, who would produce the life of John Philip Sousa. Of course, Zanuck was more liberal and socially conscious than Hughes, and, in that respect, was closer to the Jewish moguls than to Hughes. Also, Zanuck shared the industry's interest in name writers from the East and from across the Atlantic in England. Hughes did not cultivate writers in this way. He started out with raw, physical ideas. The two films he directed—HELL'S ANGELS and THE OUTLAW—have their crudities, but they are not the crudities of bestsellers too faithfully transcribed. By not hankering for culture like so many other Hollywood producers, Hughes could preside over pulpy productions of uncommon vitality.

I don't want to exaggerate his importance, however. Both HELL'S ANGELS and THE OUTLAW may demonstrate nothing more than what happens when direction goes off the track altogether, and the original conception has to cohere somehow with the talent on the set at any given moment. Similarly, his involvements with Hawks, Sternberg, Sturges, Preminger, and Milestone among many others, have to be more fully documented before any theory of his importance can be considered. Still, if we just limit ourselves to the plausibly Hughesian motif of airplanes, we may wonder why in a very short span of time airplanes played such spectacular roles in three such dissimilar RKO extravaganzas as CHRISTOPHER STRONG and KING KONG and FLYING DOWN TO RIO. Even though Hughes didn't actually control RKO in this period, his legend was already beginning to loom large. There you have it: Dames and Airplanes. Sex Way Up High in the Sky. Hughes didn't have to go to Harvard to learn the fundamentals of film. ✨

### VISCONTI (continued from page 33)

veyance, but allows celebration.

In DEATH IN VENICE the creator dreams a dream of the *puer aeternis*. Aschenbach must be a composer, because he is (snatched from Mann) Visconti's Apollo; and Apollo is mind and music and control, and direction. (All great film directors are Apollonian, necessarily.) To him must be attributed the music of Mahler because the music of Mahler is the music of supreme loss (the last supremely great music written in Europe before the World War), and the *puer aeternis* is the one

forever lost. Tadziu is Aschenbach's lost one, his own-ness, his picture of the way it was. Just before Tadziu leaves Venice, he returns to the beach. Aschenbach's own self checks back in only just in time for death to accommodate. The picture must be as languid and as full of sinking panorama as an opiated ecstasy. It must be a gorgeous, dressed pavanne, and it is.

LUDWIG is another dream, which—like the aerialist's high-wire walk—circuits hilarity, defies all motivation (politics), redefines destination ("Kennst du das Land," quotes Romy Schneider at Helmut Berger), and trespasses on all motions of ter-

restrian sense (sequence, one foot in front of another). If Visconti's Ludwig were to be reincarnated as Pope Ludovic, he would loot the Vatican treasury, produce Visconti movies while Rome burns anew, be driven mad by *papparazzi* and the Curia Romana, and be assassinated by leftist Judases. In Helmut Berger's Ludwig, Visconti's *echt* aestheticism finds its last champion, its Tristan, and also its supreme sacrificial victim, its Christ. Ludwig is a passion play: a mass.

Luchino Visconti: composer/conductor, cinematic poet/prince (1906–1976.) ✨