GIANFRANCO POGGI

Luchino Visconti and the Italian Cinema

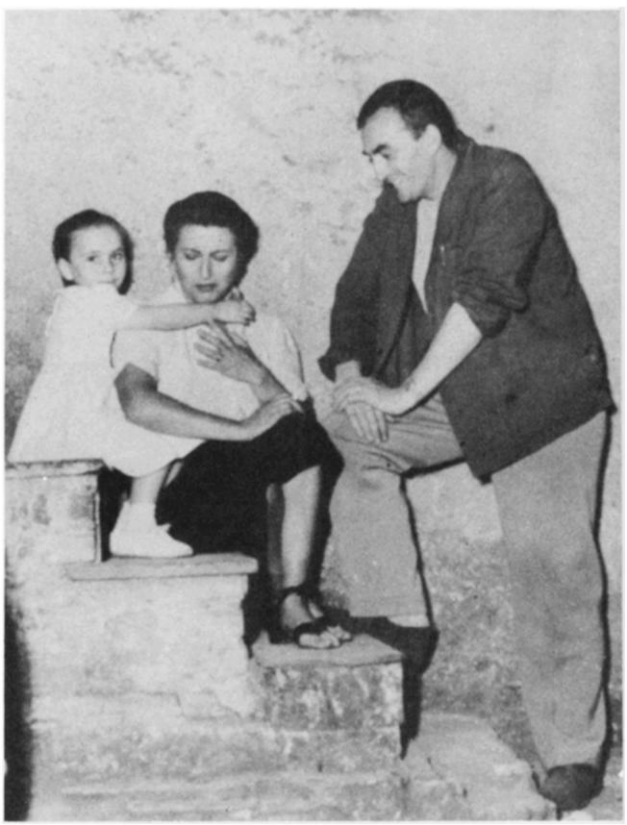
Three of Visconti's films, OSSESSIONE, LA TERRA TREMA, *and* SENSO, *occupy key positions in the history of the postwar Italian film, and hence entitle their maker to a respectable niche in film history as a whole. He has been little discussed heretofore, however, and the following article attempts to assess his place in the recent development of the Italian film.*

Few Americans are familiar with Visconti's name, and fewer still have seen his films. Only *Bellissima,* perhaps because it starred Anna Magnani, reached the art-theater circuits in this country. Visconti's films are not even widely known in Europe, even among serious filmgoers. While his work has been honored by special showings in Paris and London, and *Cahiers du Cinéma* has written about him, it is only in Italy that his reputation is formidable, and there partly for reasons (as we shall see) not connected with his films, none of which has enjoyed a great box-office success.

In Italy Visconti's prestige is unparalleled among the most informed sections of the movie public. At least half a dozen serious Italian directors (Lizzani and Maselli among them) have chosen Visconti as a creative model for their own work, now or at some time in their careers.

Many of the high priests of Italian film criticism, plus a sizable portion of intellectuals at large, especially those politically on the left, would choose Visconti as their candidate for the leading present-day Italian director.

But Visconti's leadership is one of prestige and centers largely around the man, rather than his films. The films are only five in number; and the first two of them received limited distribution. (*Ossessione* created something of a sensation, but on the basis of very few showings.) Furthermore, there is no widespread agreement that any of them is an unqualified artistic success of the caliber of *Bicycle Thief* or *Paisà,* though oddly neither DeSica nor Rossellini enjoys as high a reputation as does Visconti—let alone Fellini, whom most Italian



Tina Apicella, Anna Magnani, and Visconti during the schooting of BELLISSIMA.

critics take far less seriously than Americans do.

Visconti's personal prestige has arisen from several unusual causes, one of which is his name. The Viscontis were dukes of Milan during the early Renaissance, and the family still ranks high in the Italian aristocracy. From his branch of the family Luchino has inherited a large fortune, to which he has often liberally made recourse to overcome the financial resistance of producers. A tradition of enlightened interest in the arts also runs in the family; with Luchino, this has become an exclusive life-long commitment. Visconti's militant political leftism is hardly a family trait; but it has certainly helped give him an appealing aura, especially among younger intellectuals.

Visconti's reputation is based in part on an impressive record of theatrical productions, also. The claim that he is the best Italian screen director would be contested by some critics and film-goers; but his primacy among stage directors has long been demonstrated through a startling series of plays, operas, ballets, TV plays, and even musicals. The works he has staged run from classical tragedy to Shakespeare to Cocteau. Cosmopolitan in his education, Visconti is now cosmopolitan in his work for the stage, having directed *Two for the Seesaw* in Paris and operas in London and Edinburgh.

Visconti is known as a demanding director in both stage and screen productions. He is a domineering and outspoken personality, and has never shown any bashfulness about asking for more time and more money to make films as he meant to. He is also known as a director who expects a great deal from producers, actors, and technicians. When he has not been able to get what he considered necessary for a project, he has simply withdrawn. The number of film ideas he has abandoned is legion. Many of these cases were because of political difficulties. Curiously enough this happened both during the fascist period (for instance with *Amanti de Gramigna*) and after the war (for instance with *Pensione Oltremare,* which would have dealt with the German occupation of Rome, and *Cronache di Poveri Amanti* from a Pratolini novel dealing with the rise of fascism in the early 'twenties).

Visconti's public image is also of a man dedicated to a search for novel expressive strategies. He has sought to break through established traditions of the movie and stage world. His stage productions have included a series of revolutionary *mises-en-scène* distinctly sensational in their impact: some, like Sartre's *Huis Clos* (No Exit) or Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles*, because of their content; some, like Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire*, because of the starkly realistic treatment of the setting and acting; some, like Goldoni's *Locandiera*, because of the class interpretation superimposed on a familiar text.

Visconti's search is not for novelties or "effects," and it does not occasion improvisations. Visconti's real concern is with the theme and style of his pictures, rather than with a display of cinematic prowess. "Neorealism," he once remarked, "is first and foremost a question of content, and that's what matters." His camerawork is generally sober, his cutting measured and harmonious. The tensions of his films are usually "inside the shot." In the rock 'n' roll sequence in *Le Notti Bianche*, for instance, the emotional and rhythmic impact of a very fast montage sequence is created by a perfectly static and very long take—in which the feeling of frenetic cutting is given by the whirling heads of the dancing couple which appear and reappear in big close-up. The quality of the photography in all of Visconti's films has been superb but unobtrusive, and cost him endless hours of meditation.

Visconti's concern with the narrative aspects of his films is a somewhat unusual trait in the context of the postwar Italian film. The tenor of neorealism has been to reject a primary concern with the story, at least with the contriving of a self-contained "plot." According to Cesare Zavattini, the ideal neorealist movie would be shot by an unseen camera on a street corner like any other, on a day like any other; it would not be a structure which builds up and then resolves itself, but a series of logically and chron-

ologically connected episodes. The practice of neorealism has of course been less extreme—though perhaps the episodic construction of films like *Paisà* and *L'Oro di Napoli* is significant in this connection.

By contrast, Visconti's films have been conceived as "historical" constructs: a line of events develops with a coherent logic toward a destiny, a dénouement. Alone among Italian directors, Visconti regularly draws his material from literary texts. *Bellissima*, based on a script by Zavattini, is the exception; and it actually turned out to be more a character study than a "story" —though it had a neat and well-designed line and curve of events, occurring over a wider span of time than is common to neorealist films. ("Zavattini," Visconti says, "was very annoyed by the changes I made.")

"Narrative" art, it should be noted, is not a common flower in the Italian cultural garden. Despite Manzoni and Verga traditional Italian literature has never shown much feeling for story—for the novel in particular. (The triviality of Italian prewar production was in part a reflection of this weakness.) Visconti, however, with his wider European background, has been relatively successful in facing up to the problem of dramatic structure in the neorealist context.

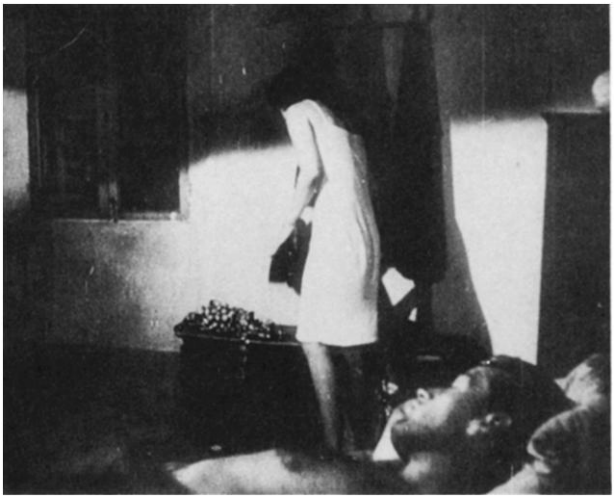
Visconti, born in 1906, spent his childhood and adolescence getting the kind of wide, refined, and cosmopolitan education that a young man of his social rank and talent could aspire to. In line with a family tradition he then had some experience in the stage arts as an amateur scene designer. After that he devoted himself for years to the training of race horses and to reading and travelling. In France in 1936–37, through the intercession of a mutual friend, he rather casually entered the movie world as assistant director on Renoir's *Partie de Campagne* (A Day in the Country). "Renoir influenced me enormously," he said later. "It was certainly Renoir who taught me to work with actors. I was only with him a month or so, but that was enough, because I was so fascinated by his personality."*

In those years the Italian cinema was going through its darkest age: one dominated by slick idiotic comedies of the so-called "white-telephone manner" and by cardboard historical "colosses." However, Mario Camerini and Alessandro Blasetti were making interesting if derivative pictures, and a group of young *cineasti* was groping for a way out of the situation: some, who were actually making movies, in the direction of a heightened formal dignity (the so-called "calligraphists"); others, more often engaged in critical writing or in production jobs this side of direction, were feeling their way toward a more total and fundamental renewal in the film's approach to reality. When he came back to Italy, Visconti quickly gained a position of quiet but unmistakable cultural leadership in this second group, centered around the Milanese magazine *Cinema*.

It was among the *Cinema* group that he selected his collaborators in writing and directing *Ossessione*; some of them, Puccini and Alicata, were actually in hiding as members of the Italian Communist underground while *Ossessione* was being shot. And it was in *Cinema* that Visconti published some of his very few explicit statements on the kind of film he was thinking of: "What has brought me to the films is the task of telling stories of live men: of men who live among the things, not of the things themselves. The film I am interested in is an anthropomorphic film."

Neorealismo, that morally and culturally new way of conceiving and using the film medium which has given Italy her finest hour in the history of world film, was historically the central experience of postwar Italian film. Yet, as soon as neorealism had become established, critics sought to single out in the war period itself

* It was Renoir who gave Visconti a typewritten French translation of James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, on which Visconti was to base his first film, *Ossessione*. Copyright difficulties, arising from sale of the rights to Cain's novel to an American company, prevented the film from being seen outside Italy except in private showings. *Ossessione* was also ordered destroyed by the fascist government at the end of the war; all existing prints come from a dupe negative that Visconti kept in his possession.



OSSESSIONE: *Massimo Girotti and Clara Calamai.*

some seminal, pathbreaking events which would intimate that the ferment had been at work, albeit half-consciously, in the last years of Fascism. In this search many critics agreed upon two very different works as having broken with the past and indicated the way for Italian film to move forward. One is DeRoberts' *Uomini sul fondo,* a tense, craftsmanlike, semidocumentary picture on submarine warfare; the other is Visconti's *Ossessione.* Recently, however, the initial judgment of *Ossessione* has been critically reappraised, and its relationship to neorealism reviewed.

In *Ossessione,* made in 1942–43, Visconti undertook to tell a story of sensual love and crime derived from James Cain's novel but set in the flatlands around the Po River in contemporary Italy. A workman, driven to wander in the country both by his need for work and by an internal inquietude, stopped at a small village grocery store, where he found work as an aide to the vulgar, fat proprietor, and to his frustrated young wife. Having gained the confidence of the shopkeeper he then gained the heart and the body of the woman. He left the place because he saw no future in the adventure, but then was brought back to the woman by his passion and contrived with her to kill the husband. After the crime, however, a feeling of guilt, the avidity of the woman, and finally her death, drove them apart; he ended up in prison. In Visconti's treatment Cain's cynicism and violence were toned down; sensual passion, greed, human alienation, isolation, and guilt were brought to the foreground.

Three features stand out in *Ossessione.* One was the unusually frank treatment of sex in the relationship between the two protagonists. This was one of the reasons, together with the general turmoil that was sweeping the country, and objections of the censors to the movie's pessimistic, defeatist mood and political undertones, why *Ossessione* never made the normal distribution circuits in Italy. A second feature is the unprecedented formal care the director had given to all aspects of his job: photography, acting, settings, camerawork. Since this care meant an unusual expenditure of time and money, it led the film's producer to withdraw his financial support after a few months of shooting—at which point Visconti simply went ahead on his own means. The final and critical feature of *Ossessione* was its new, vital, uncontrived and anti-rhetorical approach, which has made critics consider it a precursor of neorealism.

The break of *Ossessione* with the white-telephone manner which then dominated the "contact" of the film with the reality of contemporary Italian society could not be more complete. In an almost violent way, *Ossessione* really reestablished such contact—with bitter contempt for the fictional, utterly false way in which that reality had been so far avoided rather than sought. The heat and the sounds and the dust of the Po flatland; the drabness, the disorder of the house interiors, of the rooms for rent; the unkemptness in the train's third-class cars; the vulgar loudness of the local festivals and singing contests; the tired pace of life in this setting, the greed and the possessiveness of the people's life in it: all these traits of the bare everyday reality of a fairly typical corner of his country Visconti perceived with pitiless sharpness, tearing apart the veil which had separated the camera's eye from them for all those years of mystification and lies. More than that, he made them into vivid filmic images, he integrated them fully into his story. In the same vein he accomplished the first of many successful feats with his actors, forcing two conventional stars of the moment (Massimo Girotti and Clara Calamai) to give their expressive best to a

delineation of unamiable, contorted figures: a haunted young man, a sensuous, greedy woman.

On the basis of Visconti's unmistakable success in making the film medium "meet the reality of the country" arose the misconception of *Ossessione* as a neorealist movie. The break with the pre-neorealist Italian film is indeed neat and full; but the direction of the break is different from that which Rossellini and DeSica were to take immediately after the war. Perhaps the conditions for Visconti's taking that direction simply were not there; the rejuvenating experience of the Resistance, for instance, which Visconti was to live through later, was not yet a source of inspiration and of hope in the years when he made *Ossessione*. Whatever this or other factors—such as the oppressive political climate of dying Fascism—the basic approach of *Ossessione* was reminiscent of prewar French director Carné: not in dialogue, certainly, but in a certain calculation and formality. Many key identifying characteristics of the Italian neorealism of the "golden era," from *Sciuscià* to *Umberto D*, are absent in *Ossessione*.

For one thing, there is none of the keen awareness of the historical, time-bound dimensions of the "human situations" found in the great neorealist films. For all the naturalism of its "geographic," "spatial" details, *Ossessione* could as well have been situated in another historical epoch.

Again, in the neorealist masterworks the characters derive their motivations, the logic and direction of their action from being construed as socially motivated, as members of historically conditioned and differentiated social groups: think of the priest of *Roma Cittá Aperta* or of the unemployed Ricci in *Ladri di Biciclette*. But the protagonist of *Ossessione* is a marginal man, uprooted from his social *couche*, evolving his action only from a keenly idiosyncratic kernel of motivations and meanings. Also marginal is the only other character for whom Visconti feels any sympathy (he has hardly any for the woman, as is mostly the case in his pictures): a wandering actor called "lo Spagnolo," who bears some resemblance to Fellini's "Fool" in *La Strada*. But where as Fellini quite explicitly uses the Fool as a mythical semi-angelic figure, Visconti claimed for "lo Spagnolo" a full reality, but in utter contempt for what was going to be the central canon of the neorealistic conception of the character: its construction and development in terms of an identification with a wider, collective consciousness.

For several years after making *Ossessione* Visconti directed all his energies to his own revolution on the stage. In 1948 he came back to film, and made *La Terra Trema*. By then the rejuvenating expressive experience of Italian neorealism, which had begun three years before, was at its creative climax. DeSica was shooting *Bicycle Thief*; Rossellini had not yet lost himself; Castellani, Germi, DeSantis, Lattuada, were all at work in the neorealist spirit. With *La Terra Trema* Visconti vigorously and unmistakably joined forces with that "movement" and posed his candidature to creative leadership in it.

Indeed *La Terra Trema*, a picture about a fishermen's village in Sicily, was designed from the beginning with an almost paradigmatic faithfulness to some of the expressed or unexpressed "canons" of neorealism. Apparently Visconti thought of it initially as a documentary —and this early inspiration has left unmistakable marks on the style of the film, in its plastic severity *à la* Flaherty, in the harmonious pace of its montage. Even when that initial design changed into that of a "social epic," with a story derived from Verga's *House by the Medlar Tree* (I Malavoglia), Visconti stuck to methods which neorealism had in turn taken from the documentarist tradition. He employed only actors taken from real life, real fishermen from the place where the story was set, and he shot the whole film on location. Since "in Sicily Italian is not the language of the poor" his neorealist orthodoxy led him to put the dialogues exclusively in the local dialect—which is almost as foreign to Continental Italians as it would be to Americans. The dialogues themselves were the actors' own phrasing, after Visconti had told them what the broad meaning of the line would have to be. The nature and content of the *story*, then, were meant to build into the picture that histor-

La Terra Trema

ical and collective awareness which had largely been missing in *Ossessione*. The social relationships of the fishermen to the fishmerchants were made the substance of the story, and each of the characters lived it as rooted in his socially determined condition. From Verga Visconti had taken the broad outline of the story: a family of fishermen tries to break the circle of poverty and exploitation by "going on its own"—by fishing and marketing the fish on its own account, away from the tyrannical monopoly of the merchants—and fails. But in Verga's novel the failure was due to an obscure fate worked out by the nemesis of the sea and by family disunion. Visconti instead interpreted it in Marxian terms, as the socially inevitable failure of a misguided attempt of the exploited to make themselves into self-employed petty bourgeois entrepreneurs, rather than breaking through the circle of exploitation by a collective movement which would do away with the capitalist middlemen (such an attempt, incidentally, was at the center of DeSantis' *Caccia Tragica*). Actually for some time Visconti entertained the design of making *La Terra Trema* as just the first episode ("episode of the sea") of a trilogy, the other two dealing with the plight and the struggle of the Sicilian peasants and miners respectively.

But the "episode of the land" and the "episode of the mine" were never made. The reasons for this include the changing political climate of the country, which would not tolerate another such "progressive" movie, and the failure of *La Terra Trema* to repay its costs. But another reason might lie in perplexities of the director himself. Visconti was quite convinced, and outspoken about it, that he had created a masterwork; but the failure of his picture to gain the first prize at the Venice Fesival of 1948, and then the unsatisfactory response of the public to it, prompted him to the following declaration:

> Perhaps it simply cannot be seen at this time. Maybe it is better this way. In ten years, they will demand to see it. . . . Yes, ten years, that ought to be enough. By then the people will want to see it and will be able to understand it.

Ten years after this prophecy, however, the sensitivity of "the people" has moved, if anywhere, in the opposite direction from that which would lead it to appreciate *La Terra Trema*. The Sicilian of its dialogues does not get any easier to understand as years go by; nor does its severe expressive style become more appealing; nor does its theme become less bitter, or its message arouse a prompter response. Actually, steadily improving Italian economic conditions have made *La Terra Trema*, if anything, more foreign to the current mood of the general public. Finally, the direction of the artistic development of Italian cinema has changed, moving away from the neorealistic rigor of *La Terra Trema*. Leaving aside (if one just could!) the dismaying decline of Italian cinema over the past six years, and its causes—which are to a great extent political and ideological—it is still true that neorealism has also undergone from internal causes first a deep modification, then a

serious crisis (which nothing proclaims more openly than Visconti's *Le Notti Bianche*).

In 1948 Visconti had made *La Terra Trema* as a self-conscious extrapolation of the main stylistic and thematic trend of Italian cinema as it was in those days. For this reason it found itself ahead of that very trend as it was being made; and, since the trend has changed, it would be today a still "stranger" movie.

Yet these considerations apply mostly to one aspect of the destiny of the picture: its fortune with "the people" to whom Visconti was referring in his statement, since he had wanted to make a popular picture: *popular* in the semi-mythical sense that the term may have for a Communist aristocrat. From this standpoint, the picture is a failure now as it was in 1948. In itself, however, *La Terra Trema* is an almost completely successful work. It is a monumental picture, which inspires a feeling of awe. It brings to the screen, in images of splendid plastic beauty, the fullness of life of the village, the bitterness and the elation of its ever-repeated struggle with the sea. Flaherty himself, in *Man of Aran*, hardly surpassed the mute sense of tragedy which Visconti gives to the waiting of the women after a storm. The social relationships whose pressure upon the fishermen Visconti wanted to reveal are made vivid in the scene of the market, where the camera finds its way on a track amid the voices and sounds of the crowd, to watch the transactions between the fishermen and the merchants. The fullness of these contacts with reality is possibly unparalled in Italian neorealism, with the exception perhaps of the last episode of *Paisà*. What is lacking is rather a feeling of *participation*: that alive, felt participation which makes De Sica virbrate along with the action in *Bicycle Thief*, and takes the spectator as he watches the scene of the maid in the kitchen in *Umberto D.* This is not to be found in *La Terra Trema*. It is not that Visconti only *watches* the action develop: on the contrary, he always construes it, step by step, and guides it unerringly toward its consummation. But his presence is always *mediate*, never *immediate*. Either a substantial "extraneity" to the drama itself, which Visconti may have felt in spite of himself, or an overwhelming preoccupation with the formal-stylistical job of making the movie (a preoccupation which was largely successful, of which Visconti was quite aware, and which he did not mind), or perhaps both these factors, make *La Terra Trema* a monumental picture which somehow does not get its message across.

The tremendous ambitions of *La Terra Trema* seemed to have been abandoned when Visconti in 1951 went to work on his third movie, *Bellissima*. The film was based on a story by the most popular Italian screen-writer, Zavattini, and Anna Magnani was to act in it, along with a popular comic actor, Walter Chiari; the thematic material had nothing of the epic greatness of *La Terra Trema*. It was the homely story of a working-class housewife, who felt trapped by the closed horizon of her family and neighborhood, and set her own frustrated hopes of escaping it on the dream of having her little daughter succeed in a contest for the title role in a movie. The girl finally made the grade, but at that point her mother, after having lost part of the family's savings and very nearly her faithfulness to her husband, was repelled by the squalor and cruelty of the world to which she had exposed her child, retreated to her drab daily life, and refused the part finally offered her daughter. The story, the cast, the stylistic key of the picture (one without the arduous expressive flights of some parts of *La Terra Trema*) appeared to express a desire to play it safe, to make *Bellissima* into a popular picture in rather a different sense from that of *La Terra Trema*. But it would be a mistake to infer that Visconti had simply thrown in the sponge, as so many actual or would-be movie creators have had to do at some time in their career (I think of Welles making *The Lady of Shanghai* after *Citizen Kane* and *Ambersons*). Actually Visconti's ambitions had simply become more covert and more subtle. He refused, first of all, to be taken in by the potentialities of the story for becoming a sentimental drama of misguided mother love, or a cheap satire on the movie world, or even a lower-class variation on the Madame Bovary theme. Aided by Magnani's best performance,

he produced a splendid portrait of the protagonist, Maddalena, but he did not overcharge the figure with sympathy and stood somewhat aloof from her. Of "Cinecittá" he emphasized the petty small-time intrigue, the emptiness and slow pace, more than the fleshy and flamboyant vices which popular imagination likes to bestow on the "dream factories." The leitmotif of the sound track, a theme from Donizetti ("Quanto é bella quanto é cara"—how beautiful, how darling she is) seemed a continuous irony on the terrible plainness of the poor child's features. Visconti looked at Maddalena's own world, her Roman working-class milieu, with a sharp and perceiving eye: he dissected pitilessly its daily miseries and its occasional attempts at evasion: the big meals *all'aperto*, the soccer game, the unrealizable dream of owning one's house. In *Bellissima* Visconti also displayed his animosity toward women; with the exception of Maddalena, he showed them as greedy, twisted, arid figures: Maddalena's scandalously fat, noisy, vulgar neighbors (the "whales," her husband calls them); the atrociously skinny tailoress; the troupe of mothers, obsessively fanning themselves in the lobby where their children have been called for the contest. Visconti looked with a shudder even at the sensuous surrender to her husband with which Maddalena at the end signified her frustrated withdrawal into her own world: she had learned her lesson, but Visconti gave her little sympathy for it. Such motifs, systematically evading the expectations one might have in such situations, are played quite subtly in *Bellissima*. It remains a rather puzzling picture, unamiable and unappealing, although its stylistic tone is quite high, and the portrait of Maddalena is clearly an achievement.

With *Senso*, which he made in 1954, Visconti took up a more overt, more complex challenge. Based on a story by the romantic Italian writer Camillo Boito, it protrayed the moral and mental breakdown of a Venetian countess, who is swept into an insane passion for an Austrian officer. Because of that passion she betrays not only her husband but also her patriotic ideals, which are nearing fulfilment (through military defeat) in the Third War of Italian Independence (1866). She is in turn betrayed by her lover after she has given him the money to bribe a doctor and stay out of the war; she informs on him, watches his execution, and rushes into her destiny of insanity. As the plot shows, Visconti was to deal with a historical theme; yet he declared at the beginning of his work on the movie:

"I shall not abandon the line of cinematographic realism which I have followed to this day, nor lose contact with my characters just because they wear nineteenth-century costumes."

In Visconti's intentions, *Senso* was to prove that the reality which could be dealt with "realistically" in a film need not be limited, along one dimension, to strictly contemporary events, or along another, to lower- or middle-class milieux. Antonioni, in *Cronaca d'un Amore* had already broken through the *social* coördinate and attempted, with some success, to deal with the well-to-do world in the spirit of neorealism. Visconti was to break through the *temporal* coördinate of the neorealist experience also.

It was an important challenge that lay in Visconti's intention to deal with a historical situation in the spirit of neorealism. The cinema has always felt the attraction of the "historical" film, and many times raised the claim that it had succeeded in bringing forth History as Reality. Almost all "historical" films, however, give the lie to that claim, by succumbing to the temptations of cardboard colossalism or of oleographic stereotype. Even the best of them, from *Birth of a Nation* to *Alexander Nevsky*, either break down the context of history into a search for a more manageable unit of action (the Cameron and Stanton families in *Birth of a Nation*) or simplify it in terms of a hero conception of history. What they finally amount to is *epic*; by the same token they show that the fullness of historical reality is unamenable to filmic treatment in terms of a realist style. What they represent is a perception of history *à la* Plutarch or Walter Scott, never Thucidides or Leo Tolstoy.

This is the challenge which *Senso* takes up. It does it through a complex strategy, not all the lines of which are successful. Visconti said:

SENSO. *Top: Alida Valli and Farley Granger. Bottom: The battle of Custozza.*

"I wanted the film to be called *Custozza,* after the name of a great Italian military defeat. That caused an outcry: from Lux, from the ministry, from the censors. At the outset, the battle had much greater importance. My idea was to mount a whole tableau of Italian history, against which the personal story of Countess Serpieri would stand out, though basically she was only the representative of a particular class. What interested me was to tell the story of a war which ended in disaster and which was the work of a single class."

Visconti seems to have judged that the first and major element of a realist film approach to history is a strenuous effort to recapture *from inside* the reality of the historical background. His was not simply a concern with exact reconstruction of settings; it was a serious philological effort to evoke the color, the feel, the proportion of the smallest detail. In his search for how the reality around them appeared to the characters of his story, he drew upon the painters, musicians, and writers of that age, as well as its historians. He got Mahler's Ninth Symphony to comment on the sound track on Countess Serpieri's moral undoing; he asked the late romantic and the *macchiaioli* (pre-impressionist) painters, from Hayez to Fattori, for cues on the appearance of the Venetian countryside in the summer heat, the Palladian villas, the sunset on a battlefield, the people's dresses, their faces under the yellow light of oil lamps, the bottles and boxes and combs on a gentlewoman's night table. Visconti has remarked, however, that he never sought to copy Fattori. "I simply tried to get at the truth. And as Fattori painted the truth, it's hardly surprising that our works coincide on one level or another."

Thanks to such efforts all these details did not come to the screen as bits of circumstantial information, but existentially experienced objects—evocative symbols, not items in a catalogue. By seeing the final execution, for example, as if through Goya's eyes, Visconti gave it the impact of horror that drove the Countess to insanity. Italian and French critics played for months the game of catching this or that cultural reference in the film.

On *Senso* Visconti was spendidly aided by his cameraman (since *La Terra Trema*) G. R. Aldo.* With him he lived up fully to another big challenge posed by the film *Senso*: the use of color, to which both Aldo and Visconti were new. *Senso* is by far the best color movie ever made, as far as color goes: not only because it exploited more fully than ever before the technical potentialities of Technicolor; but mainly because it inexorably bent those potentialities to expressive goals: it used the color to bring forth meanings, references, undercurrents of feeling. Take the scene of the Custozza battle, for instance, where the Italian army is defeated by the Austrian. The approach is eminently subjec-

* Aldo died during the shooting, which was completed by Robert Krasker.

tive: Visconti follows Marquis Ussoni, a relative of the protagonist, and a leader of irregular patriotic bands of peasants, who tries to reach his troops after a bitter conference at the headquarters of the regular army, and wanders in the battlefield. Like Stendhal's Fabrizio at Waterloo or Tolstoy's Peter at Borodino, Ussoni is an eager patriot, full of enthusiasm about the task at hand; but also a "layman," who watches the battle develop with a definite feeling of helplessness, unable to seize its logic although more and more aware of its drift. For this reason at the beginning of the sequence the march of the riflemen through the wheatfields appears like an imposing, vivid, but incomprehensible ceremonial. Later, when Ussoni reaches an isolated gun-battery, and realizes that he is lost and the battle is lost, to his sinking spirit the scene appears veiled by a bluish haze, in which the guns' smoke, the rising dust, the hill's grass, the horizon, the artillerymen's uniforms are blended. Still later, in the retreat, the shadows which grow on the plain, and the feeling of fatigue, of undoing, make all the colors livid, spectral.

Another line of attack taken by Visconti to the task of a realistic historical film, was his attempt to maintain a complex and delicate balance between the "private" and the "public" side of the story: the affair between Countess Serpieri and Lieutenant Mahler on one side, the development of the Venetian independence movement and the war on the other. Such a balance, if successfully struck, would have helped avoid that flattening out of history into sheer oleography or breathless anecdote to which most historical movies have fallen victim. But the attempt was not successful: Visconti's attention is mainly on that knot of shame, of reckless egoism, of reciprocal betrayal, which is Livia's affair with Franz; the "public" line of events appears and disappears in the background, but is not integrated with the "private" line. Marquis Ussoni's figure, which was to supply the link between the two lines, is too weak and pale to be up to the task. It is difficult to say to what extent interference with Visconti's intentions contributed to this deficiency (the film was also cut after completion, before it was exhibited at Venice). Visconti explained:

"The first final version was quite different from the one seen today. It didn't end, for instance, with the death of Franz. We saw Livia pass through groups of drunken soldiers, and the very end showed a little Austrian soldier—very young, sixteen or thereabouts, blind drunk, propped up against a wall, and singing a song of victory. . . . Then he stopped and cried and went on crying and finally shouted: *Long live Austria!*"

"Guallino, my producer, and a very sympathetic man, came to watch the shooting. He muttered behind my back: 'Dangerous, dangerous.' Perhaps. But for me this was the perfect finish! We left Franz to his own affairs, we didn't give a damn for Franz, it didn't matter in the least whether he was killed or not. We left him after the scene in the room where he shows himself in his true colors. Pointless that he should be shot.

"We watched Livia instead, running to denounce him and then escaping into the streets. She passed among whores, become a sort of whore herself, going from one soldier to another. Then she fled, shouting: 'Franz, Franz!' And we moved on to the little soldier who stood for all those who paid the price of victory . . .

"But I had to cut it. The negative was burnt. Thousands were spent filming Franz's death. I tried to do the best I could with it, but for me this isn't the end of *Senso*."

Parts of the film dealing with partisan formations in the Third War of Italian Independence were also mutilated through the military censorship.

Finally, to avoid another common pitfall of "historical" films, the failure to *interpret* their characters, rather than just idolizing them or condemning them, Visconti projected a Marxian interpretation on his figures—interpreted them in class terms. Livia Serpieri is seen as the expression of the total moral breakdown on the Venetian aristocracy; Franz Mahler as a member of a cynical parasitic military bourgeoisie living off the weakness and corruption of the aristocracy; Marquis Ussoni as the intellectually aware son of the upper classes who has understood their destiny and is quite willing to seek a new identity by accepting leadership among

the ascending lower classes. Not even this line of Visconti's effort is completely successful: the ruinous moral features of the first two characters so clearly verge on the monstruous, on the pathological, that we refuse to accept them as symbols of a class destiny.

Behind this weakness of *Senso* lies perhaps a fundamental ambiguity in Visconti's own attitude toward the world of Livia and Franz Mahler. As a Marxian intellectual Visconti condemns and rejects that world, and preaches the inevitability, the historical necessity, of its ruin. Yet, because of his links of blood and culture to that aristocracy, Visconti seems to feel a morbid fascination with its refined wealth, its manners, its destiny of decadence. To an American reader it may be illuminating to learn that Tennessee Williams collaborated on the *Senso* dialogue: the same ambivalence of feelings which pervades Williams' treatment of the decadence of the old South seems to echo in *Senso*.

I have made *Le Notti Bianche* because I am convinced we ought to try a different way from that which Italian cinema is going on now. I have felt that Italian neorealism, lately, has become a mere formula, and this has been made into a sentence [condanna]. With *Le Notti Bianche* I have meant to show that certain borders can be crossed, although I am not reneging on anything by crossing them. . . . What I have tried to create is not an irreal atmosphere, but a reality which is re-created, elaborated, mediated. I have detached myself from a documented, exact reality, thus breaking sharply with the habitual approach of current Italian cinema. By doing this I hope I have opened a new gate to the young Italian directors who are now growing up.

With this statement to the press Visconti prefaced the first showing of his last movie, *Le Notti Bianche*, which gained a second prize at the 1957 Venice Festival. A proud, incisive statement, it reveals rather clearly certain traits of the "uomo Visconti," as Italians would put it, which I have tried to bring out in the first part of this article. It also gives a fair clue to what Visconti was up to in the film, which he shot in the period of six or seven weeks—unusually short for him.

The subject was taken from a beautiful story by Dostoievski. Mario, a young, pleasant lonely "white collar," just dispatched to a new

LE NOTTI BIANCHE: *Maria Schell.*

job, meets Natalia, a fragile girl, while taking an evening walk in a city which is new to him. Natalia spends a lot of time, every night, waiting for her fiancé to reappear at the spot where he said good-bye to her a year before, and where he has promised he will look for her when he returns. Mario falls in love with the girl, and tries desperately to get her to take an interest in him, to give up waiting for her lover to come back; but the girl uses him only as a sounding board for her own hopes and memories; during three sleepless wandering nights of talks and tears (ending in a strange snowstorm) she seeks in Mario only the comfort of his understanding, while Mario sinks more and more into an identification with a "third" in whose existence he only half believes, and who, he is sure, will never come back. But he *does* come back, just when Natalia is beginning to respond to Mario; and Mario is left alone. The film derived a definite feel of irreality (in spite of Visconti's own contention to the opposite) from developing wholly at night, in a badly lit quarter of narrow lanes and steep bridges, which vaguely suggested an area in Leghorn. The set design, the lighting, and the photography were all aimed at creating a haunting atmosphere, while the drama, in a sense, went on inside the characters. There is a double remove from reality; one from the daytime reality of things and into the nocturnal reality of the selves; the other in dissolving even *that* reality either into a receding perspective which mixes memories and hopes (in Natalia's case) or into a frantic, self-defeating search for a response on the part of the Other (in Mario's case). The spectator—like Mario himself, in a way—is left to wonder whether the action he has seen develop was meant to have ever happened, or whether it was a nightmare to start with.

Thus, the negative side of Visconti's intention, the neat break with the neorealist formula, is fully embodied in *Le Notti Bianche*. But the nature of the "gate" Visconti is opening is much less clear. For this reason the picture has left both the general public and the critics rather uneasy. It can be granted that Italian cinema cannot face its crisis by attempting to revive neorealism, as Rossellini seems to have tried to do in *Il Generale Della Rovere*—returning to themes and styles new and vital in 1945–50, but no longer. And another alternative, certainly, lies in a more direct and dedicated concern with the inner dimensions of people. Visconti's "double remove from reality" seems to hold less promise than, for instance, Antonioni's more sustained concern with the inner self in *Le Amiche* and *Il Grido*: an approach which is perhaps existentialist where Visconti's is vestigially Marxist.

In any case Visconti has, like Fellini, never been a "typical" neorealist; though he has led, he has at the same time always stood slightly aside. And while *Le Notti Bianche* is no doubt a slighter film than Visconti's previous works, he remains an innovating force in the cinema, ever able to go beyond himself. We can now hope that, having in *Le Notti Bianche* squarely posed the challenge of "meeting the reality of the self," he will in his next film more positively articulate and illuminate his response.

[NOTE: Reports from Italy indicate that Visconti, having recently staged a Donizetti opera, is now at work on a film about a boxer, entitled *Rocco e i Suoi Fratelli* (Rocco and His Brothers). Some of the quotations in the above article are taken from an interview originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma*; an English version appeared in *Sight & Sound*, Summer–Autumn 1959.]

CLASSIFIED SECTION