



## Visconti, Luchino (1906-1976)

by Daryl Chin

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The most contradictory of the major Italian filmmakers, Luchino Visconti was an aristocrat by birth, yet he is the progenitor of Neo-Realism, the Italian cinematic movement dedicated to proletarian themes.

He was born Count Don Luchino Visconti di Modrone on November 2, 1906, a member of Milan's highest-ranking nobility and one of the leading aristocratic families in all of Italy.

He spent most of his youth as a dilettante, cultivating his interests in art, music, and race horses. When he was thirty years old, he began his career in film, working as an assistant director and costume designer for French director Jean Renoir, whom he knew socially.

As a result of his association with Renoir, Visconti became a leftist in politics. Although he had close connections with Mussolini's son Vittorio, he became active in the anti-fascist movement and, during World War II, in the Resistance.

Also in his early thirties, he had his first serious homosexual affair, with a young German photographer named Horst, who became a well known fashion photographer. The affair lasted three years, but their friendship endured until Visconti's death.

His first feature film, *Ossessione* (1942), with its insistence on location shooting, proletariat subject matter, and an unvarnished approach to reality, is acknowledged as the first manifestation of Neo-Realism.

The sexual dynamics of the plot (derived from James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, causing copyright problems that hindered international distribution) points to Visconti's tendency towards melodrama and operatic emotionalism. Centering on the relationship between two men and a woman, the friendship of the two leading male characters is subtly homoerotic.

In 1948, after a time directing in the theater, Visconti created *La terra trema*, a majestic examination of working conditions among the fishermen of Sicily, cast entirely with nonactors. This film ranks as one of the summits of the Neo-Realist movement.

However, Visconti's next film, *Bellissima* (1951), with a brilliant star performance by Anna Magnani, is a satire of Neo-Realism, as a working-class mother tries to get her little girl cast in a Neo-Realist film.

Visconti followed *Bellissima* with the operatic costume drama *Senso* (1954), a study of sexual passion and betrayal set against the political and militaristic turmoil of the Risorgimento, the period of the late nineteenth century when Italy became a modern nation.

*Le Notti bianche* (1957; American title: *White Nights*) is a stylized adaptation of a Dostoevsky novella.

*Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960; American title: *Rocco and His Brothers*) is one of Visconti's most conflicted

works: returning to the proletariat themes of *La terra trema*, Visconti traces a poor family as they travel to Milan to find work. But once there, their travails become increasingly baroque, with the melodrama extending into operatic flourishes (such as the killing of the prostitute played by Annie Girardot).

Of all the Italian masters, Visconti was the most varied, as he followed *Rocco* with the costume epic *Il Gattopardo* (1963; American title: *The Leopard*), the stylized family drama *Vaghe Stelle dell'Orsa* (1965; American title: *Sandra*), and the scrupulous adaptation of Albert Camus' *Lo Straniero* (1967; American title: *The Stranger*).

With *Götterdämmerung* (1969; American title, *The Damned*), Visconti moved into the most controversial phase of his filmmaking career. The psychosexual posturings of *Götterdämmerung* were wildly exaggerated in order to provide the rationale for fascism; after *Götterdämmerung*, Visconti treated sexual obsession as a philosophical conceit in his adaptation of the Thomas Mann novella, *Morte a Venezia* (1970; American title: *Death in Venice*).

His biographical film, *Ludwig* (1972), takes his grand filmmaking to its extreme: although initially released in a version almost three hours in length, it was later assembled as planned in its five-hour entirety.

His last two movies, *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* (1974; American title: *Conversation Piece*) and *L'Innocente* (1976; American title: *The Innocent*), are the culminating movies of his career, with *Gruppo di famiglia* making overt the homoerotic tensions found beneath the surface of most of his movies; and *L'Innocente* taking his decorative tendencies to their logical conclusion.

Visconti died on March 17, 1976, during the editing of *L'Innocente*. His legacy also includes a distinguished career as a director of opera and theater.

Visconti's personal life was marked by tempestuousness and emotional upheavals. Early in his career he maintained a scrupulous detachment from the actors and singers whose careers he helped to launch; but by the end of the 1960s, he became passionately involved with several young artists. This aspect of his life came to light when letters that he wrote to several young men, including the actor Helmut Berger, became public in the 1980s.

The arc of Visconti's film career mirrors his increasing openness about his homosexuality. His first proletarian epic, *La terra trema*, contained many stunningly composed images of young men at work, whereas his later epic, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, constantly depicts Alain Delon in close-up, framed and lit in the most glamorous movie-star style, while there is a subplot involving a boxing promoter who pays young men for sex. The homoeroticism of *Götterdämmerung*, *Morte a Venezia*, and *Ludwig* is overt and configured in terms of obsession.

Critical opinion on Visconti's work remains sharply divided. Except for those critics who are totally dismissive (usually citing Visconti's decorative tendencies, which may be a coded term for his homosexual sensibility), however, most critics find at least one of his films praiseworthy, although each may cite a different one.

The divided response to Visconti's life and career points to a figure of great complexity, one of the towering figures of Italian culture in the twentieth century.

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