

## Introduction

Sandra is hosting a cocktail party when she suddenly becomes aware that someone is playing César Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*. The piece used to be in the repertoire of her pianist mother, and now it fills her mind with bitter memories. As the film – *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa* (*Sandra*) – progresses, she is forced to redefine her relationship with her family and her husband, her past and her future. When she finally decides to sever her ties with the past, she pays a high price for her freedom.

The problems of relating to time and history constitute one of the most pertinent themes of Luchino Visconti's (1906–76) artistic output. He could remember how as a small boy he could hear his mother play that piece after bedtime. The main theme of Franck's *Prelude* has much the same function in *Sandra* as the tea in which Marcel soaks his “petite madeleine” in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. There the mere sensation of the warm liquid on the lips produces “an exquisite pleasure” that makes “the vicissitudes of life . . . indifferent, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory.”<sup>1</sup>

Both Visconti and Proust were keenly aware of the perpetual sense of loss that is an inextricable feature of life, but as Mikael Enckell has pointed out, the perspective of both also emphasizes “the continuity of existence: What appears to be irrevocably lost returns through its very passing, as memory, imagination, and works [of art].”<sup>2</sup> Sandra is unable to gain strength from her painful memories and perhaps reaches a sterile peace of mind by rejecting her past. Visconti, like Proust, transformed the pain and the sorrow into restless creative energy. Resignation enabled them to view their characters both from within and without, in sympathy with the burning immediacy of their passions, yet with the tender, ironic detachment, as if viewing their own follies from a sufficient distance in time. This is the foundation of the deep resonance of their works. As

Youssef Ishaghpour points out, in Visconti's films it takes the form of a constant dissonance between the pursuit of an ideal and reality, between aspiration and immanence.<sup>3</sup> "Aspiration toward something else, like a glance, carries beyond phenomena, toward that which illuminates them from yonder, a light which reveals beauty in them, but only as a path. Immanence is attached to the here and now, it wants to possess immediately the absolute and take the phenomenon for a complete 'reality': in passion."<sup>4</sup>

Visconti's characters are often caught in the mesh of their past, dissatisfied with their present and unable to assume responsibility for the future. They may be driven by aspiration, but their attempts to realize their most cherished hopes are often crushed by their own spiritual limitations, their social condition, or the historical circumstances of their lives. Many of them would like to free themselves of all responsibility, find a quiet pool of rest beyond the relentless stream of time. But no one can escape that inexorable flux: what has passed cannot be regained; life deprives us of all that we hold dear. The struggle against the fugacity of things, the attempt to create a haven of peace and pleasure for oneself by ignoring all other commitments can all too easily lead a person to betray ideals, friends, a loved one, and be crowned by self-deception. In depicting this struggle Visconti assumes the role of witness and accomplice:

Again and again Visconti returns in his films to the phenomenon of betrayal. . . . We can see this as an expression of his basic and passionate striving to cover everything. He who wants to represent both the past and the future, both to give shape to his own traditions and belong to youth, faces the danger of betraying one or the other, probably both. This mighty aspiration, this tremendous passion to be everything Visconti expresses in film after film.<sup>5</sup>

Visconti's need to become a "master of time" grew from the conflict between his aristocratic background and the marxist view of life and society that he adopted in his thirties. He attempted to find a balance between emotion and intellect, between the private needs and the public demands imposed by the past and the future. His work was imbued with two opposite temporal perspectives, which together enable him to study and depict characters in their historical and social milieu with intellectual rigor and deeply felt compassion. This duality is not restricted to Visconti's historical films but can also be seen in those with a contemporary setting. In these there also emerges the reverse side of temporal experience, immutability and stagnation, as opposed to fugacity and transition. Workers and fishermen face the inexorable laws of nature and the almost

equally fixed structures of power in their pursuit of happiness. At times they seek to change things, but the time is not yet ripe; at times they find it difficult to cope with the changes imposed on them.

In short, Visconti's view of life and society is conflict-ridden through and through. His characters are torn between mutually incompatible desires. Money and love, cynicism and idealism, loyalty and betrayal are the ever-present alternative means of survival or pursuit of self-interest. Such conflicts create a burning desire to return to some kind of peace, to reach a final synthesis. Visconti's starting point was an all-encompassing social vision rooted in marxism, but when working on a given subject, he would never let himself be confined by dogma or theoretical analysis. Instead, he created a complex, multilayered, equivocal, and rich image of the interrelationships between the individuals and the society he was depicting. The interaction of the subject matter with the expressive means at hand, the resistance of material that all artists encounter in their work, is an essential part of the creative process. It can even be seen as a metaphor of human interaction with the world. An artist can succeed only by being in a dialectical relationship with his material and the world he lives in.

As Visconti grew older, his artistic work acquired a tone of resignation. An almost oversensitive feeling for time and place eventually led him to concentrate on the questions of old age and decay. Though even at this stage he could hardly be described as an idealist, his concern with fugacity led to an understanding of permanence, and to an almost reverse perspective of the world. The gradual transformation in his work reflected a heightened sense that art itself is the ultimate manifestation of immanence, aspiration, and their interdependence. In Thomas Mann's words:

Conceiving the world as a colourful and turbulent phantasmagory of images through which the ideal, the spiritual glows is something eminently artistic and allows the artist to find his true nature. He can be sensuously and sinfully attached to the world of phenomenon and appearances, because he knows he belongs to the spheres of both ideas and the spirit, as the magician who makes appearances transparent for them.<sup>6</sup>

This book examines Visconti's films against their cultural, historical, and social backgrounds. The sometimes tortuous production histories and practical problems that shaped certain films as well as Visconti's personal life are treated here only insofar as they shed light on the formation of his films or offer a key to richer interpretations of them.

The approach is auteuristic in a fairly broad sense of the word, the

basic assumptions being that the maker of the fourteen feature-length and three short films discussed in this volume is to a meaningful extent Luchino Visconti and that his central role must be taken into account to fully understand the connection between his films and the society and the ideological context from which they emerged. This is not to ignore the contribution of all the other people involved in making these films, nor the economic, social, and practical factors that influenced their production. The point is, it was Visconti who organized this process and gathered round him a team of faithful collaborators whose efforts would add up to a single artistic whole. He taught his collaborators not only to recognize what he wanted but also to contribute actively to the creative process and to extend their limits in doing so. Without the “workshop” that he instigated, his last film, *The Innocent*, would probably not have been completed with the loving care that it deserved, and *Ludwig* would certainly not have been posthumously restored to its full four-hour beauty. The strength of Visconti’s vision can be seen also in his ability to coax his actors to give the best performances of their lives. This has often been noted, for example, of Alida Valli and Farley Granger in *Senso* (known in the United States as *The Wanton Contessa*), Helmut Berger in *Ludwig*, and Laura Antonelli in *The Innocent*.

Rather than follow a strict chronological order, I have grouped Visconti’s films according to their most interesting and relevant characteristics. This classification is by no means “pure,” of course. For example, most of Visconti’s films are adaptations. To varying degrees, I have treated them as such, although I deal specifically with Visconti’s relationship with literature only in connection with the three films discussed in the last chapter. The treatment of the films within each chapter follows the order of their making. Because the first chapter deals with neorealism and the second with the Risorgimento films, the discussion follows Visconti’s early career chronologically all the way up to *Senso*.

Many people have encouraged and helped me in shaping my ideas and locating material for this study. Among them are Dudley Andrew, Peter von Bagh, Peter Bondanella, Francesco Bono, Satu Kyösola, Satu Laaksonen, Lino Micciché, Jarmo Mäenpää, and Elina Suolahti. Interviews with Guido Aristarco, Gian Piero Brunetta, Suso Cecchi D’Amico, and Enrico Medioli, in particular, have helped me gain an understanding of how Visconti’s works evolved and how they related to Italian society at the time of their making.

This study might not have come about had I not been invited to present

a paper at the enormously inspiring *Convegno internazionale di studi viscontiani* held in Rome in December 1994 and chaired by Professor Lino Micciché. At this meeting Millicent Marcus and Roy Armes recommended that I translate my book in Finnish on Visconti, *Tiikerikissan aika* (1992), into English. Instead, I decided to rewrite that work extensively in the light of recent research both by myself and by many other scholars. Above all, I have incorporated ideas that I developed in my doctoral dissertation, which benefited enormously from the feedback of Professor Dudley Andrew, who acted as the so-called opponent in my public defense at the University of Helsinki in May 1994.

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## **Visconti and Neorealism**

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### *OSSESSIONE*

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#### **An aristocrat and a filmmaker**

The early 1930s were a thrilling time for a handsome, restless young aristocrat to be in Paris. A successful career as a horse trainer had not been enough for Luchino Visconti. He knew he had the potential for something greater. But to realize that potential he needed more stimulation than his native Milan of the Fascist era could possibly provide. And so, after about 1932, Visconti's visits to Paris became increasingly frequent. Soon he became acquainted with the latest intellectual and artistic trends. He participated in riotous society life and met Coco Chanel, who fell for him and introduced him to many of Paris's leading artists. He got to know people like Serge Lifar, Jean Cocteau, Henry Bernstein, Kurt Weill, and Marlene Dietrich, and their art. He also saw many controversial films that were banned in Italy, ranging from the avant garde works of Luis Buñuel, Cocteau, and Man Ray to the revolutionary works of Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein.<sup>1</sup>

The period in Paris was a formative one for Visconti. On a personal level, although it would be sometime before he could fully acknowledge his homosexuality, living amid the emancipated members of Parisian high society helped considerably. He formed a close relationship with a young German, Horst P. Horst (Horst Paul Bohrmann), who had just embarked on a spectacular career as a photographer. Visconti developed a greater political awareness as well. Fascism had come into fashion in Paris, but Horst, with his openness and frankness, helped Visconti see through it and distance himself from false nationalistic pride, Fascist rhetoric, and his habit of emphasizing his aristocratic background.<sup>2</sup>

Visconti's values changed even more markedly in 1936 after Chanel

introduced him to film director Jean Renoir and his colleagues, all of whom were members of the Popular Front or were at least sympathetic to it. The time was propitious: the Popular Front had just won a major election victory – although the sense of optimism it generated would soon dissipate as the new government turned out to be ineffective and downright reactionary in its cultural policy. Getting to know Renoir's group must have been somewhat disconcerting for Visconti, who had been brought up to think of communists as a major threat to civilization. The feeling of strangeness was reciprocal: he was unable to downplay his aristocratic manners, and he came from a fascist country.

The aesthetic influence of Visconti's associates was equally significant. Renoir was on his way to becoming one of Europe's most prominent directors of the thirties. His *Toni* (1935) heralded a change in French as well as European film in general. There had been other films shot in *alfresco* style, but, in the words of Raymond Durgnant, this was "the point at which the whole documentary movement of the French cinema achieved its fullest coalescence with the fiction film."<sup>3</sup> As Renoir himself put it:

I think I may say that what characterized *Toni* is the absence of any dominating element, whether star performer, setting or situation. My aim was to give the impression that I was carrying a camera and microphone in my pocket and recording whatever came my way, regardless of its comparative importance. Nevertheless, I had given myself a framework. *Toni* is not a documentary; it is a news item, a love-story that really happened in Les Martigues. . . . I scarcely needed to adapt it for the screen.<sup>4</sup>

*Toni* foreshadowed neorealism in many ways: the characters are ordinary workers or peasants depicted without resorting to sophisticated psychology, the actors were provincial amateurs expressing themselves in their accustomed way, and the film was shot on location.<sup>5</sup> Visconti probably saw it as being close to Giovanni Verga in its depiction of the lives of uneducated (Mediterranean) people by means of emotionally charged realism. Visconti's eventual adaptation of Verga was to be quite different in style, but Renoir served as a general model, particularly with respect to some of his aesthetic principles:

From the moment when I realized the importance of unity I tried never to shoot a scene without some background movement more or less related to the action. . . . Another of my preoccupations was, and still is, to avoid fragmentation, and by means of longer-playing shots to give the actor a chance to develop his own rhythm in the speaking of the lines. To me this is the only way of getting sincere acting.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Visconti's art was to be closely tied to the actor, to his or her ability to incarnate a character in a given setting. And like Renoir, he was willing to use a literary text as his starting point and to adapt it according to his own expressive needs and sociopolitical concerns.

It is not quite clear at what stage Visconti got to know Renoir. According to some sources, it happened as early as 1934, in connection with the shooting of *Toni*, but if so he was probably a mere observer.<sup>7</sup> In any case, that year Visconti had his first taste of filmmaking. Horst had taught him the basics, and he made a Buñuelesque amateur film about a young man who first has an affair with a young girl, then a prostitute, and finally an ideal woman. Then he kills himself. The film has not survived but apparently it was not a particularly promising start for a filmmaking career.<sup>8</sup>

Visconti must have gained his first professional experience in filmmaking as the third assistant director of Renoir's *Une partie de campagne* (A day in the country, 1936; released in 1946). His actual task was to design and supervise the making of costumes. This he did with enthusiasm. He studied the collections of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and went through a considerable amount of relevant literature. But he derived his greatest pleasure and benefit from following how Renoir directed actors.<sup>9</sup>

Later in many interviews Visconti said that he became politically conscious and decided to start making films while working with Renoir. Yet it appears that his anti-fascist convictions were not particularly strong, at least at this stage. He did not take a stand on the Spanish civil war or on any other major political event before the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, all the influences he had come under during his sojourns in Paris gave him a far broader view of the world than his aristocratic upbringing on its own could possibly have done.

For a while he thought of becoming a writer, and two drafts for novels survive from this period. The first was a vaguely autobiographical work titled *Angelo* (Angel), the second an almost gothic horror story, *I tre, un esperimento* (The three, or the experiment). The drafts are interesting only because they foreshadow some of the themes of Visconti's mature output.<sup>11</sup> On the surface, there are some obvious connections between *Angelo* and Visconti's first film, *Ossessione*: "The same social class, the same poetical digressions, the same geographical setting: the Po valley, Piacenza in *Angelo*, Ferrara in *Ossessione*."<sup>12</sup> These features also connect *Angelo* with Verga and verism, while the theme of sickness links it with the decadent movement. Together with the intensity of the mother-son (or daughter) relationship, these themes were to become important in the



second half of Visconti's cinematic oeuvre. The draft also reveals Visconti's obsession with details, which at times make the text quite burdensome. This passion he was later able to turn to his advantage in films. There the phenomenal world in all its richness could be conveyed through what Seymour Chatman has called "tacit description," which refers to the power of the cinematic image to convey information about the diegetic world (that is, the fictional world created in the film) without having to halt the narrative flow.

Before his first serious attempt to make a film, Visconti tried his hand at working in the theater. He had had some experience with amateur stage production in his early youth in the small theater inside the Visconti family residence in Milan; now he approached it as a professional. After returning to Italy, he designed the sets and costumes for a production of Giannino Antona Traversi's *Carita Mondana* (Mundane charity) at Teatro Sociale in Como in 1936 and for Jan Mallory's *Sweet Aloes*, produced in Teatro Manzoni in Milan the same year. Immediately after the latter he went to Hollywood, where he saw the studio system at its peak. Apparently the trip was not particularly successful, however, and he never talked much about it.<sup>13</sup>

An opportunity to return to filmmaking arose when Renoir came to Rome to direct a film version of *La Tosca* (1940). In a prime example of the inconsistency of its art policy, the Fascist Italian government had actually invited Renoir to teach and direct in Italy. Although his *Grande Illusion* (1937) had been banned in Italy, Mussolini had acquired it for his private collection, and it was his idea that Renoir should come. Renoir was an officer in the French army, and France had already declared war on Germany, Italy's ally at that time. Renoir had the support of the French government, which hoped that keeping up cultural relations with Italy might help to sustain its noninvolvement.<sup>14</sup>

Renoir's aim in *La Tosca* was to combine features of both documentary and crime films. Visconti took him around Rome, and they chose locations for shooting. They prepared the script together with the second assistant director, Carl Koch.<sup>15</sup> But as the presence of Germans in Rome became increasingly apparent, it was obviously unwise for the French members of the team to remain there. Renoir returned to Paris only shortly before Italy declared war on France and Great Britain. Koch, who had a German passport, stayed and with Visconti's assistance completed the film. The result was somewhat uneven. Visconti later described it as "a horrible film – it was all we could do."<sup>16</sup>

The collaboration with Renoir helped Visconti establish contacts in the

Italian film world, above all with a group of critics who had gravitated around *Cinema* magazine, notably, Gianni Puccini, Giuseppe De Santis, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Pietro Ingrao. Many of them were communists dreaming of the overthrow of the Fascist regime. It was most probably at this stage that Visconti himself adopted a marxist outlook and thus felt drawn to these young intellectuals.<sup>17</sup> Politics could not be discussed openly, of course, particularly as the chief editor of the magazine was Vittorio Mussolini, the son of Il Duce himself. Vittorio did not take much part in the actual running of the magazine, but thanks to his position it almost had the status of an official publication. This did not prevent it from printing articles that criticized national film policy and mainstream productions.

Indeed, Italy's Fascists never exerted the sort of control over cinema exercised by the totalitarian regimes in Germany or the Soviet Union. According to Martin Clark, at least, "In general, intellectuals were tolerated and flattered, indeed bought off, rather than persecuted."<sup>18</sup> Apparently Mussolini believed that intellectuals producing art and exchanging ideas would have little impact in a country run by a party of the masses and entertained by a blossoming film industry. And so, though it was wise for critically minded writers to exercise a degree of self-censorship, they were not completely silenced. A few were deported to remote corners of the south, where they actually expanded their understanding of the squalor behind the facade of "official" Italy. When they returned, they were even allowed to write about what they had experienced.

Only in the mid-thirties did the government begin to exert sterner measures in the form of preliminary censorship. At the same time, it began promoting a national film culture. In 1934 films became a part of the Venice Art Festival. The following year the Centro Sperimentale Cinematografico film school opened its doors under the highly competent direction of Luigi Chiarini. Also in 1935 the government established a fund to finance film production as well as a national film production company, Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC). ENIC was given a monopoly on importing films. This led the big Hollywood companies to withdraw from the Italian market for the time being, thus considerably improving the prospects of domestic films. In 1937 Mussolini himself came to open the Cinecittà studios, and the Centro launched the ambitious *Bianco e nero* (Black and white) magazine, which was to gain worldwide recognition. Most of these institutions are still in operation.<sup>19</sup>

Sterner measures were not needed in part because the film industry –