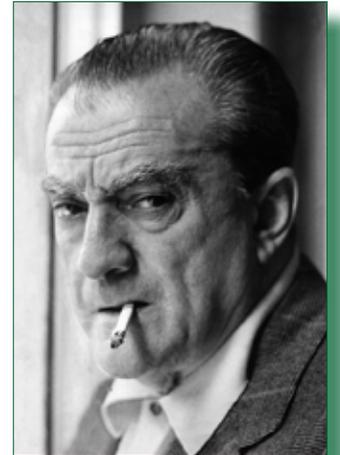


LUCHINO VISCONTI (1906-1976)

*This month's essay returns to the theme I began in September. We will look in this and in future essays at the life and work of key people who developed the Neorealism genre of post-World War II Italian cinema. The first person we will consider is Luchino Visconti, who was one of the major cinema directors who developed the themes and styles of this important genre, often rightly called "the Golden Age of Italian Cinema." He was also a theater and opera director, in addition to being a screenwriter. He is best known for his films *Ossessione* (1943), *Senso* (1954), *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), *The Leopard* (1963) and *Death in Venice* (1971). It is also noteworthy to cover Visconti in this month's Bulletin because November 2nd of this year would have been his 111th birthday.*

COUNT DON LUCHINO VISCONTI DI MORONE was born on November 2, 1906 in Milan "as the curtain went up at La Scala", as he used to say. He was born into an aristocratic family, one of the seven offspring of Giuseppe Visconti di Modrone, Duke of Grazzano Visconti and Count of Lonate Pozzolo, and his wife Carla (née Erba, heiress to Erba Pharmaceuticals). As a member of the Italian aristocracy, Visconti enjoyed a pampered and privileged upbringing that allowed him to pursue whatever activities suited his fancy. His early interests included music and theater. He inherited his musical inclination from his mother, who was a talented musician. As a youth, he studied cello with the Italian cellist and composer Lorenzo de Paolis (1890–1965). From his father, he inherited a love of the theater, since the Duke operated his own private stage. In the process, Visconti had the opportunity to meet some very famous artists including conductor Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957), composer Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), and Italian poet and novelist Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938).



Visconti's earliest education was supervised by his mother, though later he attended private schools in Milan and Como. After his parents separated, he was sent to a boarding school of the Calasanzian Order from 1924–26. Despite the unique opportunities that Visconti's privilege afforded him, his greatest passion at the time was horse breeding and racing. For nearly eight years, this passion became nearly an obsession.

But his early life was not all horses and art. From 1926 to 1928, he served in the Reggimento Savoia Cavalleria. At the end of his service, he went back to his artistic pursuits and, in 1928, made his debut as a stage set designer. During this period, he was involved in productions at La Scala, working with future opera star Maria Callas.



Jean Renoir

In 1936, at the age of 30, Visconti moved to Paris, where he immersed himself in the intellectual, cultural and political trends that characterized France before World War II. Through his friendship with world-famous fashion designer Coco Chanel, Visconti met the great French filmmaker Jean Renoir. This introduction awoke in Visconti a passion for cinema as an art form.

Visconti served as an assistant to Renoir, working as a costume designer and as an assistant director on *Une Partie de Campagne* (*A Day in the Country*, 1936) and *Les Bas-Fonds* (*The Lower Depths*, 1937). Even though Visconti was now completely

fixated on film, he did not give up his interests in theater and opera.

In 1937, Visconti made a brief visit to Hollywood, but he was disillusioned by the American film industry. When he returned to Italy in 1939, he became a member of the editorial staff of *Cinema*, a film journal. That year, he also served as assistant director to Renoir on *La Tosca*. Politics was another of Visconti's great interests, and during this period he switched his political allegiance from Fascism to Communism. When he returned to Italy, he joined the Italian Communist Party and became part of the resistance to the rising tide of Fascism. (He would remain a Marxist until his death).

Back in Italy, together with Roberto Rossellini, Visconti joined the *salotto* of Vittorio Mussolini (son of Benito), who was then the national arbiter for cinema and the other arts. Here he presumably also met Federico Fellini. His career as a film director began in earnest in the early 1940s and he would soon become a major figure in the Italian Neorealist cinematic movement. Neorealism was characterized by an unadorned and truthful depiction of lower-class life. Neorealist directors and their films demonstrated a pronounced social consciousness through concern with lower-class individuals and families and their hardships. The Neorealist style was starkly realistic, and depended on film techniques such as long, unbroken takes.

Together with Gianni Puccini, Antonio Pietrangeli, and Giuseppe De Santis, Visconti wrote the screenplay for his first film as director, *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943). The film was a loose, unauthorized adaptation of James M. Cain's American pulp crime novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Visconti moved the setting to Italy, and he increased the already heated sexuality of Cain's story. The film



reflected the influence of his early film work with Renoir, specifically in the use of long takes. He had to sell some family jewels to finance the film, but it was an enormously popular success in Italy, even though it ran into trouble with Fascist censors for its “obscurity.” The censors objected to Visconti’s steamy depiction of an illicit love affair as well as his harsh representation of Italian provincial life.

The film is considered the first “Neorealist” film. Though it had no overt political message, it still showed unemployment and depicted a harsh portrayal of the institution of marriage. It also had an overtly gay character. Not only did Fascist censors denounce the film, but the Catholic Film Center also condemned it. Reportedly, in Salsomaggiore Terme, bishops exorcised a theater where it had been shown. Scenes that involved the homosexual character were cut but were later restored.

With the onset of World War II and with his Communist Party affiliation, Visconti became an active anti-Fascist. His palazzo became a secret headquarters for members of the Communist Resistance. He also engaged in armed resistance against the Nazi occupiers. He managed to escape persecution by the Mussolini government until the final days of the War. However, finally in 1944, his activities led to his arrest and imprisonment for a brief period by the Nazi Gestapo.

His revenge came soon after the War ended when he filmed the execution by firing squad of the head of the jail in the documentary *Giorni di Gloria (Days of Glory, 1945)*. This was followed by *La Terra Trema (The Earth Trembles, 1948)*. Funded by the Italian Communist Party, the film was intended as a documentary trilogy about fishermen, miners, and peasants in Sicily. Visconti wanted to present an encompassing film about the Sicilian poor, but he only managed to complete the first part of his project, which involved the exploitation and eventual breakdown of a fishing family. It was Visconti’s most overtly Marxist film. It incorporated the qualities of the Neorealist genre: it was shot entirely on location in Sicily; possessed a documentary-like style; some of the roles were played by locals who were allowed to speak in their native dialects; it featured long takes and long shots combined with extensive camera movements. (G.R. Aldo, who was one of the best-known and finest post-war Italian Neorealist cinematographers, shot the film).

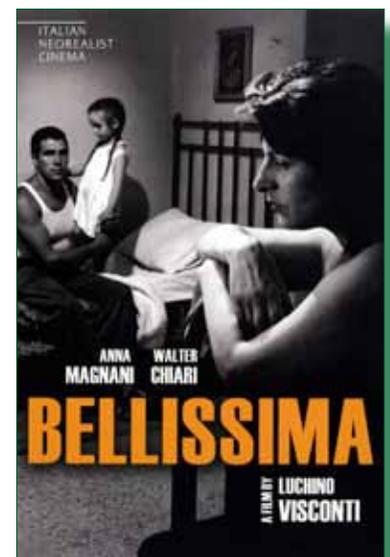
After the war, Visconti returned to his previous interests: opera and theater. His opera productions earned him as much fame as his film work, particularly his work with Maria Callas, who claimed that Visconti had taught her how to act.

Concerning his stage theater work, he was among a generation of stage directors who strove to rejuvenate the Italian theater, which had lost its vitality under the Fascist government,

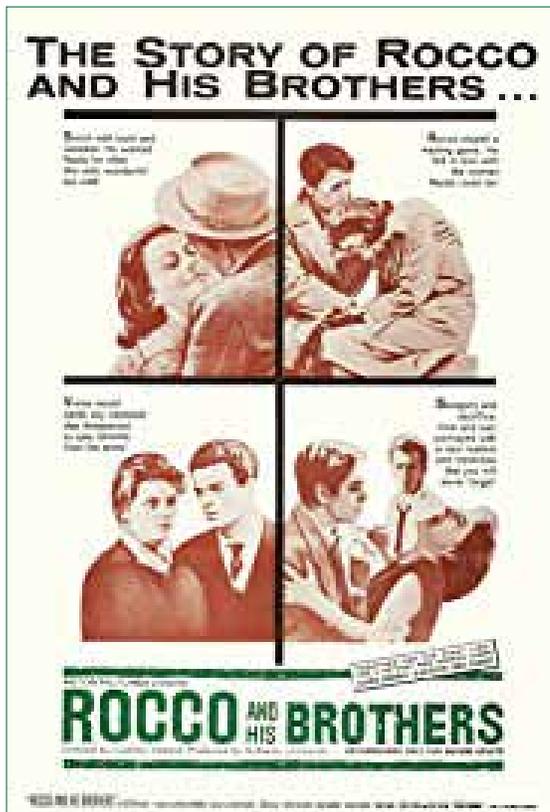
through reinterpretation of plays and by introducing new works. In the upcoming years, Visconti helped introduce playwrights that had been banned by the Fascists. These included Jean Cocteau, Jean-Paul Sartre and Tennessee Williams. He established his international reputation as a stage director at the Teatro Eliseo in Rome. His stage productions often generated controversy due to their themes and subject matter (e.g., incest and homosexuality). Some of the plays he presented also reflected his left-wing political sympathies, as they often depicted a lead character in conflict with the prevailing attitudes of modern society. The first play that Visconti directed was Cocteau's *Parenti Terribile* (*Terrible Family*) in Rome in 1945. As with his films, Visconti's stage plays were routinely censored by the Italian government—by Fascists during the War and by Italy's right-wing establishment following the War.

During the 1950s, he began producing films that were quite lavish and operatic, although they still maintained themes of Neorealism. A favorite theme involved the moral and economic disintegration of aristocratic families, especially depicting the decadence of the lifestyles of the upper classes.

In 1951, he released *Bellissima*, a satire that starred famed Italian actress Anna Magnani as a stage mother intent on getting her daughter into movies. In his next film, *Senso* (*Sense*, 1954), he veered away from Neorealism a bit and turned to the works of Verdi. The film was a spectacular, operatic film shot in color and included sections from the opera *Il Trovatore*; it was based on the novella by Camillo Boito and was set in 1866. Alida Valli played a countess who betrays her Italian nationalism for love during the Austrian occupation of Venice. It involved revolution, forbidden love, and betrayal. Though the film was highly melodramatic, it still reflected Visconti's Marxist sensibilities, specifically as it related to Italian history. It marked the end of Visconti's strict Neorealist period, as he began to commingle Realism with a much more elegant style.



In 1957, Visconti offered a very theatrical version of Dostoevsky's *White Nights*, starring Marcello Mastroianni and Maria Schell. Following this film, he entered into a period where he produced highly personal works, several of which are regarded as his greatest films. In 1961, he withdrew from theatrical work to concentrate exclusively on film. His cinema output began to include a mixture of contemporary and period films. But almost all involved reflections on a past that was irretrievably lost and how that loss affected the present, as well as how the loss manifested itself in melancholy and ruminations on the inevitability of death. Many of his films focused on the collapse of familial dynasties and the disintegration of family relationships.



The very realistic and very popular *Rocco e i suoi Fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960), marked Visconti's last venture into a subject of Neorealism. It was based on an episode from the novel *Il Ponte della Ghisolfia* (*The Ghisolfia Bridge*) by Giovanni Testori. It was a realistic look at a potent family tragedy that portrayed the Parandi, a Sicilian peasant family forced to move, for economic reasons, into the industrial northern section of Italy. The film starred Alain Delon, Renato Salvatori, Annie Girardot, and Claudia Cardinale, in one of her early roles before she became internationally famous. The film was hugely successful, both with audiences and critics, and it was Visconti's personal favorite work.

Set in Milan (with some scenes filmed in the town of Lierna, on the shores of Lake Como), the film tells the story of the family from the South and its disintegration in the society of the industrial North. The film deals with their troubles and disillusionment. It is built on an episodic structure, as it takes turns focusing on each brother. However, the main focus is on Rocco (played by Alain Delon, who became an international star because of the film), the loving, protective brother who tries to keep the family together. The brothers are unable to find work and turn to prizefighting, which Visconti portrays as class exploitation. The entrance of a prostitute, Nadia, into their lives turns brother against brother. Eventually, Nadia is murdered by Simone, the brutal brother whose actions are directed by his insecurities and moral laxity. Rocco tries to save his brother, but is betrayed by Ciro, the younger brother who has become a factory worker involved in the turmoil of labor unions.

Visconti may have considered *Rocco and his Brothers* his favorite film, but his most personal film was *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963), which was based on Lampedusa's novel of the same name. It was a haunting work that details the decline of the Sicilian aristocracy during the 19th century Risorgimento period of Italian history, a subject close to Visconti's own family history. Critics considered it Visconti's greatest film.

It was an opulent film, featuring American actor Burt Lancaster in the lead role of Prince Don Fabrizio. The aristocratic Sicilian family is forced to endure a substantial transformation due to a marriage that brings the middle class into its fold. It was awarded the Golden Palm at Cannes. However, the film was severely edited by Twentieth-Century Fox for release in the

United States, and American audiences had to wait nearly twenty years to view a restored version. (Visconti vociferously repudiated the altered Twentieth-Century Fox version).

During this period, Visconti developed his reputation as a difficult director. According to the British Film Institute website, one of his lead actresses, Clara Calamai, called him “a medieval lord with a whip.” Reportedly, he also treated Lancaster quite badly. However, Lancaster later said that Visconti was the best director he had ever worked with and described him as “an actor’s dream.”

In his next film, *Sandra* (1965), a psychoanalytical treatment of the classical Elektra myth, Visconti dealt for the first time with the Italian Resistance in a story of a wealthy woman haunted by an incestuous relationship with her brother and by the fact that her mother had betrayed her Jewish father to the Nazis. This film was followed by a critical and public failure, *Lo Straniero* (*The Stranger*, 1967), an adaptation of Albert Camus’ existential novel *The Stranger*.

It was not until *La Caduta degli Dei* (*The Fall of the Gods*, or released in English as *The Damned*, 1969) that Visconti received a nomination for an Academy Award, in this case for “Best Original Screenplay.” The film has been described as “Wagnerian” since it delineates the fall of a German industrial family that yielded to Hitler and the SS. Visconti loosely based the story on the real-life Krupp family (Essen steel-making family that made weapons for the Nazis) in order to explore a family’s descent into betrayal and murder. The family in the story produces child molesters, suicides, power seekers, and a Nazi SS officer while debating whether to support the Nazi war machine. It is an allegorical film that looks at the moral degradation of Nazi Germany. It was critically described as a “cold” film that ultimately resorted to caricature.



Visconti’s next film, *Morte a Venezia* (*Death in Venice*, 1971), was based on the Thomas Mann novel of the same name, although the film’s screenplay was far more Visconti’s than Mann’s. Although it was praised for its beautiful production values, it failed with the critics. Visconti followed this with *Ludwig* (1972), a four-hour depiction of the life of the “mad” King Ludwig of Bavaria. Critics found it also visually beautiful but overlong.

While he was filming *Ludwig*, Visconti suffered a severe stroke from which he never fully recovered. According to accounts, he smoked up to 120 cigarettes a day, which contributed to the

stroke and to his subsequent health problems. Although he was nearly paralyzed by the stroke, he directed his final two films from a wheelchair. Although these final films reveal signs of his declining powers, they still testify to his dedication to art, beauty, social justice and human values that were the motivating forces behind his extraordinary talent.

The first post-stroke film was *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* (released in English as *Conversation Piece*, 1974), a semi-autobiographical film about an aging Italian professor at odds with the “new” Italy in which the vulgar materialism of the new bourgeoisie clashes with the sometimes desperate alienation and militancy of a radicalized youth. Burt Lancaster starred as the professor.



A scene from *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno*.

Visconti’s final film was *L’Innocente* (*The Innocent*, 1976) which he based on Gabrielle d’Annunzio’s novel of upper-class adultery. In the film, Visconti returns to his recurring interest in infidelity and betrayal by depicting the moral degradation of European high society in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Openly bisexual, as was his father, Visconti’s films had few explicitly gay characters, although there is often an undercurrent of homoeroticism. This often led to his films being criticized, and sometimes even censored, by the government and by the Catholic Church. He favored attractive leading men, such as Alain Delon, and his final obsession was Austrian actor Helmut Berger whom he directed in *The Damned*, *Ludwig*, and *Conversation Piece*.

Visconti died on March 17, 1976, in Rome at the age of 69. His death occurred two months before the premiere of *L’Innocente* at the Cannes Film Festival. The cause of death was cited as influenza and heart disease. Visconti’s funeral was held two days later and was attended by Italian President Giovanni Leone and Burt Lancaster.

SUMMARY AND IMPORTANCE

Visconti chose to use his cinematic creativity to further a critique of contemporary society by showing the cynicism and harm behind the values of Italian society. Always working toward bettering the life of the lower class peasants and workers of Italy, he sought to help develop a society in which they could live a life of decency and respect.

As Daniel Scavone summarized Visconti's work: "Visconti shared with Neorealists a sympathy for the lower classes of Italy. He had a penchant for adapting his films from books while moving the setting to Italy and altering the plot to suit his own sensibilities. His films are strong criticisms of the hypocrisy of 'phony' liberalism and they express a deeply felt regret for the disappearance of the simple and traditional times when great families like his own could exercise the role of godfather vis-à-vis the peasantry. While important for their sociological messages, Visconti's films are rich in cinematic art. They are always visually powerful and contain subtle symbolisms."

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: British Film Institute website; Encyclopedia of World Biography website; Turner Classic Movies website; Scavone, Daniel. "Luchino Visconti" in Dictionary of World Biography: The 20th century, O-Z. (Vol. 9). Magill, Frank N. (ed.). New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 3818- 20; and Wikipedia.

