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all enthusiasm and the subsequent political victory. Acclaimed by Georges Sadoul as "the most beautiful battle to take place on the film screen since Griffith,"²⁰ Visconti's battle of Custoza was conceived as a picture of total confusion as witnessed by an uninvolved observer. The method is reminiscent of the way Tolstoy described the battle of Borodino in *War and Peace* and of Stendhal's account of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma*. The battle scenes are cross-cut with images of Livia's betrayal: devoured by her passion for the much younger Franz, Livia gives him money that belongs to the Italian patriots so that he can bribe a physician and get out of the army. The third act opens with Livia's journey to Verona where she hopes to find Franz. Her carriage passes wounded soldiers, refugees, the remnants of a defeated army. Livia's face ages before our eyes. The voyage is seen as a trip to hell, ending with Livia's moral annihilation and Franz's execution.

In retrospect, Visconti's attempt at the actualization of a historical subject has lost much of its meaning. In 1954, however, it provoked intervention of the censor and a protest from the Italian Ministry of Defense. Eventually, the scenes set at the headquarters of the Italian army had to be eliminated. In them, the Italian patriot Ussoni (portrayed by Massimo Girotti) offers the regular army the help of his company of volunteers and is refused. This scene, for which Visconti had historical backing, suggested parallels with the year 1944 when the Italian partisans were ordered by the provisional government to stop all actions against the Germans.²¹

Senso is the first Italian film to use color to convey human emotions and to color the landscape as these feelings change. This dynamic concept of color contradicted its traditional descriptive function and anticipated Antonioni's use of color in *Red Desert*. During Livia's trip to Verona, the prevailing color is gray with its impersonal low-key shades, occasionally intercut with the vivid green of the landscape. The first act, showing the beginning of Livia's love, is composed in large expanses of pastel tones whereas the interior of the Serpieri's summer estate, the scene of the betrayal, is toned with a dramatic crimson, contrasted by the white of Livia's gown.

Senso's theatrical conception occasionally weakens the overall impact without transgressing Visconti's original intention. As he pointed out in 1956: "It is a romantic film filled with the true essence of Italian opera. In real life, there are melodramatic people, just as there are illiterate fishermen in Sicily."²²

Senso was followed by a strange, almost totally theatrical, experiment, *Le notti bianche* (The White Nights, 1957). Whereas in *Senso* the environment was authentic—but made to look artificial—in *The White Nights* the environment was artificial and intended to be perceived as such. The streets of Livorno were reconstructed in the studio, and the characters, reduced to their essential traits, functioned as parts of a deliberately unrealistic metaphor. All the Viscontian themes appear in the story of Natalia, a lonely girl of the fifties who waits for the return of the man she loves; and of Mario, in love with Natalia, a stranger in the town, consumed by solitude. Pervaded with the theme of expectation, *The White Nights* becomes to a certain degree an anthology of Visconti's obsessions.²³

A minor film but the most romantic of Visconti's works, *The White Nights* was inspired by a story by Dostoyevsky. It is a rigorously directed "kammerspiel," bound by the unity of time and place. With the settings as a major structural ele-

*Le notti bianche*

ment, it is conceived primarily as an underscoring of the dreamlike aspect and evanescence of life.

"A formalistic nightmare" for Umberto Barbaro (but a probing of certain ways of expression for Visconti), *The White Nights* was an attempt to break away from the concept of verisimilitude, to create a mediated and reworked reality. No unity of criticism has ever been attained in the case of *The White Nights*, which testifies, to some degree, to the film's exceptionality.

THE LONERS: ROSSELLINI, ANTONIONI, FELLINI

During the fifties, the gap between the movie industry and the so-called art films deepened to such a degree that the quantitative difference became a qualitative one, affecting the overall structural balance. Amidst a heap of assembly-line productions, the few films marked by definable personalities stood out as solitary achievements. For some Italian historians, this was the reason why "the vital and live contact between the Italian cinema and society was lost, and all types of active political, cultural, and artistic testimony in film were abandoned."²⁴

Rossellini's *India* is among the solitary achievements of these years. Its innovative influence was felt above all in the France of the New Wave, particularly in the mode started by Jean Rouch. Rossellini's two previous films, the last ones he made with Ingrid Bergman (*Giovanna d'Arco al rogo* [Joan of Arc at the Stake, 1954] and *La paura* [Fear, 1954]), had already contained some technical experiments that