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Luchino Visconti's Legacy



Visconti's last film *The Innocent*, with Giancarlo Giannini and Laura Antonelli, is recommended as a refined, heartfelt poem from the grave.

PHOTO TRENDS

By Andrew Sarris

LUCHINO VISCONTI RETROSPECTIVE. Six films at the Library and Museum of the performing Arts at Lincoln Center, January 8 to 13.

THE INNOCENT. Directed by Luchino Visconti. Written by Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Enrico Medioli, and Visconti from the novel by Gabriele D'Annunzio. Produced by Giovanni Berolucci. Distributed by Analysis Film Releasing Corporation.

WIFEMISTRESS. Directed by Marco Vicario. Written by Rodolfo Sonego and adapted by Vicario. Produced by Franco Cristaldi. Released by Quartet Films, Inc.

Giancarlo Giannini merits our gratitude and admiration for having persuaded the distributors of the late Luchino Visconti's last film, *The Innocent*, to restore 20 minutes of footage cut from the print scheduled for release in America. This thoughtful intervention goes above and beyond the call of an actor's duty even to his own director. One only wishes that someone with Giannini's clout, conviction, and consideration had run interference for Visconti in America throughout his 35-year film career.

As it is, Visconti's reputation here has never reached the fashionable heights that it attained in Europe. His first two works—*Ossessione* (1942) and *La Terra Trema* (1947)—were credited with giving birth to neorealism. They did not reach our shores until long after neorealism was dead. *Bellissima* (1951) was moderately successful, but it was regarded more as a vehicle for Anna Magnani than as a stylistic coup for Visconti. *Senso* (1954) and *White Nights* (1957) were delayed in their American distribution for years and were generally denigrated by American reviewers when they finally did appear. Consequently, Visconti was effortlessly eclipsed by Rossellini and De Sica in the '40s and early '50s, and by Fellini and Antonioni in the middle '50s and early '60s. *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), a huge hit everywhere else in the world, was never considered in the same league here with Antonioni's *L'Avventura* and Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*.

It was with awareness of this critical neglect that I first wrote about Visconti's oeuvre in 1961 from my vantage point in Paris:

"In Visconti's work there has always been an unreconciled tension between a Marxian vision of society and an operatic conception of character. *Rocco and His Brothers* is comparable in its contradictions to what might have come out of a Verdi-Brecht adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The unity of the family in *Rocco* is destroyed partly because of the urban pressures of Milan on the rural mystique of the depressed South, partly because of the inhumanly Christlike sanctity of *Rocco*, partly because of the destructive in-

tervention of a willful prostitute, and partly because of the fratricidal destiny of the brothers. The disturbing homosexual overtones of *Rocco* (and *Ossessione*) reflect additional conflicts with which the director must cope.

"Throughout his career Visconti has been haunted by the image of the destructive woman. In the sublime cinema of Mizoguchi and Ophuls, most notably in *Ugetsu* and *Lola Montes*, woman is presented as the Redeemer of men, but for Visconti she is man's Nemesis. The females in *Ossessione*, *Senso*, *White Nights*, *Bellissima*, and *Rocco* wreak their

Why, then, was Visconti singled out for victimization when so many of his equally homosexual colleagues escaped with a few knowingly furtive whispers? Possibly, the homosexual argument was introduced as a way of discrediting Visconti's incongruously aristocratic background in a profession almost universally restricted to the bourgeoisie. Class envy, as in the outrageous indifference of the women's movement to Patty Hearst, can never be overlooked as a motivating force. From the beginning, also, Visconti's elegant style seemed inappropriate for any "significant" subject. Kenneth Tynan

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havoc not through spidery machinations but through a psychic force that the male can neither resist nor overcome. It follows almost logically that Visconti is the best director of actresses in the world, and the performances of Clara Calamai (*Ossessione*), Anna Magnani (*Bellissima*), Alida Valli (*Senso*), Maria Schell (*White Nights*), and Annie Girardot (*Rocco*) are among the most memorable creations of the cinema."

As I look back on what I wrote I realize that I did not then appreciate the audacity of writing explicitly of a director's homosexuality. There was Jean Cocteau, of course, but it was not the same thing. Cocteau had never dabbled in realist aesthetics; hence, there was no conflict between his art and his public personality. Cocteau's god was Narcissus, not Marx. As a self-styled poet, he could claim all the privileges of the most precious subjectivity. By contrast, Visconti presumed to look out on the real world in all its psychological and sociological complexity. Whereas Cocteau's poetry was enmeshed in autobiography, Visconti's was ensnared in history. One could not say of Visconti that he had created his own world. Quite the contrary, his world was our world, or, at least, it pretended to be. That may be why Visconti became the first major cinematic victim of homophobic condescension. We were a long way then from grappling with the massive problems in film scholarship caused by belated imputations of homosexuality to F.W. Murnau and Sergei Eisenstein, two of the theoretical mainstays of the world cinema. Even now, however, a reviewer runs the risk of being accused of libel for suggesting homosexual tendencies in a filmmaker's work. One problem may be that homosexuality is generally mentioned in a negative or limiting aesthetic context

had wittily dismissed Visconti's florid stagecraft on the Milan boards. The fragmented vaudevilles of Brecht and Beckett were all the rage in critical circles, and there was no place in the new parlance for Visconti's melodious arias for the eye, "*Rocco and His Brothers*," quipped Stanley Kauffmann.

An operatic destiny, which loomed so large for so many of Visconti's characters, could be said to be the product of an elitist perception of options and choices. Visconti himself was like the protagonist in a Visconti movie: trapped by the contradictions of his personality, aware of social injustice but too faithful to the documentation of luxury to caricature the upper classes. Critics lamented the lack of humor in Visconti's productions. Certainly, there were no easy laughs at the expense of straw men. Arguably, a darkly wicked amusement lurked in the margins of Visconti's meticulous mise-en-scene. At times, living space seemed more crucial to Visconti's intentions than life itself. When one looks back at Visconti's oeuvre, one is flooded with recollections of chairs, tables, divans, beds, clocks, curtains, and assorted bric-a-brac. Is Visconti's, then, merely the art of the decorator? Not really. There is a moral and dramatic substance to his settings, particularly in his later, more vulnerable works, like *Ludwig* and *Conversation Piece*.

Like most accomplished directors, Visconti became more intuitively confessional as he got older. Ultimately, he came out of many closets. He never seemed to lose his power to outrage the critical establishment. Literary purists deplored his screen versions of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Visconti was probably correct in wanting Alain Delon rather than Marcello Mastroianni for the role of Camus's zombielike nonhero. But it is doubtful that

even so drastic a recasting would have made all that much difference. One had to take Visconti for what he was: romantic but not mystical; dialectical but not derisive; exquisite but not sublime. With his vivid sensibility, Visconti reminded us of the fragility and perishability of our most cherished illusions. Bookish spectators recoiled in horror from the sordid, greasy manifestation of Dirk Bogarde's Aschenbach. Visconti had seen too clearly the squalid images festering under Mann's antiseptic "ideas."

In his eloquent tribute (*Film Comment*: May/June 1976), "Luchino Visconti: composer/conductor, cinematic poet/prince (1906-1976)," James McCourt glories in the lurid and lavish contradictions that have given pause to even Visconti's friendliest critics. "If Visconti's Ludwig were to be reincarnated as Pope Ludovic," McCourt speculates, "he would loot the Vatican treasury, produce Visconti movies while Rome burns anew, be driven mad by paparazzi and the Curia Romana, and be assassinated by leftist Judases."

Curiously, Visconti was damned irrevocably after *The Damned* as fascination with the fetishism of Nazis gave way to revulsion over the apparent self-revelation of the *auteur*. He had averted pity by staging a *scandale*, and his place in the World Pantheon became more problematical than ever. One could therefore find some logic in Visconti's turning to the notorious Gabriele D'Annunzio, lover of Duse and progenitor of Mussolini, for *The Innocent*, which was to be Visconti's swan song as a filmmaker.

Giancarlo Giannini plays Tullio Hermil, D'Annunzio's stab at a Nietzschean Superman beyond the reach of Christian morality. Tullio seems at first merely a philandering aristocrat, but when he discovers that his neglected wife has been impregnated by a famous writer, he becomes obsessed with the idea of destroying the baby. Laura Antonelli's Giuliana exudes a mysteriously complacent sensuality as she stubbornly resists her husband's wishes for an abortion. For a time, Visconti seems to be traversing the ideological minefield of the woman's movement; but, finally, a bleak, plaintive despair resolves matters. Through Giannini's joyless intensity, Visconti seems to be savoring the things of this world for the last time. No Visconti film to date has conveyed so intense a feeling of loss as *The Innocent*. Also, Visconti has captured ever so subtly the prevailing paranoia of our own time but without exaggerating the hysteria involved. I therefore recommend *The Innocent* not as a fact film, nor as a timely allegory, but rather as a refined, heartfelt poem from beyond the grave.

By a strange coincidence, Laura Antonelli is appearing also in Marco Vicario's *Wifemistress*, with Marcello Mastroianni as a philandering husband of a different sort than Giannini's Don Juanish metaphysician. Ever since *Malizia*, the mere mention of the name Laura Antonelli is enough to make the more discerning voyeurs in the area rush down to the Rizzoli Screening Room. Her lush nudity has become a *sine qua non* of all her projects, and the dialectical conflict between her angelic face and her devilish body seems to provide all the stimulation necessary for soft-core erotic fantasies. *Wifemistress* exploits her even more expertly than does *The Innocent*. Indeed, the entire scenario seems to have been contrived so that Marcello Mastroianni can be placed in the position of watching his wife as she awakens sexually in his apparent absence.

Again, we are encouraged to think that we are witnessing her liberation when actually we are merely preparing to participate in her corruption. As a director's name, "Vicario" seems almost too apt to be true, which is to say that if you are not scheduled for a date with Laura Antonelli soon, *Wifemistress* (and, of course, *The Innocent*) is the next best thing. Oh yes, there are intimations of period anarchism and kinkiness to jolly things along, and there is one unexpected plot coup with a loaded gun. But at this point in his career, Vicario seems merely facile, whereas Visconti has bequeathed to us as his last cinematic will and testament a mournful meditation on life without transcendent faith. ■