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# Padding Around in Visconti's Redux Soup



Luchino Visconti (right) on the set of *The Innocent*

By Myron Meisel

It never does to judge one's life too finally; nothing sounds more final, nor is more resolutely of the moment only, than pronouncements of any ilk. I'm not overly enamored of man's capacity to change, but as long as there is still more to come, the whole story is far from complete. The plot is not completed, as it were, until the plot is dug.

Except in art, where the judgment remains dynamic until the work itself is forgotten. There is something simultaneously tardy and premature, yet irresistible, about the rush to evaluate an artist's work after his death. Perhaps it is the only apt eulogy. In any event, we now have had the benefit of Luchino Visconti's time on earth, and the art remains, with his final work, *The Innocent*, from D'Annunzio, nearly unreleased here and now his greatest commercial success.

Visconti embodied massive contradictions that he attempted to sublimate into a consummately flamboyant serenity in his art. Aristocrat and Marxist, homosexual and Catholic, opera and irony coexist in his work, with less inherent conflict than seems possible. The contradictions were not conflicts for Visconti; his dramas proceed from them, not about them. Directors with far less good reason have had far more divided souls.

To adapt D'Annunzio at the end of his life might appear perverse. No writer could be more ideologically suspect, the literal embodiment of the perversion of Romantic idealism into the harbinger of fascism. Yet D'Annunzio's sense of drama is peculiarly suited for movies—in fact, he was probably the first big-name screenwriter in cinema history,

fashioning the scenarios for the trail-blazing Italian epics of the 1908-1914 period that pressured D. W. Griffith into features. Visconti himself described the period as "an age of brutality, where appearances are all important." Egotistic indulgence was the hallmark of what is now derisively called *dannunzianismo*, deemed in the smugness of historical hindsight as decadent and cheap. Yet Visconti as youth undoubtedly devoured the novelist, and the posturing romanticism was an inevitable formative influence. Certainly the eroticism of brutality is a theme that obsessed Visconti, who with characteristic aplomb sought delicacy in his sentiments toward it.

*The Innocent* is less a major work of art than a critical capstone to a major body of work. If it seems slightly marginal, it is in part because it represents an incapacitated old man endeavoring to break new thematic ground, and only in part is it less than a full artistic success. The drama itself is relatively small-scale, outlandishly elaborated with Visconti's usual hypergrandeur. The emotions may seem confusingly scaled, but only because the film is partially about characters who have egotistically inflated their emotions to the point of grievous consequence. But it is also because of Visconti's inability to tell a story straight in terms of the feelings of the characters themselves, and here excessive elaboration overloads the dramatic tension. The film, to use Dave Kehr's phrase, "lusters like a Romantic dinosaur." The underpinning feelings in the movie are wholly Visconti's, not his characters'—in this way, the audience is reminded that he is no stranger to the effluvia of the ego.

Indeed, it is Visconti's greatest strength as an artist that he so matter of factly implicates himself in his characters, with a compassion through identification with

their conflicts and aspirations that frees his ironist's hand for scathing critique of the same drives and passions. Like John Ford, he can criticize because he shares the values of his characters, and also like Ford, he is compelled of necessity toward the elegiac mode.

His penultimate film, perhaps his best, *Conversation Piece*, was consciously an old man's film, composed as a deliberate final statement on the postmortem state of Western civilization as seen by its last, impotent apostles. The elegy of *Conversation Piece* invokes no nostalgia, save for the values of the Renaissance, which are in the process of surviving not even as memory. It is his one true contemporary work (even the Nazis, for Visconti, are period, and even the peasant heroes of his ostensible neorealist works lapse into opera, or at least, *verismo*), a tense, contemplative work for an age of anxiety. Connoisseur Burt Lancaster dies pathetically amid a network of hospital tubing, clinging to his absurdity as the only refuge for his abused values. It was a long-held, unsentimental final chord, sounding at the end of a distinguished career, a testament.

But life goes on, bra, and despite a stroke that confined him to a wheelchair, Visconti makes one more film. He has already meditated on death and the meaning of his life, but briefly resurrected, as it were, he can show us something he has learned as a result of his meditation, Visconti redux. If he once saw in himself the death of the Renaissance, he can at least take Romanticism with him. *The Innocent* could have been made by a man at the peak of his powers, though Visconti obviously was not, so he substitutes wisdom for prowess in revealing ways. It is not meant to be a final statement, but a new one, forming

a dialectic of sorts with *Conversation Piece*. Where the former celebrates the death of idealism, the new film perceives its potential for corruption, and finally Visconti reaches the source of his fascination with fascist subjects. It is the incipient impulse of idealistic perversion, and not fascist drag, that has been at the heart of his obsessive "German" trilogy, the fascism of personality, not of politics. *The Innocent* looks at sexual relations in ideological terms, finding passion in perversion and vice in versa.

Yet the film is poignant, not angry. Nothing in a Visconti film is over, past, gone. The mortality hanging over *The Innocent* rescues it from grotesquerie. Visconti's use of decor and mise-en-scene for motif reinforces this sense, since memories are milked within the context of the film's own imagery. Thus the evolving color scheme, from warm reds to wintry grays parallels an overall concentration on the passing of seasons that reflects the dramatic progress of the work. Flowers in particular embody this regard; lilacs, tuberoses, and violets, exultant in exteriors, mournfully cut indoors, dominating the frame and the lovers. So, too, the clothing—the black-clad celebrants at a musical soiree, ribbon chokers, scarlet satin gowns, pink chiffon for belligerent hopes. Most devastating of all is the use of nudity, particularly in a key scene where the wife's lover walks naked in front of the husband, the only genital exposure in this erotically motivated picture.

Even the faces themselves conjure up past Visconti films—of Alain Delon's Rocco or of Maria Schell in *White Nights*. One of the more curious conscious decisions of Visconti has been to severely limit his performers, even though they are, with the decor, the main articulators of the drama. Their work is calculatedly ironic, their grand passions pitched broad enough to evoke audience distance. Jennifer O'Neill is most obviously hampered, since her line readings in Italian are delivered by Valeria Moriconi. Laura Antonelli flails about in her patented passive-aggressive characterization; tigerish, stubborn, introverted. But it is Giancarlo Giannini who must carry the picture, and fails. He hasn't the tragic stature required, as a Vittorio Gassman might have. He's good at wormy anti-heroes, but lacks the dimension for a pretender to the heroic mold. The expressive range for consummate two-facedness just isn't there—Giannini is always what he is, a fraud perhaps (as in *Seven Beauties*) but no phony. He obviously knows the effects he is after, and his mostly disastrous performance is a courageous, intelligent assault on an elusive role.

The risk is that the characters flirt with ridicule, particularly in the framework of a svelte marital melodrama. But no director has ever been less skittish about appearing ridiculous than Visconti: The man who made *Conversation Piece* recognizes that appearing foolish is the necessary state of a civilized man. So he doesn't spare the actors the risk of au-

dience derision, holding his shots where cutting might have ameliorated the more extreme gestures of performance. He doesn't salvage his actors' egos because he is intent on savaging their characters. The disparity between the melodramatic style (compounded by the English subtitles) and the rather tawdry pettiness of the people doesn't glorify them as they glorify themselves—their emotions are small ones wrought large in their own self-esteem. As Visconti argued in *Senso*, life is *not* opera.

So Visconti ends his oeuvre not with the resigned disillusion of a humiliated Professor Lancaster, but the romantic idiocy of Giannini's suicide, undertaken as a final pure gesture hopelessly adulterated by impure motives. The suicide is neither a critique of the bourgeoisie, nor an expression of Catholic opprobrium, nor a tragedy. It is the release that didn't come at the end of *Conversation Piece*, a sacramental act that has no significance except that it is the end—no less an ending, but, just as resolutely, no more. It has no meaning beyond its finality. Visconti ended one film with a whimper, and one more with a bang—what is moving is how little difference it makes to him.

*The Innocent* has the impassivity of a fresco, a style to which his combination of pans and slow, isolating zooms has long been tending. It is redolent of late Rossellini, though their purposes are divergent, save for the pursuit of contemplation. All of Visconti's protagonists have had an impulse to separate themselves from society, in their wildly varied ways, and certainly the spectacle of a film obviously directed from the viewpoint of a wheelchair about ludicrously vigorous people reinforces that sensation. How absurd an impulse when you are locked so securely inside that society! In his best films—*Osessione*, *La Terra Trema*, *Senso*, *Rocco and His Brothers*, and *Conversation Piece*—Visconti expressed the exquisite tensions of his own personality. Even in such lesser works as the much-maligned *Ludwig*, he could combine compassion with sense amid indulgence. There is no liberation in Visconti's films, unless it could be said that in his art, and only then, Visconti lived as a free man. He may have been no more than an artist of the second rank, but he was never less than an artist. *The Innocent* means more than its parts because it stands in a family of Visconti works that together comprises a single work of art that remains his self-made monument.

Speaking of the fallibility of man, I have negligently been referring to the screenwriter of *The Silent Partner* by other than his true name, which is Curtis Hanson. These pseudo-alter egos, once started, take on a life of their own, so take note, encyclopediasts. Also, *Mindscape* is "pen" rather than "pencil" animation, an error that I will blame unfairly on my editor's Texas accent.