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V I S C O N T I

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FILM COMMENT
FROM THE ARCHIVES

ON VISCONTI

BY DONALD LYONS

*This is an excerpt from the March-April 1979 issue of Film Comment.
Back issues of Film Comment are available to purchase at shop.filmlinc.org*

Family and history, two of the most basic enduring themes, confront us at the start. Count Luchino Visconti di Modrone, direct descendant of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the fourteenth-century Duke of Milan and remote kinsman of Desiderius, father-in-law of Charlemagne. Indeed. He was born on November 2, 1906, to Duke Giuseppe, whose family title may mount the centuries to Charlemagne or be merely a recent Bonapartist creation under Napoleon III—in either case, a formidable piece of background.

The early years included much that went with the territory: artistic mother, spell at eighteen in monastery, passion for horses, restless dissatisfaction, etc. At thirty came the turning point. In 1936, Visconti went to France, the Paris of the Popular Front, so alien in spirit and ferment to the mood of Mussolinian Italy. He was assistant director and costumer on Jean Renoir's *A Day in the Country* and worked on *The Lower Depths*. Transformed by the generous populism of Renoir's Paris, Visconti returned with him to Italy in 1939 to assist on a film of Tosca, aborted by the war. Three years later, his own first film,

Ossessione, based on James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, drew some mood and structure from Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (1939). *Ossessione* became known, misleadingly, as a precursor of neorealism.

Visconti's first feature after the war was *La Terra trema* (1974), a *plein-air* study of a Sicilian fishing family. It was financed by the Italian Communist Party, used non-actors, and revolves around a failed effort at economic liberation, though actually impressing more as the tragedy of a family rent by the centrifugal forces of history. It prefigured *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), the Sicilian family come north, though *Rocco* is ultimately memorable less for its sociology than for the spiritual, metahistorical sweetness of *Rocco*.

Among the key films of the Visconti career are *Senso* (1954) and *The Leopard* (1962), two anti-political Risorgimento studies, and the three "German" movies: *The Damned* (1969), *Death in Venice* (1971), and *Ludwig* (1973). The Viscontis were, after all, Lombards, and Visconti's *Drang nach Norden* in these years reinforces the sense of him as a historically torn character,



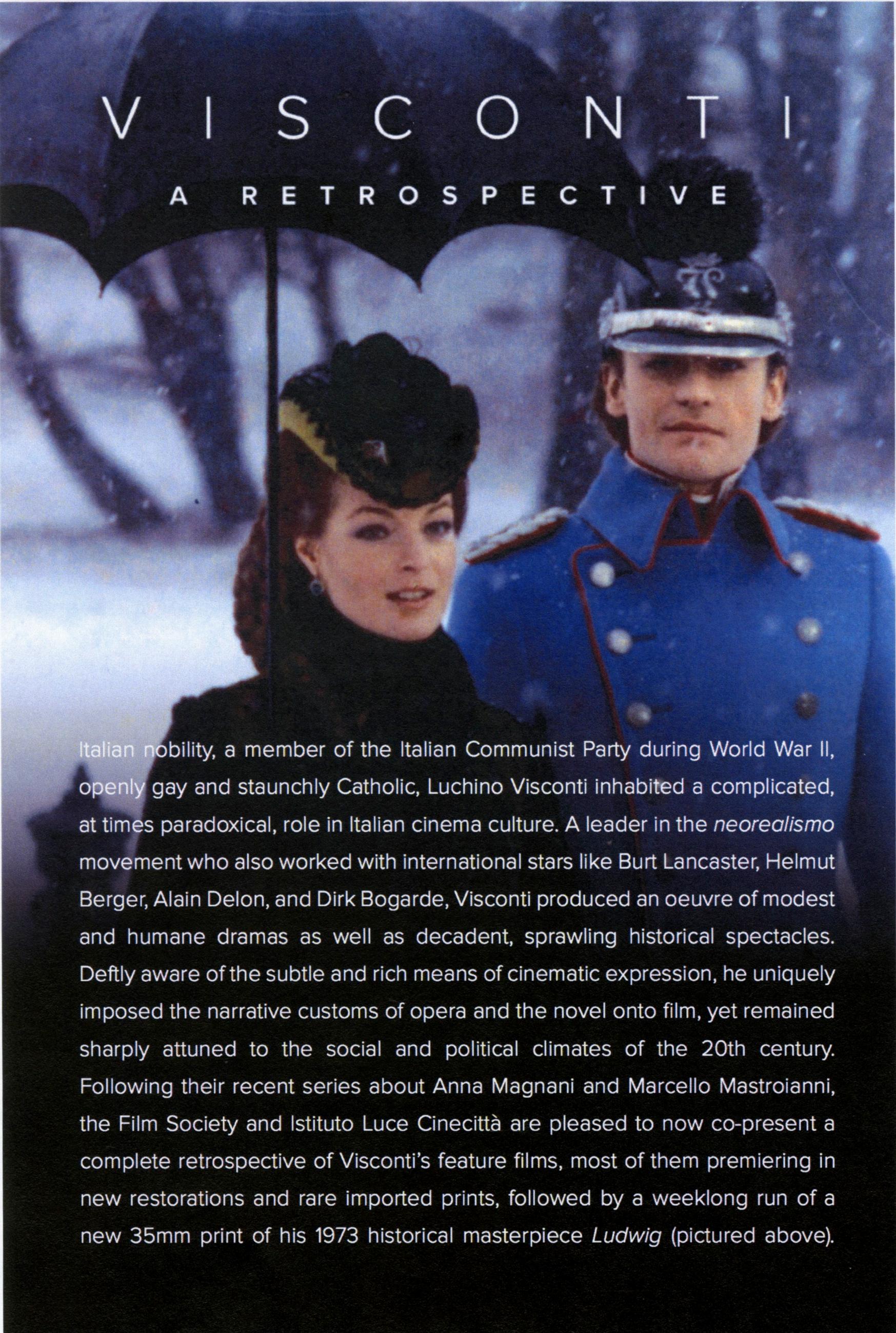
a victim of Mannian self-consciousness. These tensions were again crucial in his late masterwork, the intimate *Conversation Piece* (1974).

From 1945 to the mid sixties, Visconti was an important force on the Italian stage, directing Cocteau, Sartre, Anouilh, Tennessee Williams, Miller—even *Two for the Seesaw*. He staged Goldoni, Beaumarchais, Shakespeare, Chekhov. And from 1954 to 1964, he directed (all over Italy, in London, Paris, and elsewhere) still-famous opera productions, the first four with the singer-actress Maria Callas, whose genius flowered under him. It was altogether a position whose centrality and versatility recalls that of Ingmar Bergman in Sweden. And music—its relation to personality, reinforcing or satirically contrasting—forms a major Viscontian theme: from *Ossessione* (where the husband sings *La Traviata* while his wife and her lover plot his murder) to *Death in Venice* and *Ludwig* (which directly

examine characters formed by Romantic music). He was, Visconti, a high Romantic sensibility, unafraid to deal with Passion, Art, and Death.

Visconti died on March 17, 1976, his influence surviving especially in Bernardo Bertolucci, whose lurid readings of history as sensation (*The Conformist*, 1970) owe much to a side of Visconti. A certain filiation with Visconti can be seen in Marco Bellocchio, and in fact works like Bellocchio's *Fists in the Pocket* or Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem*, with their closed family thrashings, can actually surpass a murky Visconti like *Sandra* (1965). But, as with the other giants of postwar Italy like Fellini or Rossellini, Visconti was too compact a figure to have allowed any real cult or school.

Visconti was, among other things, the John Ford of Italy, epic elegist of national myths. But celebration, in both men, often yielded to melancholy and irony.



V I S C O N T I

A R E T R O S P E C T I V E

Italian nobility, a member of the Italian Communist Party during World War II, openly gay and staunchly Catholic, Luchino Visconti inhabited a complicated, at times paradoxical, role in Italian cinema culture. A leader in the *neorealismo* movement who also worked with international stars like Burt Lancaster, Helmut Berger, Alain Delon, and Dirk Bogarde, Visconti produced an oeuvre of modest and humane dramas as well as decadent, sprawling historical spectacles. Deftly aware of the subtle and rich means of cinematic expression, he uniquely imposed the narrative customs of opera and the novel onto film, yet remained sharply attuned to the social and political climates of the 20th century. Following their recent series about Anna Magnani and Marcello Mastroianni, the Film Society and Istituto Luce Cinecittà are pleased to now co-present a complete retrospective of Visconti's feature films, most of them premiering in new restorations and rare imported prints, followed by a weeklong run of a new 35mm print of his 1973 historical masterpiece *Ludwig* (pictured above).



OSSESSIONE

Italy, 1943, 140m

Considered by many the first neorealist masterpiece, Visconti's bombshell debut is a sexy, sweaty adaptation of James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The chiseled Massimo Girotti is the penniless drifter who breezes into unhappily married Clara Calamai's whistle-stop roadhouse, setting the stage for a torrid saga of lust, murder, and betrayal. In blending the sordid source material with an earthy evocation of underclass life, Visconti incurred the wrath of the Fascist censors, who promptly suppressed the film. Among their objections was the homoerotic charge supplied by a character not in Cain's novel: a gay, communist artist, whom one is tempted to read as a stand-in for the queer, Marxist Visconti. **Restored by Istituto Luce Cinecittà, CSC-Cineteca Nazionale and VIGGO.**

Saturday, June 9 5:15pm

Saturday, June 13 6:30pm



LA TERRA TREMA

Italy, 1948, 160m

In Visconti's Sicilian masterpiece, a fisherman's budding leadership of the local labor force threatens the price-fixing schemes of wholesalers all too willing to put down an incipient rebellion. Based on a classic novel by Giovanni Verga, *La Terra trema* was one of the most formally daring of all neorealist works, establishing the template for dozens of later films that would examine the emergence of political consciousness. The many extraordinary sequences are played out by a cast of actual fishermen, who are, to critic André Bazin, filmed as though "Renaissance princes." **Digital restoration from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Saturday, June 9 2:00pm

Monday, June 11 6:00pm

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BELLISSIMA

Italy, 1951, 35mm, 108m

Visconti deftly blends showbiz satire with heart-tugging pathos in this neorealist melodrama. When Cinecittà Studios puts out a casting call for a new child actress, they're flooded with starry-eyed stage mothers and their talentless tots, among them Anna Magnani's working-class Roman nurse and her rather indifferent daughter, whom she's driven to make a star. As in similar Hollywood-plays-itself melodramas such as *Sunset Boulevard* and *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *Bellissima* both romanticizes the power of celluloid dreams and delivers a cuttingly cynical takedown of the industry. Magnani's affecting performance as a mother whose desperation for success is outweighed only by her love for her child helps the film achieve true poignancy. **35mm print from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Sunday, June 10 3:30pm

Monday, June 11 9:15pm



SENSO

Italy, 1954, 35mm, 123m

Set amidst Italy's struggle for unification, Visconti's operatic melodrama is a key link between the neorealist grit of his early work and the increasingly grand-scale historical spectacles to come. *The Third Man's* Alida Valli plays a tremulous 19th-century Venetian countess torn between loyalty to her country and a dissolute Austrian officer (Hollywood beauty Farley Granger). As much an aesthete as a political radical, Visconti luxuriates in the aristocratic period trappings—a Technicolor feast of sumptuous gold, lavender, scarlet, and emerald jewel tones—while casting a jaundiced eye on Italian history, class, and nationalism. A Rialto Pictures Release. **35mm print from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Tuesday, June 12 6:30pm



WHITE NIGHTS

Italy/France, 1957, 35mm, 101m

Visconti's adaptation of a classic short story by Dostoevsky is a ravishing romantic reverie in incandescent black and white. Marcello Mastroianni is the lonely flâneur who meets and falls in love with a fragile young woman (Maria Schell) amidst the fog-shrouded night world of the Tuscan canal city of Livorno. The resulting tale of all-consuming love and loss is a swooning dream vision elevated to the nearly operatic by Visconti's rapturously stylized direction. **35mm print from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Sunday, June 10 8:00pm

Wednesday, June 13 9:15pm



ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS

Italy/France, 1960, 177m

Visconti's rich and expansive masterpiece has an emotional intensity and tragic grandeur matched by few other films. The director turned to Giovanni Testori, Thomas Mann, Dostoevsky, and Arthur Miller for inspiration, achieving a truly epic sweep for this story of a mother and her grown sons who head north from Lucania in search of work and new lives. In one beautifully realized scene after another, we observe a tightly knit family coming apart, one frayed thread at a time. Alain Delon is Rocco, Renato Salvatori is his brother Simone, Annie Girardot is the woman who comes between them, and Katina Paxinou is matriarch Rosaria. One of the defining films of its era, *Rocco and His Brothers* has been beautifully restored, and Giuseppe Rotunno's black and white images are as pearly and lustrous today as they were always meant to be. **Restored by Cineteca di Bologna in association with Titanus, TF1 Droits Audiovisuels and The Film Foundation. Restoration funding by Gucci and The Film Foundation.**

Friday, June 8 1:30pm

Saturday, June 9 8:00pm

FOR TICKETS VISIT FILMLINC.ORG



THE LEOPARD

Italy/France, 1963, 186m

Visconti reached new heights of epic grandeur with his sweeping, Palme d'Or-winning account of political upheaval and generational sea change in Risorgimento-era Italy. A bewhiskered Burt Lancaster is the leonine patriarch of a ruling class Bourbon family in the last gasps of its dominance as Garibaldi and his redshirts upend social order and a new spirit ascends—embodied by beautiful people Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale. With fastidious attention to period detail, Visconti evokes a gilded world fading into oblivion, his camera gliding over baroque palazzos, magnificent banquets, and ornate ceremonies. It all culminates in a majestic, dusk-to-dawn ball sequence that is as poignant as it is breathtaking. **Restored in association with Cineteca di Bologna, Pathé, Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, Twentieth Century Fox, and CSC-Cineteca Nazionale. Restoration funding by Gucci and The Film Foundation.**

Friday, June 15 6:00pm
Sunday, June 17 1:00pm



SANDRA

Italy, 1965, 105m

Shady family secrets, incestuous siblings, descends into madness, decades-old conspiracies . . . With *Sandra*, Visconti traded *The Leopard's* elegiac grandeur for something grittier and pulpier—the Electra myth in the form of a gothic melodrama. Claudia Cardinale's title character returns to her ancestral home in Tuscany and has an unexpected encounter with her long-lost brother and a reckoning with her family's dark wartime past. Shooting in a decaying mansion set amidst a landscape of ruins, Visconti came upon the great theme he would return to in his late career: the slow death of an aristocracy rooted in classical ideals but long since hollowed out by decadence and corruption.

Sunday, June 10 5:45pm
Friday, June 15 3:45pm

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THE STRANGER

Italy/France/Algeria, 1967, 35mm, 104m

Visconti brilliantly translates Albert Camus's landmark work of existential humanism to the screen in this shattering adaptation. Marcello Mastroianni is (perhaps unexpectedly) perfectly cast as the alienated atheist Meursault, who, due to a series of seemingly random events, shoots an Arab man on an Algerian beach and finds himself on trial for murder. The cosmic absurdity of Camus's vision is delivered with a gut-punch by Visconti and Mastroianni in a stunning final scene that stands as one of the actor's greatest moments. Long unavailable (and never released on DVD), *The Stranger* deserves to be rediscovered for its singular, haunting power. **35mm print from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Friday, June 8 5:00pm

Tuesday, June 12 9:00pm



THE DAMNED

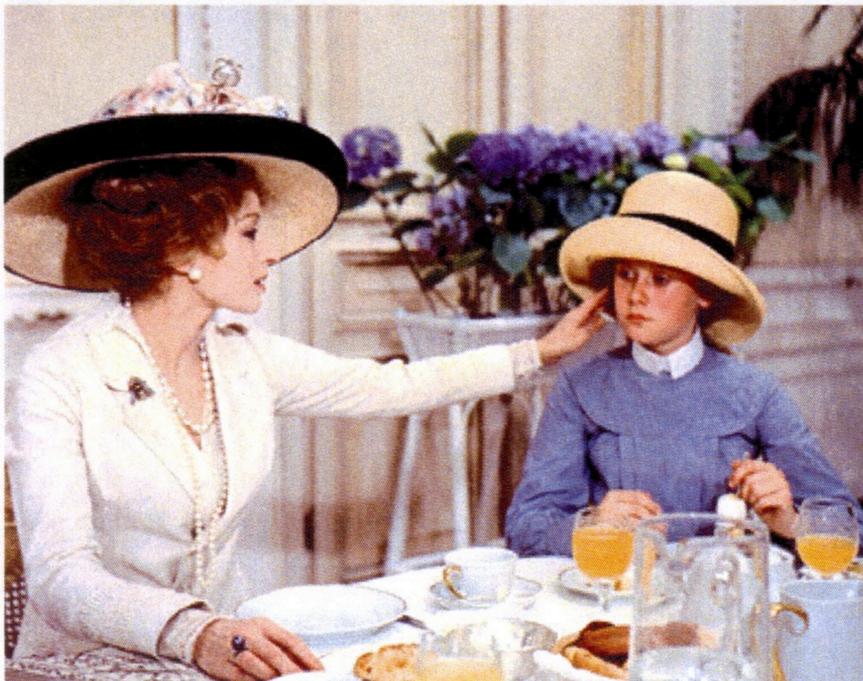
Italy/West Germany, 1969, 156m

The Damned chronicles the downfall of the Essenbecks, a wealthy German family (led by Dirk Bogarde and Ingrid Thulin) with business ties to the Nazis. Visconti's symphony of decadence is perhaps best remembered for Helmut Berger's indelible turn as depraved son Martin, vamping in drag as Marlene Dietrich from *The Blue Angel*. Kinky and perverse (the film was rated X upon initial release), Visconti's epic features a score by Maurice Jarre (*Lawrence of Arabia*) and a stylistic opulence that led Rainer Werner Fassbinder to name it as one of his ten favorite films. **Restored by Cineteca di Bologna and Institut Lumière (Lyon).**

Saturday, June 16 8:30pm

Sunday, June 17 4:45pm

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DEATH IN VENICE

Italy/France/USA, 1971, 130m

Opening with the otherworldly image of a steamship emerging ghostlike from inky blackness and closing with one of the most transcendent denouements in all of cinema, Visconti's exquisite adaptation of Thomas Mann's novella is a piercing meditation on mortality, sexuality, beauty, and the longing for youth. In a career-capping performance of tragic vulnerability, Dirk Bogarde plays gravely ill composer Aschenbach, who, while on a rest cure in Venice, is spellbound by an angelic teenage boy (Björn Andrésen)—an infatuation that escalates as pestilence consumes the city. Visconti's painterly compositions enter the realm of the sublime thanks to the tension-swelling, never-resolving strains of Mahler's Fifth Symphony. **Restored by Cineteca di Bologna, Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Friday, June 8 7:30pm
Sunday, June 17 8:00pm



LUDWIG

**Italy/France/West Germany, 1973,
35mm, 238m**

Visconti's remarkable film about the life and death of Bavaria's King Ludwig II is an opulent, complex study of romantic ambition in the era of 19th century decadence. Helmut Berger plays the title role as a loner tormented by unrequited love for his cousin, Empress Elisabeth of Austria (Romy Schneider); an obsession with the music of Richard Wagner; and excessive state-funded expenditures. Visconti's lavishly composed portrait of one of history's most complicated figures is as much an operatic descent into madness as a requiem to a monarch at the dawn of the modern republican world. An AGFA release. **New 35mm print made by Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Saturday, June 16 1:30pm
**Friday, June 22–Thursday, June 28
2:00pm & 6:45pm**

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CONVERSATION PIECE

Italy/France, 1977, 35mm, 121m

Visconti reunited with *The Leopard* star Burt Lancaster for this profoundly personal, contemporary chamber study. Once again the actor is cast as an emblem of Old World honor passing into obsolescence, here a retired professor living out a quiet retirement in his art-stuffed Roman palazzo; his dignified solitude is drastically upended by a turbulent marchesa (a serpentine Silvana Mangano) and her bisexual boy toy (Helmut Berger) who insinuate themselves into his life. Visconti masterfully interweaves provocative ideas—on class, sex, art, fascism—in what is ultimately his own disquieting confrontation with mortality. **35mm print from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Friday, June 15 9:30pm

Monday, June 18 6:30pm



THE INNOCENT

Italy/France, 1979, 35mm, 129m

In his final film, Visconti offers a cutting variation on the theme that most consumed him: the moral decay of the soul-sick aristocracy. Based on a novel by the proto-fascist sensualist Gabriele d'Annunzio, this poison-pill melodrama concerns a callously self-absorbed nobleman (Giancarlo Giannini) whose “liberal” views on marriage extend only as far as his own extramarital affairs. When his tormented wife (Laura Antonelli) pursues a dalliance with a writer, the full monstrousness of his chauvinism is unleashed. Working with a late-career rigorousness, Visconti returns one last time to the luxuriant, red velvet world of the 19th century, stripping away operatic excess in favor of a supremely controlled emotional intensity. **35mm print from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

Saturday, June 16 6:00pm

Monday, June 18 9:00pm

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The Witches

SHORTS PROGRAM: 1953-67

Visconti directs Anna Magnani, Romy Schneider, and Silvana Mangano in this potent trio of offbeat, often comic shorts drawn from omnibus films *We, the Women*; *Boccaccio '70*; and *The Witches*. **TRT: 114m**

ANNA MAGNANI

Italy, 1953, 21m

In this segment from the marvelously offbeat portmanteau film *We, the Women*, superstar actress Anna Magnani protests a taxi fare surcharge for traveling with her dachshund, spiraling into a comic melee involving half of Rome's police officers. **Digital restoration from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

THE JOB

Italy, 1962, 35mm, 56m

Between *Rocco and His Brothers* and *The Leopard*, Visconti contributed to *Boccaccio '70*, an anthology comedy inspired by the irreverent spirit of the *Decameron* author. His segment plays like a sophisticated deconstruction of the battle-of-the-sexes bedroom farce, featuring an effervescent Romy Schneider as an idle, rich heiress putting the screws on philandering husband Tomas Milian when one of his escapades winds up in the scandal sheet. It's all fun and games—until it's not. **35mm print from Istituto Luce Cinecittà.**

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THE WITCH BURNED ALIVE

Italy/France, 1967, 35mm, 37m

Visconti's contribution to Dino De Laurentiis's omnibus curio *The Witches* is an enigmatic, unsettling dissection of celebrity, beauty, and artifice. A divinely helmet-haired Silvana Mangano plays a nerve-shattered movie star who retreats to an Alpine chalet for some much-needed peace—only to become embroiled in the emotional and sexual gamesmanship of a coterie of upper-crust vultures. Look out for Visconti's soon-to-be muse and lover Helmut Berger in his debut.

Sunday, June 10 1:00pm

Friday, June 15 1:15pm

SCHEDULE

VISCONTI A Retrospective

FRIDAY, JUNE 8

- 1:30** Rocco and His Brothers
5:00 The Stranger
7:30 Death in Venice

SATURDAY, JUNE 9

- 2:00** La Terra trema
5:15 Ossessione
8:00 Rocco and His Brothers

SUNDAY, JUNE 10

- 1:00** Shorts Program
3:30 Bellissima
5:45 Sandra
8:00 White Nights

MONDAY, JUNE 11

- 6:00** La Terra trema
9:15 Bellissima

TUESDAY, JUNE 12

- 6:30** Senso
9:00 The Stranger

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13

- 6:30** Ossessione
9:15 White Nights

THURSDAY, JUNE 14

No Screenings

FRIDAY, JUNE 15

- 1:15** Shorts Program
3:45 Sandra
6:00 The Leopard
9:30 Conversation Piece

SATURDAY, JUNE 16

- 1:30** Ludwig
6:00 The Innocent
8:30 The Damned

SUNDAY, JUNE 17

- 1:00** The Leopard
4:45 The Damned
8:00 Death in Venice

MONDAY, JUNE 18

- 6:30** Conversation Piece
9:00 The Innocent

FRIDAY, JUNE 22–THURSDAY JUNE 28

- 2:00 | 6:45** Ludwig

All Screenings at the Walter Reade
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