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BELLISSIMA

By Andrew Sarris

I indicated last week that I would have more to say this week about the marvelous double bill at the Public Theatre of Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Lady Without Camelias* (1953). Now that this week has rolled around, I really don't know where to start. It is possible that some of my readers may not share my admiration for Visconti and Antonioni. It is even possible, though highly unlikely, that some of my readers may be unimpressed by the emotional force of Anna Magnani and the subtle magnetism of Lucia Bose. It is somewhat more likely that some audiences may not share my unbridled enthusiasm for films about the film industry. And, of course, there are younger moviegoers who may never understand my devotion to the great masterpieces of the '50s, by far my favorite decade of filmmaking. Yet, when I started reviewing films in the '50s, I was convinced that the art of the cinema was going through a state of decline. Hoorah for the *nouvelle vague* and all that. Now I discover that this was a golden age not only for American directors like Ford (*The Searchers*) and Hitchcock (*Vertigo*), but for such sublime foreign directors as Ophuls, Mizoguchi, Renoir, Rossellini, Visconti, Fellini, Bergman, and Kurosawa. It was a decade in which the formal shell of cinema was expanding, but a decade in which the need for narrative was still felt. By contrast, the '60s and the '70s tended to move too far in the direction of story-

killing abstraction and absurdism for my taste to follow with any degree of comfort and pleasure. I have thought my way through the films of these past decades, but I have left my deepest feelings somewhere on the road between Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and Ingmar Bergman's *Brink of Life*. In this context, *Bellissima* and *The Lady Without Camelias* may be regarded as classical or even conventional exercises in the respective careers of Visconti and Antonioni, but I can't say that anything they did subsequently gave me any greater pleasure or edification. These inside-Cinecitta movies are all the richer for working on different levels for different audiences.

As for the subject itself, *Bellissima* and *The Lady Without Camelias* impress me with their unexpected realism about movies and the people who want to get into them. Not that the two movies follow the same pattern. The neo-realist theories of Cesare Zavattini can be detected around the edges of *Bellissima* as a horde of mothers descend upon a studio with their precious little darlings. But one needs an extraordinary degree of sociological concentration to peer around the edges of Anna Magnani's emotional thunderburst of a performance as the mother of a hopelessly untalented and ungainly child, who is nonetheless beautiful in an introverted sort of way. When Anna Magnani belatedly discovers the truth about her "bellissima," she becomes a loving lioness of a mother, and her maternal fury is a glory to behold, but its emotional force is

built up very slowly and solidly in a series of scenes in which the many facets of her womanly nature are brilliantly illuminated. There was at the time a remarkable coming attraction for *Bellissima*, one in which Bette Davis narrated her own unqualified admiration for Anna Magnani as a woman and as an actress. I cannot remember a more gracious tribute from one great actress to another, and it was thoroughly deserved.

The Lady Without Camelias is in some ways, however, an even more impressive achievement than *Bellissima*. Antonioni and his scenarists have managed to avoid the traditional hypocrisies of the genre by denying themselves the audience-pleasing dialectic of "life" versus "art," with art usually running a very poor second. Here, Lucia Bose plays a Milanese shopgirl who achieves a quick success on the screen largely on her looks and charm, but who cannot move up into more challenging roles. She thus finds herself unable to advance or retreat, and there is no one to blame, not even herself. Lucia Bose's characterization of an intermediate mediocrity is so painfully honest that it seems to belong more to a novel of irony and sensibility than to a movie of popular appeal. I do not agree with the critics who dismiss the plot as soap opera. Antonioni transcends the plot on every occasion with his very expressive mise-en-scene of loneliness and alienation, but he never loses touch with the throbbing feelings of his characters in the process.

—Village Voice 2/11/7, 1981

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