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SENSO THE WANTON COUNTESS/SENTIMENT Italy 1953. *Dir* Luchino Visconti *Scen* Luchino Visconti, Suso Cecchi D'Amico, G. Prosperi, C. Alianello, G. Bassani based on the short story by Camillo Boito *Photog* G. R. Aldo, Robert Krasker *Art Dir* Ottavio Scotti *Costumes* Marcel Escoffier, Piero Tosi *Mus* Anton Bruckner's *Seventh Symphony* *Ed* Mario Serandrei *Cast* Alida Valli, Farley Granger, Massimo Girotti, Heinz Moog, Christian Marquand *Prod* Lux. 115 mins. Technicolor. (Abridged English version, 100 mins., released under title *The Wanton Countess* with dialogue by Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles.) In 1866 in Venice, where patriots are conspiring against the occupying Austrians, Countess Livia Serpieri (Valli) meets a young Austrian officer, Franz Mahler (Granger), and finds herself so desperately in love that she forgets family and patriotic obligations. She tries to break with him when liberation forces approach Venice but is unable to resist his persistence. She gives him money intended for the partisans so that he can buy his way out of the army. He leaves for Verona, and when she joins him, she finds him wrecked by drink and aware of his cowardice. When she discovers he had loved her for her wealth and had betrayed her cousin (Girotti), she goes to the Austrians to denounce him and he is shot.

This large-budget spectacular is one of the most beautiful Italian films ever made and one whose expressive colors and luxurious period setting are never used merely as a decorative backdrop. Its style seems almost operatic and, in fact, the film opens with a tribute to Giuseppe Verdi, whose opera gives rise to an Italian demonstration in the theater. Visconti makes brilliant use of the Italian landscape and existing settings: the old streets of Venice through which the countess goes to meet her lover; the splendid country house at Aldano,

which shelters their love; and the stone ramparts of Verona before which Franz is led to be shot. Each and every word and phrase of the dialogue is used to develop the drama and the psychology of the characters.

Visconti (aristocrat by birth, Marxist by conviction) offers in *Senso* an extraordinary portrait of a decadent and corrupt aristocracy in which Livia's seduction and treachery and Franz's cowardice and deceit are an inevitable result of their environment.

Senso also depicts the Risorgimento of the Italian people as they fight for the freedom and unification of their country. A high point of the film is the battle during which a young marquis (Girotti) vainly pleads with his superiors for the use of the ordinary Italian people in the fighting. This sequence was cut by the Italian censors and, without it, the tragic destiny of the two lovers no longer seems so closely tied to the destiny of a nation.

Alida Valli gives a superb interpretation of the countess ravaged by age, passion, and misery, and Farley Granger is convincing as the wretched Franz.

Senso was a critical failure and had only a limited commercial success. [Many critics bewailed Visconti's betrayal of neorealism in favor of "neoromanticism." But, in retrospect, Visconti's baroque qualities are evident even in *La Terra Trema* (q.v.) and *Ossessione* (q.v.) and reached their height in *The Leopard* (q.v.) and *The Damned* (q.v.) *Senso's* reputation has only increased over the years and it is now recognized as a great classic.]