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REMARKS ON 'SENSO' --from 'Films and Filming' January '63 by John Francis Lane.

. . . Visconti was to encounter endless difficulties with his SENSÒ, to begin with from the film company, who were far from giving him the free hand that he has been getting this year with THE LEOPARD. And the government bitterly resented an approach to the Risorgimento which drew an obvious parallel with recent Italian history. Above all, the military authorities were offended because Visconti gave such prominence to the Battle of Custoza at which Victor Emmanuel's armies had been defeated by the Austro-Hungarians (and the same thing was to happen a few years later with Monicelli's LA GRANDE GUERRA when another Italian defeat--Caporetto in the First World War--was considered equally 'offensive', although historically common knowledge).

Vital parts of the battle sequence were cut from SENSÒ, thus destroying the overall impact of the Risorgimento theme. SENSÒ provoked bourgeois anger on moral grounds too: I remember at the Venice Festival premiere that a Venetian gentleman sitting behind me cried out indignantly. 'This is an insult to Italian women'. Much worse things were shouted at Visconti when the film finally reached Italian screens; yet it took its place with I VITELLONI, GOLD OF NAPLES and Castellani's ROMEO AND JULIET as the only 'serious' films amongst the Italian twenty box-office successes of the years 1953-55. Needless to say, SENSÒ didn't win the Golden Lion at Venice or even a consolation prize, though most Italian critics gave it their preference (at that Festival, ROMEO AND JULIET won the top award and LA STRADA won a Silver Lion as well as the Catholic Prize).

The aesthetic discussions over SENSÒ were to continue for a long time after the controversy about the Venice Golden Lion had died down. It took another three months for the film to come out in Italy while the censors studied how they could best mutilate it. Marxist-leaning critic, Guido Aristarco was the most enthusiastic supporter of the film: and perhaps sometimes he seemed to go too far, especially when he compared the film to the 19th century novel. And yet looking back now, maybe the judgment was not so hasty, even if one is obliged to judge SENSÒ in an incomplete version (and quite apart from the censor's cuts one has to remember that the producers prevented Visconti from expanding the historical side of the novel as he would have wished and as, indeed, he is doing with THE LEOPARD). Certainly SENSÒ revealed that the cinema, or anyway the Italian cinema, could look history in the face on almost equal terms with the novel. Whereas Flaubert, tired of the sordid modern world he had portrayed in 'Madame Bovary', turned to the exotic background of Ancient Carthage for his next novel, 'Salammbô', Visconti turned to a moment in contemporary Italian history which was very similar to the Anti-Fascist Resistance that they had just been living through. The character of the Marquis Ussoni, played by Massimo Girotti, is the equivalent of the Partisan leader in the years when the Germans were being chased from Italy. And in the love story between the dissolute young Hapsburg officer Franz Mahler (Farley Granger) and the 'wanton Countess' (Valli), we have a portrait of bourgeois values that were not perhaps to disappear quite as soon as Franz prophesied in the dramatic scene in Verona. The Countess has followed after him and finds him drunk and in the company of a young whore who he is paying with money the Countess has given him (and which she had taken from the Italian patriots' funds that her cousin had entrusted to her). Here are Franz's words to the Countess Livia: 'Who am I? How do I live? By what means?...' 'With the money that I procure in two ways...that which women give me...and that which I steal by cheating at cards. I am a master in both techniques. I also have a few other qualities...I am a deserter because I am a coward. And I don't care about being either. What does it matter to me if today my compatriots have won a battle in a place called Custoza...when I know they will lose the war...and not just the war. And Austria in a few years time will be finished, and a whole world will disappear. That world to which you and I belong. And the new world which your cousin talks about has no interest for me. It's much better not to get mixed up in it...and enjoy one's pleasure where one can find it. You must agree with me anyway or you wouldn't have given me money to pay for an hour of love'.

In Franz we have the 'hero' of a realist novel. Visconti, however, brought to bear all his art as film director and also not a little of his experience with the theatre, both in drama and opera. He has said 'my films always have something theatrical in them and my theatrical productions always have something cinematic'. Some of the dialogue in SENSU which was repeated over and over again--such as the memorable line 'We aren't in Venice any more' when Franz is trying to convince the Countess to find him money to bribe his way out of battle--or some of Franz's seemingly exaggerated poses and gestures (which, it's true, Farley Granger was not experienced enough to carry off), give one the mood of opera. And to speak of melodrama in the country of Verdi is not deprecatory. The mood of SENSU is set in the opening scene at La Fenice Theatre in Venice during a performance of IL TROVATORE when the patriots stage an anti-hapsburg demonstration.

Luigi Chiarini, a leading figure in Italian criticism, whose schooling was with Crocean Idealism, and who therefore brings a Hegelian approach to the cinema, refuted Aristarco's claim that SENSU marked the passage from neo-realism to realism. Chiarini wanted neo-realism to survive in its purest form and he insisted on the specifico filmico which means that no literary or theatrical influence should be imposed on the film medium. In other words he preferred Pudovkin's theories to Eisenstein's. The debate on SENSU was carried on not only in the film magazines. When Pratolini's novel 'Metello' appeared (the first volume of an intended trilogy telling the story of the Italian proletariat from the Risorgimento to the present day), many leftwing literary critics invented a parallel between Pratolini's novel and Visconti's film. There was perhaps a good deal of wishful thinking in their theory that Italian cinema and literature had arrived at Realism. And yet SENSU was a very important step forward. . . .

SENSU also inaugurated a new approach by Italian artists to heroics. Nobody before Visconti had dared to show an Italian defeat on the screen... (end of excerpt)

CREDITS: Scenario; Visconti, from novel of the same title (SENSU) by Camillo Boito; Adaptation: Visconti and Suso d'Amico (daughter of a leading Italian film critic); English Dialog: Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles; Photography: G.R. Aldo (killed during filming of the battle); Robert Krasker; Historic reconstruction: Gino Brosio; Decor: Ottavio Scotti; Costumes: Marcel Escoffier and Piero Tosi; Music: Fragments of Bruckner's 7th Symphony; Production: Lux Film; Editor: M. Serandrai.

CAST:

Countess Livia Serpieri (Alida Valli); Lt. Franz Mahler (Farley Granger); Marquis Roberto Ussoni (the partisan leader), Massimo Girotti; Count Serpieri (Heinz Moog); Laura (Rina Morelli); Clara (Marcelle Mariani).

FILMOGRAPHY of Visconti: born in Milan, 1906; assistant to French director Jean Renoir in 1936 for Party in the Country and Lower Depths; Adaptation of L'Amante du Gramigna from a novel by Giovanni Verga refused by the Mussolini censors; adapted THE POSTMAN (ALWAYS RINGS TWICE) from the James M. Cain novel under the title OSSESSIONE 1942. Visconti's treatment of the story photographed in somber grays of the Po Valley is generally taken as dating the beginning of the "neo-realist" movement in Italian film. 1945: DAYS OF GLORY (Giorni de Gloria); 1948: LA TERRA TREMA (Trembling Earth), from Verga's I Malavoglia; the high point of the neo-realist film (along with the Zavattini-DeSica BICYCLE THIEF); 1951: BELLISSIMA (assistant director Francesco Rosi); 1953: sketch in WE ARE WOMEN; 1954: SENSU; 1957: WHITE NIGHTS (from the Dostoevsky novel; with Maria Schell, Marcello Mastroianni); 1960: ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS; 1962: IL LAVORO (Work) episode in BOCCACCIO 70; 1963: THE LEOPARD. Visconti is working now on the Dino de Laurentis super-production THE BIBLE, doing the sketch JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS. He also has under preparation an adaptation of Camus' THE STRANGER.

One of the major figures of the Italian cinema of the last two decades has been Luchino Visconti, whose works are difficult to classify within the rubric of "neo-realism" or critical realism or any other kind of realistic cinema, even though his early films have been faithful to the details of Italian social life, enough to earn him the reputation of being the Italian Zola. This millionaire nobleman who is at the same time a Marxist intellectual (Togliatti, however, was one of the bitterest critics of his films), has also dominated the Italian stage with his direction and presentation of Chekhov, Pirandello and Sartre. As you can see from SENSU, Visconti's tendency toward "theatricality" and excess in decor and melodrama is at once very Italian, Melodrama would not be considered a defective means in the country of Verdi and opera. Another key to understanding Visconti's perspective is his tendency to give to the cinema the dimension of the novel. All his films are of exceptional length in order to provide dramatic density and psychological duration. (He disclaims any connection with the American version of THE LEOPARD, which had 40 minutes lopped off, as did the original version of ROCCO as well). Neo-romanticism has been suggested as a better term to describe his work than neo-realism. One might thus excuse the excessive character of Mahler (Farley Granger) in the film, as being deliberately overdone in view of the irony of his situation, the type of man "who might have been a martyr to something noble and beautiful" but whose historic situation could only turn someone of his lucidity into a scrupulous cynic and egoist.

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