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# films

by Andrew Sarris

Luchino Visconti's "SENSO" had never really been released in America before, but now the Elgin Theatre (at Eighth Avenue and 19th Street) has unveiled a version Visconti himself has approved. Sharp-eyed viewers may have caught an abridged version of "Senso" under the lurid title of "The Wanton Contessa," a fate all too typical of Visconti's films in America. Visconti's first film — "Osessione" — is still to be released stateside because of a squabble with the James M. Cain estate over "The Postman Always Rings Twice," the novel from which "Osessione" was freely adapted. As it is, "Osessione" came out three years before Roberto Rossellini's "Open City," and thus in Europe at least Visconti was considered Rossellini's pre-eminent predecessor rather than, in the American view, his decadent descendant. Nor did Visconti receive any credit in America for

"La Terra Trema," (1948) until a couple of years ago when Dan Talbot showed it at the New Yorker Theatre in a period when neorealism was less a new wave than an old joke. When "Senso" was shown in Europe in the mid-'50s, it marked for some critics a transition in Italian cinema from neorealism to neoromanticism. Few critics of that era suspected that Fellini's "La Strada" was the wave of the Italian future in the transition from neorealism to poetic fantasy, all of which is just a lot of water under the Bridge of Sighs. "Senso," like any other film, must ultimately take its chances out of context of its own time. The easiest adjective that comes to mind to describe "Senso" is "operatic." Unfortunately, every Italian movie with at least one scene in an opera house is described as operatic, but nonetheless the adjective applies to no other director so aptly as it does to Visconti both in the sense of larger than life emotions and a fine melodic line of dramatic development. This kind of rousing cinema has its intellectual limitations, of course. For example, there is that memorable moment when Alida Valli's dis-

traught countess stands at the door of what she thinks is her lover's lodgings. Her husband, knowing that a mysterious note has summoned her to this rendezvous, follows her to the door and waits with her for it to be opened. The door opens to reveal the countess's patriotic cousin who is in hiding from the hated Austrians. The note that promised romantic dalliance for the countess and threatened catastrophic cuckoldry turns out to be merely the medium of a political conspiracy. Her nerves torn to shreds, the countess bursts into hysterical sobs prompted partly by relief at not being caught in a compromising situation and partly by an irrational disappointment at not finding her lover. Both her husband and her cousin misunderstand her tears as the consequence of conspiratorial tension in a noble cause. Alida Valli acts the scene so beautifully that she imbues it with a deliciously Stendhalian irony, but the very conception of the scene marks Visconti as an artist with a divided vision of the world, and a divided vision, however brilliant, is not the equal of a unified one. Thus if I rank Ophuls, Mizoguchi, and Renoir above Visconti it is because they see life as a whole and thus treat sex and statecraft as parallel lines rather than ironic tangents.

The ultimate casting of the leads in "Senso" has an irony all its own. Visconti had persuaded Marlon Brando and Ingrid Bergman to do the leads, but Visconti's producer demurred. He preferred Farley Granger and Alida Valli! And so it was, and it all has come out in the wash after 15 years, but the notion of producers as crafty calculators suffered a serious blow when Brando and Bergman were turned away from the set of "Senso." Finally, it is gratifying to hail the Elgin Theatre from rising out of the rubble of ethnic and exploitative policies to take its place as one of the more venturesome art-houses in the city.