

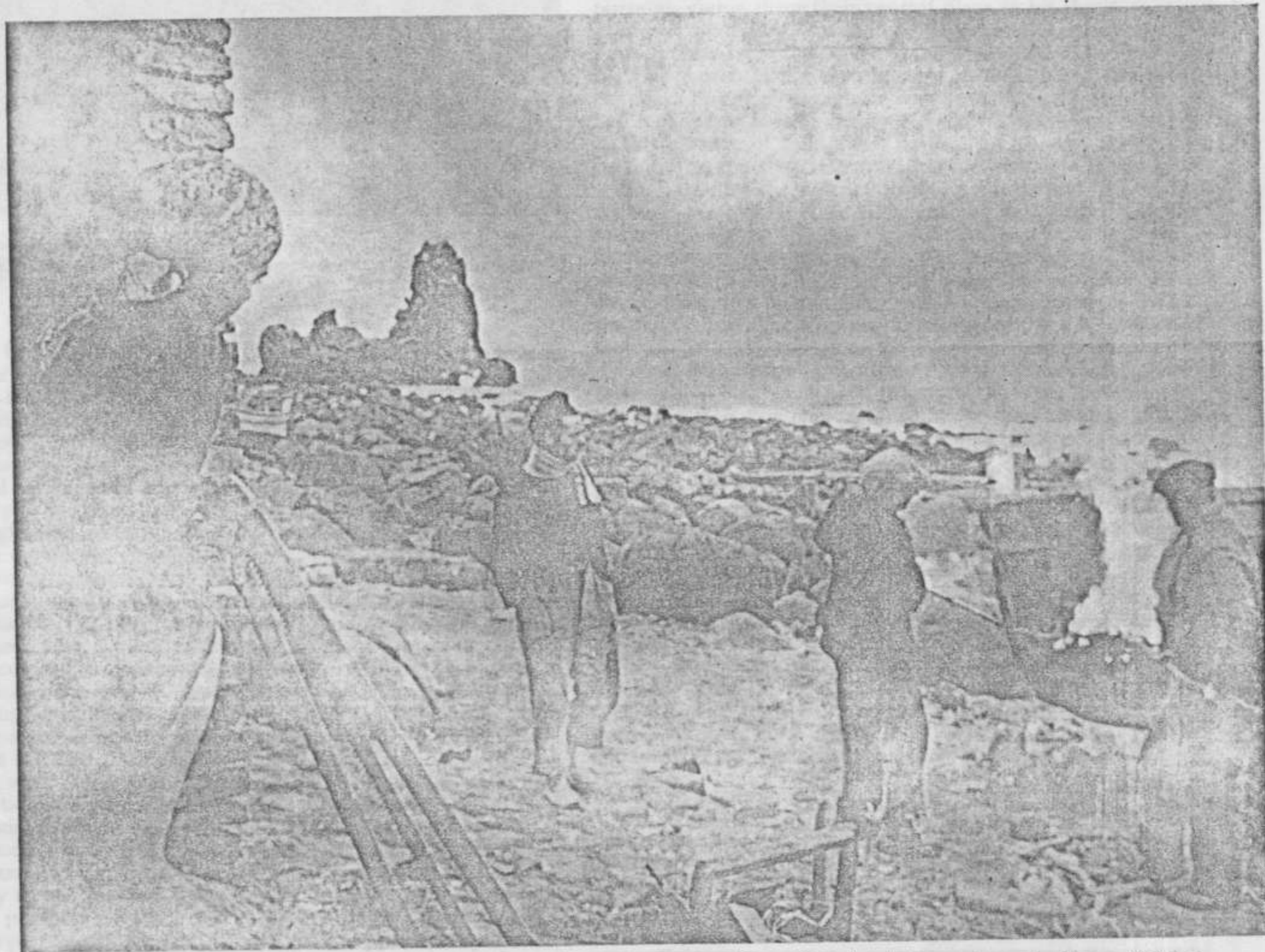
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Rediscovery (2)

ALAIN TANNER

LA TERRA TREMA



"La Terra Trema": the last act. "... Now the Valastros have nothing left, nothing but their eyes to weep with ... And one day 'Ntoni goes down to the shore to have another look at his boat ..."

Luchino Visconti's film about Sicily, made by the Communists and meant to rouse the Italian rich to action on behalf of the poorest fishermen ... had dragged out its interminably sordid "shots" for nearly three hours when many of the critics became thoroughly bored with it ... Italian realism is tending to turn all Italian films into monotonous documentaries. (*Manchester Guardian* report on the showing of *La Terra Trema* at the Venice Festival, 1948.)

THERE are two good reasons for "rediscovering" Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema*. Until the recent National Film Theatre showing, the film had been known in this country—in so far as it was known at all—only in a version dubbed into Italian, and drastically cut down from its

original two-and-three-quarter hour running time to what the Italian distributors regarded as more commercial proportions. With the original Sicilian dialogue suppressed, and a total of about forty-five minutes missing, this version sacrificed much of the film's atmosphere, its tempo and tonality. Seeing it in this form, one could have only a vague idea of the picture's real quality. Moreover, *La Terra Trema* belongs to that range of films whose innovations are so striking that they demand, in a sense, the perspective of time. It is almost ten years since Visconti made this picture, yet it still seems too soon for anything in the nature of a final judgment. All the same, it must be recognised that a particular epoch in the neo-realist cinema has now ended, whatever the reasons may be. *La Terra Trema* belongs to a period already

Sight + Sound?



Last meeting between Nicola, the bricklayer, and Mara. "From now on", he says, "your window will always be closed . . . just as my heart is closed".

past, but one worth revisiting because the themes and methods of the neo-realist film-makers remain as relevant now as they were ten years ago.

With *La Terra Trema*, Visconti developed the neo-realist approach to a dramatic subject in its most extreme form: the players, the lines they speak, the places they live in, the whole social background and motivation, depart hardly at all from reality. We shall see later how this "real" scene was re-thought and re-interpreted by the director. First, though, some details are necessary.

Visconti originally went to Sicily for a few weeks, with the idea of filming a short documentary; later, probably through his discovery of the problems of the island, and the imaginative response they aroused in him, his original project was transformed into an adventure not unlike that of Eisenstein in Mexico. The film he then proposed was to be in three parts, dealing with the struggles of the fishermen, the peasants and the miners to achieve freedom from economic exploitation. These three episodes, three stories following roughly parallel lines, would have made up a single work. Sicily gave Visconti a particular setting; and above all it presented a special kind of social problem: the condition of the workers and peasants in a society still to some extent feudal. It was these conditions that aroused the polemicist in Visconti, giving him the opportunity to put forward a solution in line with his general left-wing position. But *La Terra Trema*, because it ends on an apparent defeat, was not unanimously approved by Italian left-wing critics.

Visconti experienced all kinds of difficulties, and was able to complete only the first of his three episodes—that of the sea—which he expanded into a whole film. This was shot entirely on location, in the little fishing village of Aci Trezza, from the beginning of November, 1947, to the end of May, 1948.

2

The basis of the story is Giovanni Verga's novel *I Malavoglia*—and Visconti's film remains surprisingly true to the letter of this original, however far it departs from it in spirit. *I Malavoglia* is a detailed and sombre study of the ruin of a family of fishermen, the disasters brought about by their own maladroit attempts to better their condition. "This sincere and dispassionate study", as Verga described it in his preface,

Lucia, the younger sister.

seems to have been an end in itself for the novelist. He gives the reader a picture of a certain kind of life, but he is not concerned with suggesting solutions to the problems he raises. Many of the characters and situations of the film, as well as some of the dialogue and some passages in the Italian commentary, come directly from the novel, whose action is also set in the village of Trezza. But in Visconti's film all these elements serve another purpose. The artist is no longer content with the role of the objective, dispassionate observer: rather, he organises the facts of the situation for his own purpose, giving them their central place in his thesis.

Three quarters of a century separate the characters of *I Malavoglia* from the Valastro family of Visconti's film, and the two works in themselves sum up a period of historical change. Fatalism has given way to a struggle whose ends and means can now be clearly defined. The clearest example of this passage of time, from naturalism to neo-realism, can be found in the shift in the central character (in the novel it is the father, in the film the young nephew) and in the very different attitude he takes. The grandfather, who in the film symbolises the past, is an authentic Verga character. He is all for accepting things as they are; he represents a kind of antiquated "wisdom"; he talks only in proverbs which sound false and meaningless to his young relations. When the family leave for Catania to mortgage the house, so that they can go into business on their own account, he is asleep in his chair and must be pulled out of it to follow them. When their fishing tackle is lost in the storm, he is the first to realise the probable consequences since he has had so little faith in the enterprise. Later, when the younger brother, Cola, goes away, the old man is finished.

'Ntoni, the film's hero, is essentially a character developed by Visconti. He is the first to understand the methods of the dealers in the fish market, to realise just how the fishermen are being exploited by these middlemen. Though he makes only clumsy efforts to break the economic stranglehold, though his revolt ends in failure, it would be wrong to regard the film's conclusion as a wholly pessimistic one. *La Terra Trema* is not just the story of a defeat, but of the lessons learnt from defeat; and if 'Ntoni's ultimate victory has no place within the framework of the film, it is because Visconti has been careful not to anticipate events. 'Ntoni knows why he has failed, as his final dialogue with the little girl makes apparent*: he sees clearly what is at stake. In the novel,

* "... One day, though, people will understand that I was right. Then they will realise that the things that have happened to me, the losses I've suffered, have a meaning for them. We must learn to help each other, to work together. It is only then that we will be able to go forward".





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'Ntoni has finally to leave the village, where there is no longer any place for him. But in the film, preparing to return to work, he looks up at the sky and says to his sister: "Good fishing weather". Then, on the boat, a shot of 'Ntoni's face, resolute and determined, gives way to the final image: the fishing boats cut through the water, the sound track takes up the beat of the oars. Irresistibly, we have the sense of a movement forwards. "Get this into your head", 'Ntoni has said earlier to his brother, "it is here that we must stay and fight". So the impression left by the film is of an adventure begun rather than an attempt defeated.

3

Where Verga's novel is fatalistic, the film shows the working of the economic machine, the techniques of exploitation. The dealers, the middle-men, as a result play a more sizeable part in Visconti's film than in the novel. All the factors of the drama are immediately crystallised in this economic problem, which becomes the axis on which the whole film turns. Economic problems, however, are also and inevitably social problems, particularly in a community so dependent on tradition, so bound mentally and emotionally to the past. Although Visconti has not overtly emphasised these traditional aspects of Sicilian life, they run through the film like an undercurrent, a motive force never far beneath the surface. We see, for instance, no religious ceremonies, but we are constantly aware of the strength of religious feeling in the community. 'Ntoni's enterprise is regarded by the old women as a defiance of the divine will. "God has punished you", one of them says to him after the Valastros' defeat, "and because of your pride you have become the lowest family in Trezza". "You get used to injustice", say the old people, "it becomes a habit". When the Valastros go to Catania to set up their fishing business, "No-one follows them, since when you are poor you are also frightened: there is always worse to come". And Mara, the sister, facing the disaster that has struck them, sees it only as "the Will of God".

Resignation to poverty as part of the natural order of things, fear of any change—one can see where these feelings originate. If rebellion is sacrilege, then suffering and poverty come as a punishment, are somehow shameful. After the catastrophe of the storm, the women stay shuttered within the house, hiding from the eyes of the village. Eviction from their home, the forced sale of their possessions, comes as the final humiliation: it is this defeat rather than mere hunger

that forces 'Ntoni to swallow his pride, to go back to work for the dealers. Love is equally subject to social law, and it is not simply a difference in income that separates Nicola, the bricklayer, from Mara, both when she seems likely to become rich and again when she faces the extreme of poverty.

The script, then, defines a pattern of interlocking social and economic forces which set a series of events in motion: once this process is started, the wheels turn automatically, the dramatic devices merely accelerating the working of the machinery. Once the characters and initial situation are established—'Ntoni's revolt, the setting up of the family business, its failure after the storm—the other disasters that strike the Valastros all follow logically and inevitably. The family's slow disintegration is not something imaginatively plotted by the screen-writer; instead, it results from a close analysis of the way in which a society, in a given set of circumstances, will reject those who try to resist its laws. Above all, it can deprive them of their only defence: the right to work. Afraid of going against the dealers, the other fishermen refuse to give Valastro employment; they have not learnt the need for solidarity, but are governed by their fear of losing what little they have.

The Valastros now become the victims of those always ready to exploit suffering. Forced to sell their last few barrels of fish, they must take any price offered them. The younger brother, Cola, weary of his aimless and destitute existence, emigrates illegally, victim of a racketeer who finds the village the ideal territory for his operations. As for the sister, Lucia, she lets herself be seduced by Don Salvatore, the village policeman, rather than face the prospect of a drab, poverty-enforced spinsterhood. 'Ntoni, for his part, can find friends only among the idlers who hang about the local bars. Finally, when the family can no longer meet its obligations, the bank has to seize the house itself. Meanwhile, the elders take refuge in a dour and sorrowful silence, and the children helplessly look on at disaster. Earlier, when his associates showed some concern at 'Ntoni's first successes, the chief dealer reassured them: "As the worm says to the stone, give me time and I will bore a hole in you".

As can be seen, the script owes more to dialectic—to, it could be said, dialectical materialism—than to the working of imagination. It is an object lesson, even if superficially it seems an object lesson in failure. It is not surprising to learn that such a script was composed on the spot, day by day. As Visconti has himself said, it would have been preposterous to write these dialogues in a Roman drawing-room; and, at the same time, only deep and direct knowledge of the subject could make such a narrative feasible.

The film's characters, as a result, have nothing extraordinary about them. That they are put to the service of a particular thesis does not detract from their truth, nor the verisimilitude of what happens to them. They are, essentially, types representative of the society that has created them.

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4

I said earlier that Visconti here developed neo-realist methods to their extreme limits. The same characteristic appears in the actual technique of the film, at least in the particular rhythm he has given it. This extreme slowness is not simply something designed to give the picture its special grandeur, its almost majestic pace. It may in the end achieve this effect, but its primary purpose is uncompromisingly to re-create the movement of life itself, to give to even the slightest gesture its proper duration and so its due significance and meaning. It should not be deduced from this, however, that the style of the film is a documentary one. *La Terra Trema* is not simply a fictionalised documentary on the lives of Sicilian fishermen. Its slow pacing, which permits it to explore situations so thoroughly, also serves a dramatic demand. This is most apparent in the second half of the film, when the sombre rhythms seem to suggest the whole weight of time, the oppressive burden of despair. Particularly notable is the long and admirable scene, cut from the Italian version, of the conversation between the two brothers before Cola's departure.

Visconti, obviously enough, is not concerned only with the daily life of the village but with the moral and social situation of the people of Trezza. The actual work of fishing, for instance, is only suggested; the return of the men, coming back exhausted to their homes or going to the fish market to see what becomes of the fruits of their labour, is described at length. Similarly, when the Valastros and their friends salt their own fish for the first time, the emphasis is on their delight and triumph rather than the work itself.

This method of allowing actions to develop at their natural pace, rather than breaking them up for reconstruction in the cutting room, also indicates the director's steady control over the feelings he wants to express. He never allows emotion to take a free hand; he rejects the tactics by which the cinema habitually magnifies emotion, the underlining through a sharp editing technique. Sentimentality is

rigorously excluded, and the film consistently addresses itself to the mind rather than the heart. (This, incidentally, is particularly noticeable in the treatment of the dealers, the exploiters, where the characterisation is wholly free from hatred.) Visconti is not here presenting an impassioned anecdote: he is painting a social fresco on a grand scale. The passion is there, certainly, but it is in the idea rather than its expression, and if the film seems detached it is simply because Visconti has taken that step backwards which enables the artist to see his subject in a true perspective. Detachment, in effect, amounts here to mastery of the material: the "real" scene has been interpreted in order to give us its essence. And the fact that almost every shot has been planned as an aesthetic composition does not mean that the emphasis is negatively picturesque. Rather, it establishes for us the quality of the setting and the people. We feel the presence of man in every shot—even in those few from which, literally speaking, he is absent.

It is difficult to write about *La Terra Trema* without mentioning G. R. Aldo's part in its achievement. Aldo, whose first film this was, had previously worked in the theatre as a still photographer. Although this detail is significant, it would be a mistake to assume from it that the camerawork is over-indulged, allowed to become an end in itself. Without insisting on the technical skill needed to achieve such depth of focus within the confining walls of the little houses, or the takes lasting several minutes with complex camera movements in three directions, it is important to note that every shot is so designed as to extract the maximum value from its subject. Through this precise, direct composition, the whole setting comes to life for us. This impression is further strengthened by the composition of the sound track, the use of natural sounds and voices and the striking use of background sound to give an additional impression of depth to the images. The whole film vibrates with life, and in this sense Visconti makes positive his own statement: "The cinema that interests me is the anthropomorphic cinema".

Finally, the problem of the playing is posed and resolved in the same line. Visconti did not want merely to use non-professional players: he wanted his film to be acted by the fishermen of Trezza themselves. The distinction is between the usual method of using amateurs, mainly with the object of "deglamorising" the actor, and a method closer to that of documentary. Here again, though, the handling of the actors falls into line with the whole approach of the film: the transition is from pure realism to the most conscious stylistic refinement.

The director employing non-professionals can normally profit from their inexperience, letting his camera catch the spontaneous moment of truth. The casting of *La Terra Trema* was obviously carefully considered, and the fact that the actors were going through familiar actions clearly made their task easier. At the same time, the film's style, the sheer length of the shots and the part played by the dialogue, meant that the players had genuinely to act. They had to relive their daily life on the screen, and also to give it dramatic substance. Visconti's methods equally ruled out any possibility of covering up defects later, building up a dramatic effect in the editing. One can imagine the extraordinary efforts demanded of both the players and the director, but it is nonetheless in this field that one notes the film's occasional weaknesses. The actors sometimes seem handicapped by the strict dramatic framework to which they must conform. This is merely a point of detail; and the final impression is of the extraordinary depth of humanity and feeling conveyed by these non-professionals. The director's demands appear

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After the storm: "... The debts must now be paid, says the grandfather, but Ntoni and his younger brothers have not yet taken in the full extent of the disaster".