

## Document Citation

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**SENSO**

**1954**

**125 min. Technicolor**

*Directed by Luchino Visconti; screenplay by Visconti and Suso Cecchi d'Amico based on a novel by Camillo Boito; photography by G. R. Aldo and Robert Krasker; music from Anton Bruckner's Seventh Symphony directed by Franco Ferrara. With Alida Valli, Farley Granger, Massimo Girotti, Heinz Moog, Christian Marquand, Sergio Fantoni. Italian dialog with English subtitles.*



"Senso" is a masterwork that has been called the first true film novel, and it is one of the few attempts to treat a historical subject with a realistic approach. As Visconti claimed when he began work on the film, "I shall not abandon the line of cinematographic realism which I have followed to this day, nor lose contact with my characters just because they wear 19th Century costumes." The story is freely adapted from a tale by Camillo Boito and portrays the moral and mental breakdown of a Venetian countess who is swept into such a state of passion by an Austrian officer that she betrays her ideals, and is in return betrayed by her lover. She becomes insane and her lover is executed as a deserter.

Visconti develops his story along two separate lines: the "private theme" involving the three central characters — the countess, her patriot cousin, and her Austrian officer-lover; and the "public theme" involving the historical events of the Third War of Italian Independence in 1866. The characters are developed in Marxian terms: The Countess Serpieri (Alida Valli) representing the total moral decay of Venetian aristocracy as she abandons her country in pursuit of an enemy lover; Lt. Mahler (Farley Granger), an Austrian Hapsburg officer who is a cynical military bourgeois living off the aristocracy; and the Marquis Ussoni (Massimo Girotti), a patriot of the upper class, intellectually aware of its descending destiny and willing to accept leadership from among the ascending lower class.

The historical theme is developed with an exacting attention to detail, not only in its reconstruction of settings, but its use of color to accent the meaning and undercurrent of the feelings of its characters. It was the first color film for both Visconti and his cameraman G. R. Aldo. Aldo died during the filming and was replaced by Robert Krasker whose credits include work on "Henry V," "The Third Man," "Romeo and Juliet," "Billy Budd" and "The Collector." The final results of Visconti's approach are not entirely successful, but there are indications the fault rests not with Visconti, but with his producer and the Italian censors.

"Senso" was the first Italian film to center about a major Italian military defeat (the Battle of Custoza), and it suffered difficulties with both the producer and the censors from its very beginning. The government resented an approach that drew an obvious parallel with recent Italian history, and exercised major cuts in the battle sequence. The producer demanded that the Austrian officer be executed at the ending of the film, though this was not Visconti's intention and required considerable re-filming and the scrapping of an already elaborate and costly finale. A press and public uproar following the Venice Festival premiere delayed release for several months and resulted in further cuts while a battle raged among the critics. As a result, "Senso" was never given a wide release and until now has been seen in the U.S. only in a condensed English dubbed version entitled "The Wanton Countess." The version released here has been subtitled from the complete Italian version as shown at Venice.

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