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EIGHTH EXHIBITION MEETING - SEASON 21
 MONDAY, MARCH 31, 1969, AT 8:00 P.M.
 CENTURY THEATRE, 147 DANFORTH AVENUE

LA TERRA TREMA (THE EARTH TREMBLES)

Italy 1948

160 mins b&w 16mm

Production Company: Universalialia. Producer: Salvo D'Angelo. Director: Luchino Visconti. Script: Luchino Visconti, based on the novel "I Malavoglia" by Giovanni Verga. Director of Photography: G. R. Aldo. Camera Operator: Gianni Di Venanzo. Editor: Mario Serandrei. Assistant Directors: Francesco Rosi, Franco Zeffirelli. Music: Willi Ferrero. Production Manager: Anna Davini.

Filmed on location in Aci-Trezza, Sicily, with a cast of non-professionals.

For some years it seemed next to impossible to see a film by Luchino Visconti in Toronto. Although he had been making features for eighteen years, it was only starting with ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS (1960) that his works showed here regularly (we had seen BELLISSIMA, with Anna Lagnani, in 1951). After ROCCO, there were no problems with THE LEOPARD (1963), SANDRA (1965) and THE STRANGER (1967), nor with his The Job episode in BOCCACCIO '70 (1962). But we've never seen his first feature OSSESSIONE (1942), based on James M. Cain's "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and credited with being a powerful forerunner of the neo-realist movement. Nor has SENSO (1954) ever turned up - reportedly an elegant romantic melodrama of the Garibaldi revolution. WHITE NIGHTS (1957) finally got shown by TFS last season (this exercise in formal visual style, with the admirable Mastroianni having to fight Maria Schell's excesses all the way, is generally considered his least successful work). Many believe LA TERRA TREMA to be his masterpiece; those of us who have been reading about it for years and had just about despaired of ever seeing it, were delighted when it recently became available to film societies through the Canadian Film Institute. Naturally TFS booked it at the first opportunity.

Luchino Visconti is an interesting combination - an aristocrat who is also a Marxist. He once assisted Jean Renoir on LES BAS-FONDS and UNE PARTIE DE CAMPAGNE (both shown by TFS) and for many years has been known for his highly regarded theatre and opera productions in Rome and elsewhere.

In 1947 he went to the Sicilian fishing village of Aci-Trezza, intending to shoot a short documentary; he became so absorbed by the lives and problems of the people there that the project was expanded to become the two-hour-and-40-minute feature LA TERRA TREMA. At one point, indeed, Visconti had planned to make an epic trilogy, with feature films about Sicilian peasants and mine-workers as the second and third parts - "the sea, the land, the city"; but this project had to be abandoned, for financial and other reasons (though some critics have suggested that ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS might be considered as a modification of the original city theme).

Visconti based LA TERRA TREMA on a novel by Verga which had been set in this very village but had dealt with its inhabitants of three-quarters of a century before. Whereas Verga had taken a fatalistic view of the tragedies and failures of

Recorded Music provided by Doug Wilson: "La Mer", symphonic poem by Claude Debussy; Arturo Toscanini conducting MBC Symphony Orchestra.

a family of fisher-folk, Visconti's interpretation had a more modern, political orientation. This family, led by the forward-looking son, tries to break away from the exploitation of the wholesalers, the "middlemen" (who pay them a miserable sum for their catch), by setting up an independent business; they fail because they try to "make it on their own" rather than in some form of organized concert with their fellow-fishermen. In spite of this "lesson" - and in spite of the fact that the film virtually ends with the young man saying that some day people will realize he was right and will find a way to act together to solve their plight - the film was still attacked by some left-wing critics as "defeatist".

But the importance of LA TERRA TREMA as a work of film art goes far beyond the political aspect. Determined to make an honest and realistic study of the toil-and-poverty-ruled lives of its characters, Visconti not only filmed in the real locations, but in all the roles he used actual inhabitants of the area, who eloquently portrayed their own lives for the camera. They also spoke, more or less spontaneously, in their own Sicilian dialect, Visconti often simply explaining to them the mood or content of a scene rather than have them memorize set lines. Some critics have compared his use of and respect for real places and people with that of Robert Flaherty; but since he combined this realism with a certain visual stylization ("carefully composed though casual-seeming images"), some have also evoked the name of Eisenstein. There has been a certain amount of critical disagreement on the degree and/or success of this element of stylization in the film. Many feel that it works admirably, adding a dimension of beauty without detracting from the reality; some have thought it obtrusive and "arty".

Stanley Kauffmann in his book "A World on Film" seems to have had a reaction to this aspect different from any others. He says, in part: "(Visconti) has resisted any temptation to make lovely pictures (a worrisome flaw in Flaherty's comparable MAN OF ARAN). The opportunities were plentiful, but Visconti knew that the fleet of boats putting out to sea is not pretty to the fishermen, and the anxious women scanning the horizon for a missing boat do not feel nobly statuesque".

Other comments by Kauffmann:

"Its theme is man's fight to live in the face of the cruelty of nature and of his fellow man...genuinely embraced and lovingly executed. A story either more novel or more complex would have worked against Visconti's purpose: to let the lives of these people flow past, to let the characters create themselves. Before long they are individualized at the same time that they become parts of a community in a routine. We soon turn up the street with them and into their house with the pleasant semi-tedium of familiarity. The style is neo-realism at its best; he has unobtrusively induced these people to give a 'new' (reconstructed) reality to the facts of life as they know them. There are moments throughout that seem a little slow, but our forbearance with them rewards us with the purpose of this tempo: the recreation of a rhythm of slow, oceanic swells...

"Visconti's honesty is the chief beauty of the film. Unlike much of his work since then, there is no patent exploitation of grim materials, no attempt at dazzling virtuoso direction. There is nothing here but sheer concern, effectively expressed in self-effacing art...To see LA TERRA TREMA so belatedly, out of sequence in the chronology of the Italian film, is to have an explanatory light cast on much that has happened since. For instance, it is now possible to be even fonder of De Seta's BANDITS OF ORGOSOLO, which deals with Sardinian shepherds, or Olmi's

two films about workers in Milan and Sicily [IL POSTO and THE FIANCES]. They honour Visconti by having learned well from him."

Predictably, LA TERRA TREMA was not a success with the Italian public; indeed it has had very restricted showing anywhere, and that mostly at film festivals, film societies and the odd very enterprising art-cinema. Attacked by both Left and Right, frowned upon by the Italian Government, in some versions cut or Italian-dubbed, called slow, boring and overlong (note: GONE WITH THE WIND is one hour longer!), it has had a stormy passage. But in the majority of critical opinion it has weathered the test of time, and surely stands (with Rossellini's OPEN CITY and PAISAN, and De Sica's SHOE SHINE, THE BICYCLE THIEF and UMBERTO D.) as one of the milestones of Italian Neo-realism.

- GGP

A Letter from the Family Valastro,
the main participants in LA TERRA TREMA

"The Family Valastro wishes to express publicly its gratitude to Luchino Visconti and his collaborators for making their story known to Italy and the world through LA TERRA TREMA.

"We are profoundly grateful for the experience we underwent together, from which we have reaped the highest hopes for our future.

"Although our family, provisionally united for the film, has had to separate now, we remain permanently united in the memory of the extraordinary adventure we had the good fortune to share."

References

Visconti - Geoffrey Nowell-Smith
A World on Film - Stanley Kauffmann
Motion, Spring 1962
Film Quarterly, Spring 1960
Sight and Sound, February 1951, Spring 1956, Spring 1957, Winter 1960-61
National Film Theatre (London) Notes: World Cinema season, November 1956 -
February 1957

EVALUATIONS OF THE MARCH 10 PROGRAMME

<u>Film</u>	<u>Excel- lent</u>	<u>Very Good</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Total Ballots</u>	<u>Average Rating</u>
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