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SPRING TERM

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LA TERRA TREMA - Luchino Visconti
(Sicily) 1948 - 180 minutes

Script and direction	Luchino Visconti
Photography	G. R. Aldo
Sound	Vittorio Trentino
Editing	Mario Serandrei
Assistant directors	Francesco Rosi and Franco Zeffirelli
Camera operator	Gianni di Venanzo

(Shot on location in Aci Trezza near Catania -
November 1947 - May 1948.)

It is interesting to see the close connection which exists between the film-making of the neorealist period and the best of Italian films today. The impact of the Italian cinema has been felt most strongly during the 1945-52 years of neorealism and the recent period, since about 1959, which has reflected an impressive combination of noteworthy films from established directors like Antonioni and Fellini along with the emergence of important new directors like Olmi, Pasolini and Rosi.

For example, Gianni di Venanzo who gained his first experience as assistant cameraman under the leading directors and photographers of the neorealist period emerged as the leading Italian photographer during the recent years.* On Rome Open City and Paisa (Rossellini), Caccia Tragica (de Santis) and Osessione and La Terra Trema (Visconti) - he worked with other young cineastes with whom he was to collaborate so successfully during the more recent period. The impressive list includes 8½ and Giulietta of the Spirits with Fellini (Rossellini's former script-writer) and the entire 1953-63 period with Antonioni (with the single exception of L'Avventura.)

* Footnote: If di Venanzo is currently the 'first' cameraman of the Italian cinema, Giuseppe Rotunno must surely come second. He too was an assistant to the great Aldo on both Umberto D of De Sica and Visconti's Senso. He has been Visconti's regular cameraman throughout the 1957-63 period including The Leopard in 1963.

In the case of La Terra Trema which was filmed in Sicily, G.R. Aldo, the ('still') photographer, began his short but distinguished career in the cinema on this film with di Venanzo as his assistant, while Francesco Rosi and Franco Zeffereilli served as assistant directors. And apparently many of the best Italian films of recent years have really been 'Sicilian'. Evidently the combination of bright sunlight, primitive social conditions and the natural acting ability of the people make it the ideal location for filming. Visconti himself returned there in 1963 to film The Leopard, but it is the director Francesco Rosi (with di Venanzo as cameraman) who has most clearly carried on the tradition of La Terra Trema. Thus, Salvatore Giuliano (1961) takes place during the very same period in Sicilian history (in flashback) and like La Terra Trema centres on the efforts of a young man to break out of an almost 'feudal' social system which extends back many centuries. 'Ntoni's rebellion or Giuliano's banditry are merely two sides of the same coin, while Rosi's most recent and less successful film attempts to deal with this identical theme in terms of a poor peasant boy's rise to become a successful bull-fighter in Spain. The Moment of Truth is notable though, as the first excursion into colour for both Rosi and di Venanzo.

Chiarini in his statement on neorealism rightly emphasizes how the movement 'emerged and developed in a climate of militant political struggle'. During the years 1941-43 Visconti had been a member of a group (including de Santis) writing in the review Cinema (edited by Mussolini's son), who saw themselves inheriting a tradition which extended back to the realist writings of the great Sicilian novelist Giovanni Verga. An adaptation of a short story by Verga was one of the very first film projects which Visconti had submitted for approval to the Fascist ministry. It was rejected. But Ossessione (adapted from James M. Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice), incredible as it may seem, was approved.

As filmed by Visconti in 1942 it became the first landmark of Italian neorealism - a movement which did not properly emerge until after the liberation of Italy and overthrow of the Fascist regime in 1945. Ossessione is certainly the second most impressive directing debut in the history of the cinema - only following behind Orson Welles's Citizen Kane. But all Visconti's film projects during an interim period of five years * had fallen through before he set out for Sicily in 1947 to begin an ambitious new trilogy.

* During this period he was quite active in the theatre - (see over).

Planned as the filmic expression of a strongly left-wing viewpoint, La Terra Trema was never completed. The films about the miners and the peasants were never even begun and the only completed film the Episodio del Mare ('episode of the sea') assumed the title of the entire trilogy - 'The Earth Trembles'. The negative conclusion of this part had been planned to lead on to the more optimistic finale of the peasant episode and of the film as a whole.

On the surface Visconti's first film, Ossessione, would seem to have little in common with the slow-paced examination of life in a small Sicilian fishing village. One could point to obvious contrasts in pacing and use of actors (vs non-professionals), in characterisation and location (the Po River Valley in the North vs. Sicily.) Yet the more 'conventional' approach of the earlier film serves to clarify the theme which is fundamental to Visconti and helps us to a better understanding of his second film.

Gino in Ossessione is torn between his love for Giovanna, reflecting his wish to settle down, and his friendship for L'espagnol, reflecting his love of travel and enjoyment of his previously rootless existence. And at the heart of La Terra Trema is a similar division between the 'man's world' of work and adventure (on the sea) and the 'woman's world' of home and security. The form of the film is based on the contrast between these two worlds, with most of the scenes taking place either in the Valastro home or at the fishing boats (on the beach or at sea).

So uncompromisingly realistic is Visconti's approach that the drama and conflicts always appear to grow naturally out of situations and are carefully placed within locations and surroundings. A highly mobile camera depending especially upon long panning shots is used to place characters in relation to the environment. But the generally long takes combined with Visconti's careful sense of composition requires from his 'fisherman-actors' a naturalness and acting ability in front of the camera which even professional actors rarely achieve. The remarkable authenticity of performance which Visconti was able to extract from his Sicilians speaking their native dialect is truly astonishing and entirely justifies his decision not to use professionals.

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In keeping with his overall approach, Visconti had no pre-established screen-play. Rather he worked closely with the fishermen in planning or improvising dialogue which would be appropriate for each scene or situation as it arose. He did not merely 'manipulate' the fishermen and dub in the voices of actors afterwards, as had been done in other so-called neorealist films.

Visconti excellently described his approach in an interview published in Sight and Sound (Spring-Summer 1959):

"The use of non-professional players isn't an indispensable part of neorealism. Certainly, you can take 'real' people straight from the street who match the character you want exactly, but then the problem becomes how to make them into actors. I spent hours and hours with my fishermen in La Terra Trema over one little line of dialogue. I wanted the same effect from them that I'd have gotten from an actor. If they had talent, and some certainly did (plus something even more extraordinary - a complete lack of nerves in front of the camera), they could pick up what you were after quite quickly. What I got from them, it would have taken me even longer to get from actors. At the same time, the text wasn't pre-planned: I got them to make it up for me themselves. For instance, I took the two brothers aside and told them: "Now look, this is the situation. You've lost your fishing boat, you're desperate, you haven't enough to eat, you don't know what to do. One of you is young and wants to clear out, the other wants to keep him here ...". With tears in his eyes, then, he said: "If you go further than the Faraglioni (that was the name of the two rocks) the storm will carry you away." Now who'd have been able to write that?"

Andre Bazin was extremely impressed by the acting (see Qu'est-ce Que le Cinema, vol IV) which clearly made demands on the actors comparable with those of the best American films. He probably had in mind Welles and his Mercury Theatre company; for his main point regarding La Terra Trema is the way in which it serves as a landmark in the history of the cinema, as a unique combination of the documentary realism of a Farrebique with the 'aesthetic realism' (camera mobility, depth of focus and formal sense of composition) of a Citizen Kane.

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And like the characterisation, the use of symbols appears to grow naturally out of the realistic fabric of the film. The varying fortunes of the Valastros are reflected in the family photograph. But it is the two pointed rocks in the harbour (the Faraglioni) which grow to assume a dominant symbolic role in the course of the film, yet so natural is this development that it can quite easily be missed. (According to the translator's note to I Malavoglia of Verga on which the film is loosely based: "The faraglioni are tall, often pointed rocks, characteristic of Sicily and Capri: according to tradition they were thrown by the blinded Polyphemus at the fleeing Odysseus.")

In looking for his inspiration to the realist novelists of the 19th century Visconti has helped to reinvigorate the realist film of the 20th Century. In this respect the film suggests the name of Renoir whose adaptations included Nana and La Bete Humaine, (from Zola) and Madame Bovary (from Flaubert). Visconti had even gained his first film experience as assistant director under Renoir on Une Partie de Campagne (from Maupassant). And one might even trace this tradition back to Stroheim's Greed - adapted from Frank Norris's McTeague. However, the tragically more pointed meaning of Visconti's film is that the social conditions in Sicily had hardly changed during the years which separate the Verga novel of 1881 and the film of 1948.

No discussion of Visconti would be complete without reference to his position as the leading director on the Italian stage - equally at home in both the theatre and opera house. During the six years which separate Ossessione and La Terra Trema, for example, he had been active in the theatre. This alternative career of great stature has allowed Visconti to remain uncompromising in his determination to direct only those films which he really wanted to make. This means that in the course of a film career which spans twenty-four years he has directed only eight feature films and two episodes. Unfortunately, this has not aided his film-making and the influence of the theatre has appeared more strongly in his films from Senso (1954) onwards. His films also have been subject to more than their share of the usual hazards from unsympathetic distributors, censors and producers - particularly annoying because of the small number of his films. Thus, Ossessione has never been released commercially in this country: La Terra Trema only in a badly mutilated form, Senso and The Leopard (1963) were badly dubbed and Rocco and his brothers (1960) was shortened.

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His other films include Bellissima (1951) and an episode in Siamo Donne (1952) - both starring Anna Magnani: Le Notte Bianche (1957) from Dostoevski and an episode in Boccaccio (1962). His most recent film, the disappointing* Vaghe Stelle dell'orsa (1965) was awarded the Gold Lion at last year's Venice Festival - probably more as a recognition of Visconti's total contribution to the cinema than for this particular film. Seventeen years earlier at the 1948 Venice Festival La Terra Trema had received merely a second prize - the top award in that year had gone to Olivier's Hamlet.

J.W.F.

* Footnote: Disappointing in my opinion; there are many, particularly in the Latin nations, who disagree with me.

Slade Film Department,
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