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The Stranger *As Film*

Walter Korte

Luchino Visconti was known to have, for many years, an abiding interest in adapting Albert Camus' *The Stranger* for the screen; when the project finally came to pass last year, it was largely as a result of Dino De Laurentiis' patience in waiting for the director to find the time to undertake the rather awesome task. De Laurentiis had acquired the screen rights some eight years ago and felt (along with many of Camus' close friends) that Visconti was the only director for the project. The finished product seems to bear out the producer's judgment. No one would make the case, of course, for the film's being even equal to the novel: as in the case of so much twentieth-century literature, innumerable elements work against a totally satisfying transfer. Therefore, to a certain extent, at least, the usual normative criteria for judging the film qua film do not obtain. Visconti's *Stranger* is not so much a great film as a completely admirable, discreet and perceptive labor of love—by the director and his highly talented crew—with a work they have long admired; but the film does bear the unmistakable stamp of its creator and enables us to draw a number of worthwhile stylistic parallels with his previous work.

At first glance, the tasks involved in moving Camus to the screen would seem overwhelming. Delimitation of scope was necessary from the outset in that, obviously, the book could not withstand substantive alteration. The only change of note made by Visconti is in the nature of a mildly reproachable excrescence: the addition of a brief prologue showing Meursault in his first encounter with the examining magistrate, taken from the opening of Part Two in the novel. This was calculated to allow the director to move more easily into his chronicle of this "very simple case," as Meursault puts it. The otherwise remarkably faithful screenplay, by Visconti's long-time colleague Suso Cecchi D'Amico, assisted by Georges Conchon and Emmanuel Robles, is geared to creating the most cinematic structure possible for what is essentially a novel of inward, patient observation. The script labors under an inherent disadvantage in that Camus was able to evoke a pervasive dreamlike quality by putting a great deal of the protagonist's dialogue into direct discourse, thereby imparting to many scenes a texture of ineluctable suspension. But the disadvantage was simply unavoidable, and by facing the difficulties squarely, and with his usual taste, Visconti succeeded in casting the novel into the best mold for his filmic goals.

The Stranger is the most literally adapted of all Visconti's films which derive from literary sources (it might be remarked incidentally that, of his features, only *Bellissima* and *Vaghe stelle dell'orsa,* known in America as *Sandra,* were written directly for the screen, without any prior basis in literature, and even *Sandra* was inspired by some lines of Leopardi). Much of the credit for its being an ultimately cinematic treatment, however reverent the translation, is doubtless due to Giuseppe Rotunno, who, since the death of Gianni Di Venanzo, is very probably the most talented director of photography in Italy. The Visconti-Rotunno collaboration is a long one and encompasses such films as *Le notti bianche, Rocco and His Brothers,* and *The Leopard.*

With his parallel career in operatic and legitimate theatre in Europe and with his frequent preoccupations with a chamber-cinema format, Visconti has a highly refined penchant for fantastic attention to period detail. In recent years he has used the wide screen to good advantage in heightening this talent; his films (with the exception of *La terra trema,* with its obvious Eisensteinian influences in the form of three-figure compositions and the like) have never been highly edited, and the wide screen has offered him an ideal vehicle for gradual revelation within the shot. The most objectionable stylistic aspect of *The Stranger* seems to me to be directly related to this whole matter of the *mise-en-scene.* This is the excessive use of zooms. Visconti first experimented with this device in *Sandra.* In that film an extraordinary emphasis was placed on gesture, which was given a multiplicity of contextually explicit values. For this reason the use of pronounced zoom shots (at first seemingly arbitrary) was justified: not only to seize a feeling in the act, as it were, but to fix it in its real and illusive duplicity.

The Stranger lacks this important emphasis on gesture and concomitant theatricality; indeed, the whole tone of the recent film is at a far remove from the traces of

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verismo found in *Sandra* and *Rocco*. (It is significant that, in the one scene where Camus might be said to call for a *verismo tableau,* the vigil by the mother's coffin, Visconti atypically intensifies the experience by underplaying it.) In *The Stranger,* zooms excessively abound, from the prologue through the courtroom and prison sequences, and often seem to force themselves on the content rather than grow from it. One thinks particularly of the spectacular and obtrusive shots of old Perez taking a short cut through the fields in the funeral procession, and of the initial confrontation between Meursault, Raymond, Masson, and the Arabs.

But the most important and all-encompassing stylistic consideration of *The Stranger* is Visconti's masterful use of light.Once again,parallels with *Sandra* immediately come to mind (although every print of the earlier film which I have seen in this country has lost much of the high contrast which its director intended). In *Sandra,* Visconti experimented to a much greater extent than in his previous works with relating light to the event. Lighting helped him to understand and dig into the psychology of his characters; the atmosphere that surrounded them revealed their feelings; the penumbra was their natural refuge when they feared to betray to the light the true nature of their mental states.

In *The Stranger,* Visconti does not have to relate light to the event: the all-pervasive Algerian sun takes on a quintessentially active role. The novel's constant preoccupation with this cannot be overemphasized. The descriptive details of the funeral sequences abound with continual insistence on "whiteness" and "light." The mortuary is "bright...with whitewashed walls and a big skylight," and people within it wear white. The effect of light on all this whiteness is to make the room into a place which reverberates painfully against Meursault's eyes. When the doorkeeper puts on the lights he is "almost blinded by the blaze" and later asks that one of the lights be extinguished only to be told it is not possible. Meursault obtains a further insight into the unblinking reality of death and the absurd as he follows his mother's coffin in the merciless sun the following day. The glare which makes him dizzy seems to transform the landscape into something "inhuman"; he feels the sun to be as hostile and inescapable as was the light in the mortuary. The harsh sense of alienation from nature which Visconti's imagery conveys throughout the sun-drenched funeral procession, the visual creation of something "inhuman" in the landscape, calls to mind similar scenes in *The Leopard,* where the Sicilian sun and *ambience* take on an analogous character. Indeed, the long shots of the procession silhouetted against a harsh horizon have direct antecedents in the journey to Donnafugata sequence in the earlier film.

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Meursault encounters this metaphorical landscape of the mind again on the beach outside Algiers (the only part of the film not shot on location). As at the funeral, the sun beats down on him with an insistent, disruptive force and he attempts to elude the stark pressure of light and heat that threatens to unseat his mind. The Arab he encounters appears to lose human integrity and to be allied with the impersonal reality of the sunswept beach in wielding a knife which probes Meursault's eyes with light. Camus' and Visconti's recurring emphasis on a heat and glare that disturb the protagonist's normal processes of thought (together with the novelist's repeated stress on "the forehead," the symbolic source of consciousness) suggest that the pressure in the beach scene is toward a delirium which will destroy the mental poise Meursault has maintained by staying uninvolved. The pressure is dissipated by the five pistol shots, and the way is open for the dominant imagery to move from the sunshine of Meursault's youth to the prison cell evening of his maturity. These final scenes are handled by Visconti with a subtlety of chiaroscuro which one has never before seen in a color film. The increasing isolation is conveyed by gradually isolating Meursault's person until only his face is embodied out of the dark.

Given the unique problems of treating the interior monologue cinematically, Visconti relies on the close-up to a degree without equal in his previous work. The debate will continue to rage over whether cinema can, within its artistic limits, portray or delineate psychological states with any degree of efficacy. Different directors will have different approaches: Antonioni uses a complex polyphonic associative montage in *The Red Desert,* while Visconti and Bergman stay within more "traditional" contexts, for example, the close-up. Both approaches have their own advantages, but with the particular task of adapting Camus, Visconti's mode is certainly the more valuable. With the high reliance on close-up, the title role for the film was of overwhelming importance, particularly for a director who takes such meticulous care in casting and in eliciting the desired performance. (The ultimate proof of Visconti's ability to direct actors lies in his opting for Burt Lancaster—over Olivier and Cherkasov—to play the Prince of Salina in *The Leopard*, and, amazingly, obtaining a more than credible portrayal.) The choice of Marcello Mastroianni as Meursault was most felicitous, despite the fact that he speaks French with a heavy Italian accent and is therefore dubbed by another actor. Mastroianni has so refined his art that he is capable of immediately adjusting to a film in which the drama is not overt, but largely internal; he reveals—rather than conveys—mind and feeling by utmost imagination and subtlety. And on this matter of acting, one cannot resist adding a word on Anna Karina as

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Marie. After years of being overly made-up and largely posed by Godard, it is a revelation to see that she is no mannequin after all, but a talented and sympathetic actress.

The Stranger represents, then, a logical continuation in Visconti's thirty-year film career, during which he has maintained absolute fidelity to his own sources of inspiration and his chosen thematic material. Much can be made of his diversity as a director, the chameleonesque ability to capture the precise tone of another artist's work, to follow a Di Lampedusa adaptation by one of Camus, and to vary each time the angle from which his themes are approached, so that fresh stylistic insights are constantly found. Yet it is the unity of all his work which is the hallmark of Visconti's greatness: the manner in which he is able to go beyond his neorealist beginnings, mix prose and poetry, naturalism and operatic lyricism, while still remaining true to himself. Above all, he applies a wholly individualistic conception of the cinema's stylistic potentialities, running largely at variance with current fashion and practice. *The Stranger* reveals all these sides of his talent; for all its fidelity to Camus, it is unmistakably Visconti's creation.

The Stranger: Anna Karina