Directed by Luchino Visconti
Written by Luchino Visconti, Mario Alicota, Giuseppe De Santis, Gianni Puccini, James M. Cain (novel)
Cinematography by Domenico Scala, Aldo Tonti
Original Music by Giuseppe Rosati

Clara Calamai...Giovanna Bragana
Massimo Girotti...Gino Costa
Dhia Cristiani...Anita
Elio Marcuzzo...Lo spagnolo
Vittorio Duse...L'agente di polizia
Michele Riccardini...Don Remigio
Juan de Landa...Giuseppe Bragana

Luchino Visconti (November 2, 1906, Milan, Lombardy, Italy – March 17, 1976, Rome, Italy) directed 14 feature films and wrote or co-wrote the screenplays for all of them:


James M. Cain (July 1, 1892, Annapolis, Maryland, USA – October 27, 1977, University Park, Maryland, USA) was a novelist, many of whose works were adapted for film, some of them more than once. Some of these adaptations are 2011 “Mildred Pierce” (in production), 2004 Swing My Swing High, My Darling (novel The Postman Always Rings Twice - uncredited), 1998 Szenevedely (novel The Postman Always Rings Twice), 1995 Girl in the Cadillac (novel The Enchanted Isle), 1982 Butterfly (novel), 1981 The Postman Always Rings Twice (novel), 1973 “Double Indemnity” (novel Double Indemnity in Three of a Kind), 1960 “Double Indemnity” (1960) (novel Double Indemnity in Three of a Kind), 1956 “Mildred Pierce” (novel), 1954 “Double Indemnity” (novel), 1946 The Postman Always Rings Twice (novel), 1945 Mildred Pierce (novel Mildred Pierce), 1944 Double Indemnity (novel Double Indemnity in Three of a Kind), 1943 Ossessione (novel The Postman Always Rings Twice - uncredited), 1939 Le dernier tournant (novel The Postman Always Rings Twice), and 1934 She Made Her Bed (story “The Baby in the Ice-Box”)

February 8, 2011 (XXII:4)
Luchino Visconti, Ossessione/Obsession (1943, 140 min)
Domenico Scala (March 26, 1903, Turin, Piedmont, Italy – December 25, 1989) was cinematographer for 60 films, some of which were 1963 Colossus and the Headhunters, 1960 Un eroe del nostro tempo, 1953 The Wayward Wife, 1953 Empty Eyes, 1952 Io, Amleto, 1950 Mountain Smugglers, 1950 Domenica d'agosto, 1950 The Counterfeiters, 1948 Fuga in Francia, 1947 Cronaca near, 1945 Chi l'ha visto?, 1941 Se non son matti non li vogliamo, 1941 Le due tigri, 1941 Il signore a doppio petto, 1941 Un marito per il mese di aprile, 1940 Scarpe grosse, 1939 Le educande di Saint-Cyr, 1939 The Knight of San Marco, 1939 Il barone di Corbò, 1938 Fireworks, 1933 Fanny, 1932 What Scoundrels Men Are!, 1932 The Blue Fleet, and 1931 La segretaria private.


Under the Olive Tree, 1947 Lost Youth, 1943 Osseessione, 1943 La danza del fiuoco, 1942 La fabbrica dell’imprevista, 1942 Via delle cinque lune, 1941 La compagnia della teppa, 1940 The Sinner, 1940 Manon Lescaut, and 1934 Like the Leaves.


The films of Luchino Visconti are among the most stylistically and intellectually influential of postwar Italian cinema. Born a scion of ancient nobility, Visconti integrated the most heterogeneous elements of aristocratic sensibility and taste with a committed Marxist political consciousness, backed by a firm knowledge of Italian class structure. Stylistically, his career follows a trajectory from a uniquely cinematic realism to an operatic theatricalism, from the simple quotidien eloquence of modeled actuality to the heightened effect of lavishly appointed historical melodramas. His career fuses these interests into a mode of expression uniquely Viscontian, prescribing a potent, double-headed realism. Visconti turned out films steadily but rather slowly from 1942 to 1976. His obsessive care with narrative and filmic materials is apparent in the majority of his films.

Osseessione, a treatment (the second and best) of James M. Cain’s The Postman Always Rings Twice. In it the director begins to explore the potential of a long-take style, undoubtedly influenced by Jean Renoir, for whom Visconti worked as an assistant. Having met with the disapproval of the Fascist censors for its depiction of the shabbiness and desperation of Italian provincial life, Osseessione was banned from exhibition.

Like Gramsci, who often returned to the contradictions of the Risorgimento as a key to the social problems of the modern Italian state, Visconti explores that period once more in Il gottopardo, from the Lampedusa novel. An aristocratic Sicilian family undergoes transformation as a result of intermarriage with the middle class at the same time that the Mezzogiorno is undergoing reunification with the North. The bourgeoisie, now ready and able to take over from the dying aristocracy, usurps Garibaldi’s revolution; in this period of transformismo, the revolutionary process will be assimilated into the dominant political structure and defused.


Count don Luchino Visconti di Modrone was born in Milan, Italy, the third son of Giuseppe Visconti and the former Carla Erba. His mother was the daughter of a millionaire industrialist and his father was the son of the Duke of Modrone. His father’s family, wealthy landowners, had received their dukedom from Napoleon. They trace their ancestry to the Visconti who ruled Milan from 1277 to 1447, and on back to Desiderius, father-in-law of Charlemagne.

With his six brothers and sisters, Luchino Visconti grew up in his father’s palazzo in Milan. His education was supervised by his mother. She was a talented musician and he first envisaged a musical career also, studying the cello for ten years in childhood and adolescence. His delight in the theatre and opera also developed in childhood, inspired by the plays and entertainments his father liked to arrange in the palazzo’s private theatre. From the age of seven, he attended performances at La Scala opera house in Milan, which his grandfather and then his uncle had helped to support. Although Visconti usually described his childhood as idyllic, there was discord between his parents. In 1921 they separated for good, and a bitter court battle over Carla Visconti’s share of the Erba fortune ensued. She eventually regained her property but lived thereafter in retirement, the children staying sometimes with her, sometimes with their father.

As a youth Visconti was restless and discontented. He ran away repeatedly from home, and once from a college in Geneva. Hoping that military discipline might bring him under control, his father sent him to the cavalry school at Pinerolo, where he conceived a passion for horses.

For some ten years after that the breeding of racehorses was Visconti’s principal interest—he often remarked on the similarity between the problems involved in schooling horses and directing actors (and said that horses were on the whole preferable because they didn’t talk). During this period Visconti dabbled in the arts but remained uncertain of his direction. He painted, designed sets for one or two plays, and tried his hand as a film scenarist. He was nearly thirty when in 1936 he left Italy with the intention of

—Visconti—Osseessione—3
working for the cinema in England or France. The same year, having been introduced by Coco Chanel to Jean Renoir at a racetrack, he found himself on the great French director’s production team.

At first in charge of costumes, Visconti then served as Renoir’s third assistant director on Une Partie de Campagne (1936) and Les Bas Fonds (1937). Escaping in this way from the claustrophobia of Italy, home, and Fascism, and finding himself accepted by a group of dedicated and talented artists in the heady atmosphere of the Popular Front, permanently changed Visconti’s life. Of Renoir himself he said: “His was a human influence, not a professional one. To be with Renoir, to listen to him, that opened my mind.”

After a brief, disillusioning visit to Hollywood in 1937, Visconti went home. In 1940 he was able to work once more with Renoir, who had gone to Italy to film an adaptation of La Tosca. Renoir had to abandon the movie when Italy declared war on France and it was completed by Charles Koch. Visconti himself remained in Italy, where he joined the editorial staff of the magazine Cinema. The young critics and filmmakers associated with Cinema were in vigorous revolt against the insipidity and conformism of the contemporary Italian film industry. Their aim was to make cinema an extension of the literary realism that had developed in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century, notably in the work of the Sicilian novelist Giovanni Verga.

Visconti’s first film was Ossessione (Obsession, 1942), based on James M. Cain’s starkly naturalistic thriller The Postman Always Rings Twice, with the action translated from America to the Romagna region of Italy. Visconti had been looking for a subject which would not invite the hostility of the Fascist censors, and the Cain novel had been suggested to him by Renoir (whose stylistic influence can be detected in this but in none of Visconti’s later films). Ossessione is about the destructive passion that develops between Giovanna, wife of an aging innkeeper, and Gino, a young wanderer who takes a casual job at the inn. Gino begins to suspect that he has been used and goes to another woman, a young dancer with whom his relationship is purely physical, uncomplicated by financial greed or sexual politics. But the police are closing in, and Gino and Giovanna, reconciled, die together as they try to escape arrest.

Several members of the Cinema group had a hand in the script of Ossessione, which thus became a kind of manifesto. At its first showing in Rome in 1942 it had an effect that was described as “explosive.” Appearing at a time when the Italian cinema was devoted to optimistic trivia, Ossessione’s social and psychological authenticity and sexual frankness outraged the Church and the Fascist censors, and terrified the commercial distributors. When the censors tried to ban it, Visconti and his friends appealed to Mussolini himself, who passed it with only a few cuts. In the confusion following the Allied invasion, the film was destroyed. Visconti managed to preserve a duplicate, however, and a somewhat mutilated version of Ossessione was finally released some years after the war. It was almost universally hailed as the first masterpiece of Italian neorealism. Pierre Leprohon has called it “a great film, the portrait of a miserable, greedy, sensual, obstinate race at grips with the daily struggle for existence and with instincts they are unable to master. For over and above the neorealism, this film has the ingredient indispensable for its lasting greatness, poetry.”

For a time during the war, Visconti was imprisoned by the Fascist authorities, charged with aiding the Resistance. Moved from jail to jail and threatened with shooting, he was only reprieved by the Allied invasion. After the liberation of Rome, he filmed the trial and execution of several Fascist officials, including his jailer, and the death of another at the hands of an angry mob; these sequences appear in Giorni di Gloria (Days of Glory, 1945), a documentary produced by the Allies.

In 1945 Visconti began another and immensely successful and influential career as a theatre director. No one did more to free the Italian stage from outworn conventions, techniques, and attitudes or to modernize its repertoire, to which he added the works of such contemporary French and American writers as Sartre, Cocteau, Anouilh, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Hemingway and Erskine Caldwell. Visconti built up a repertory company which later provided acting and technical talent for his films, and whose best-known products are the actor Marcello Mastroianni and the director Franco Zeffirelli.

There were no professional actors at all in Visconti’s next film, however. Visconti was a Marxist, though an unorthodox one, much influenced by the Italian socialist leader and theorist Antonio Gramsci. In 1947 he went to Sicily with some funds advanced by the Communist Party, intending to make a short documentary. What he saw there inspired a far more ambitious project—a vast fresco of the Sicilian poor, in three parts dealing respectively with the fishermen, the peasants, and the sulfur miners. In the event, only one part was completed—La terra trema: Episodio del mare.

The film is loosely based on Verga’s novel I malavoglia, but in Visconti’s Marxist adaptation the great enemy of the poor Sicilian fishermen is not the sea but the local wholesalers, who own the boats and pay the fishermen derisory prices for what they catch. One family, the Valastro, try to free themselves from this pernicious system. They mortgage their house and buy their own boat, but are ruined when it is destroyed in a storm. The film centers around two key episodes in the development of the political consciousness of the young ‘Ntoni Valastro—when he leads a spontaneous if short-lived revolt against the wholesalers, and when, at the end, he recognizes the need for concerted rather than individual action against exploitation.

La terra trema is performed entirely by the people of the village of Aci-Trezza, who contributed in important ways to Visconti’s scenario and who say what they have to say in their own dialect (which is so obscure that it was necessary to overlay the dialogue with a commentary in standard Italian). There is an elemental quality in the film that has reminded critics of Flenchty...
and Eisenstein. It has occasional longeurs, and purists have complained of certain hauntingly beautiful shots whose only function is aesthetic. Nevertheless, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has said, “the chiseled beauty of its images, the simplicity and rigour of its narrative, and its unbending concern with social realities have all cause *La terra trema* to be hailed as a masterpiece of the propaganda film.” It received first prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1948. It was nevertheless not popular with audiences used to lighter fare, was not widely distributed, and is said to have cost Visconti almost $200,000 of his own money.

For some years after that Visconti restricted his activities to the theatre, presenting among other things a number of innovatory interpretations of the classics like his celebrated 1948 production of *As You Like It* (with additional scenery and costumes by Salvador Dali), and an equally famous version of John Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* produced in Paris in 1951. The excessive visual effects and self-indulgent *coups de theater* that had marred some of his earlier productions gave way to a more purposive and disciplined use of all the resources of the theatre, but he never lost his love of spectacle or his meticulous concern for realistic detail (luxuries that he was prepared to pay for himself if necessary).

The same qualities distinguished his operatic productions, which were often lavishly staged, but in which his singers were required to curb the traditional extravagance of operatic gesture and to “act like people.” Many considered Visconti the greatest operatic director of his day, especially in a triumphant series of productions with Maria Callas. “The real reason I have done opera,” he once asserted, “is the particular opportunity of working with Mme. Callas, who is such a great artist.” His operas were produced not only at La Scala and elsewhere in Italy but at Covent Garden in London (where he staged an unforgettable production of Verdi’s *Don Carlos* in 1958) and in other foreign countries. In 1958 he helped Gian-Carlo Menotti to launch the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds, for which he directed a number of operas over the years.

Meanwhile Visconti had made his third film, *Bellisima* (*The Most Beautiful*, 1951), starring Anna Magnani as a working-class woman befuddled by the movies….It was followed by *Senso* (*Feeling*, 1954), widely regarded as one of his greatest films. Set in the *Risorgimento* of the mid-1860s, it opens with a brilliant scene in a Venetian theatre where a performance of Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* disintegrates into an Italian nationalist demonstration against occupying Austrian forces. The story (from a novella by Camillo Boito) turns on the love affair that develops between an Italian countess—a nationalist, played by Alida Valli—and a young Austrian officer (Farley Granger) for whom she betrays her husband, her brother, and her political allegiance. This personal drama resembles that of *Ossessione*, not least in the way that emotional responses and moral standards are shown to be influenced by class and historical factors—notably in the complex characterization of the Austrian officer Franz. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith points out there is, moreover, “an implicit parallel between the events of 1866 and those of 1943-1945. In each case, one élite replaced another, and the new élite came to look suspiciously similar to the old.”

…Visconti’s retreat from naturalism [in *Le notti bianche* *White Nights*, 1957 adapted from Dostoevsky’s short story] was reversed in his next film, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960). It may be seen almost as a continuation of *Le terra trema*, examining the fate of the widowed Rosaria Pafundi and her five sons, a peasant family from the impoverished south trying to make a new life in the northern industrial city of Milan…. *Rocco and His Brothers* was the first of Visconti’s films to gain worldwide distribution and not to lose money. It won a special jury prize at the 1961 Venice Film Festival and several other international awards. Though the version seen in the United States was damaged by extensive cuts, it was warmly received by most American critics….This success made possible Visconti’s ambitious screen version of Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s novel *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963). A return to the *risorgimento*, it is a study of an ancient family of Sicilian aristocrats at a time of rapid social change. This theme, and the fact that Visconti undertook it with a multi-million dollar budget provided by 20th Century-Fox, using a wide screen and Technicolor, greatly disquieted the nostalgics of neorealism. In fact, Visconti recreates the story in his own way. Where the Prince of Lampedusa accounts for the survival of the House of Salinain almost mystical terms, the “Red Duke” Visconti attributes it to political and economic cunning—as another example of the way the old order perpetuates itself in the face of revolutionary ferment. He shows the old Prince (played by Burt Lancaster) coming to terms with the changing social order.

Over the timid objections of the family priest, the Prince gives his blessing and a bag of gold to his nephew Tancredi (Alain Delo), off to join Garibaldi’s forces, and upon Tancredi’s return, arranges a marriage between this fiery young opportunist and the beautiful Angela (Claudia Cardinale), daughter of a rich bourgeois. In the brilliant and immensely long ball scene at the end, the alliance between aristocrats and parvenus is sealed, amid rumors of reprisals against Garibaldi’s peasant followers and intimations of the old Prince’s mortality. Politically the film is highly ambiguous. The strategems by which the privileged class will survive are set forth with unsparing realism, but as we see through the Prince’s eyes what endures and what is lost of the past, the dominant note is unmistakably one of nostalgia.

The film won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival and had splendid reception in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. The version shown in the United States, however, was shorn of several important scenes, badly printed on inferior color stock, and insensitively dubbed. Visconti, denying paternity of this version, remarked: “It is our destiny to be always in the hands of assassins….We work for months and months to create material that is then torn to shreds by ravening dogs.”

…Even thus mutilated, the film seemed to David Robinson “a beautiful and fascinating spectacle….The mise-en-scène is superb. Each scene is staged with the rhythm of a choreographer and the composition of a painter” and “it is a film of enormous virtuosity and brio.”…
Visconti’s perfectionism is legendary, and his attention to authenticity of detail was carried to extreme lengths in *Morte a Venezia (Death in Venice, 1971).* …Georges Sadoul called it “unquestionably [Visconti’s] most perfect film…a richly textured, obsessional study of passion and social putrefaction.” Soon after completing *Death in Venice* Visconti collapsed with “nicotine poisoning.” He never fully recovered his health but continued to work, making three more films….Directed from a wheelchair [*L’innocente/The Innocent 1976]* this ravishingly elegant movie” was Visconti’s last. He was editing it when he died in his sumptuous Roman villa of influenza and heart disease.

Luchino Visconti was a stocky, elegant man, deep-voiced, dark-eyed, with heavy eyebrows and the prominent nose of his great ancestors. He was said to be liable to sky-rendering rages” on set but in conversatioin was a person of “totally disarming courtesy and sly, laconic wit.” Often accused of ‘voting Left and living Right,’ he remained a communist all his life, though he would not join the party. He was also a Christian, though often anticlerical. As a young man, he said: ‘I was impelled toward the cinema, by, above all, the need to tell stories of people who were alive, of people living amid things and not of the things themselves. The cinema that interests me is an anthropomorphemic cinema. The most humble gestures of man, his bearing, his feelings and instincts, are enough to make the things that surround him poetic and alive. . . . And [his] momentary absence from the luminous rectangle gives to everything an appearance of still life [natura morta].”


Luchino Visconti belongs, with Welles and Resnais, to a select company of major directors whose international reputation was established early in their careers and has been maintained, on the basis of a relatively small output, ever since. Among his Italian contemporaries he is unique. Unlike Antonioni or Fellini he did not have to wait for recognition. Unlike Rossellini he has never been a prolific director, and has managed to concentrate his energies over a quarter of a century on less than a dozen meticulously prepared productions. Unlike De Sica he has not degenerated as an artist with the decline of the movement that first thrust him into prominence. His early films are now classics, and each new film he makes is an eagerly awaited cultural event. [Written in 1967] And yet he has remained obstinately impervious to changes in intellectual fashions. A lonely and unassailable giant, his work has a devious consistency paralleled, on the world scale, only by Fritz Lang and Orson Welles.

**Ossessione**

Visconti’s interest in the cinema developed late. At an age when Orson Welles was directing *Citizen Kane,* when Alexandre Astruc could complain that he was ‘already twenty-six and had not yet made *Citizen Kane,*’ and when most aspirant directors would be starting as documentarists or serving a long and laborious apprenticeship in the industry, Visconti was still living in seclusion and undecided about the future nature of his artistic interests. An accomplished musician, interested also in painting (interests which remain latent in his film work for a long time to emerge again more fully with *Senso* in 1954), his only foray into the world of spectacle was as set-designer for a play by G.A. Traversi in 1928. He was nearing thirty when in 1936 he left Italy with the intention of working in the cinema in England or France.

As luck would have it, and thanks to a chance meeting with Coco Chanel, he found himself, shortly after his arrival in France, attached to Jean Renoir’s semi-permanent production team in charge of costumes and then as assistant director on *Une partie de campagne* and *Les Bas-Fonds.* In an interview on BBC Television in 1966 he has recalled this experience mainly in terms of what it meant to him politically, to escape from a Fascist country and to find himself working on equal terms with a group of left-wing enthusiasts, many of them Communists, in the heady atmosphere of the Popular Front. That this part of his experience had a lasting effect on him and helped to shape his future political commitment there can be no doubt. What is harder to assess is Renoir’s influence on him as an artist. There is an obvious, if superficial, analogy between the French Popular Front and the post-war Italian left-wing bloc, to which Visconti belonged. Visconti’s career seems therefore like a bridge between the two. But on a personal level the differences between the two artists are far more striking than the similarities. Visconti’s debt to Renoir is mainly stylistic and is confined to one film, *Ossessione,* which he made during the war. After that, when Visconti begins to find his own feet and establish an independent personality, all traces of Renoir’s influence disappear. They are, however, present in *Ossessione,* in the method used to establish a character, in the relationship of character to landscape, in the use of a fluid and yet probing camera, and, on a more generic plane, on the shared debt to the naturalist tradition—in Renoir’s case Maupassant and Zola, in Visconti’s Giovanni Verga and Italian regional literature.

In 1940 it was Renoir’s turn to come to Italy to make a film of *La Tosca* which was a cross between Sardou’s original melodrama and Puccini’s opera. For this film Visconti worked on the adaptation and then as assistant director. Renoir was not able to finish the film himself. He had just directed the opening sequences when Italy declared war on France, and Renoir left for the USA, leaving the film in the capable but uninspired hands of Carl Koch.

Opinions differ on the subject of the finished film. In distant retrospect, Visconti regards it as mediocre and banal, falling far short of what he himself had envisaged and what Renoir might have made had he stayed on. But something of *La Tosca,* whether echoes of the realization or images of how he himself would have made the film, remained lodged in Visconti’s imagination to appear in the making of *Senso,* the most ‘operatic’ of Visconti’s films, fourteen years later…

*Ossessione,* his first film, was produced in 1942, in an atmosphere of general disturbance. Italy was fighting, and beginning to lose, a war around the Mediterranean. Within months of the film being finished the Allied forces landed in Sicily and
began working their way slowly through the peninsula. The film did not emerge properly into the light of day until some years after the war, and then only in a severely mutilated and shortened version. As a result of these circumstances many legends have attached themselves to the story of the making of the film and an aura of mystification has come to surround its interpretation. The general purport of the legends is to bolster up the image of Ossessione as a precocious, maligned, and yet marvelous flower of the still inexistent neo-realist movement. Both in the legends and in the interpretation there is a nugget of truth. The film has its origins in the cult of verismo [a ‘truth’ or naturalism idealized in the writer Verga’s work] and was to serve as an inspiration, of a kind, to later neo-realist production. But there is also a lot of legendary dross and more than a suspicion of critical alchemy in the proceedings. When the dross has been removed and the alchemy exposed, Ossessione emerges as a very different, and furthermore a greater rather than a lesser film than its first admirers would ever have claimed.

Given a chance to direct a film of his own, Visconti’s first idea was a version of a short story by (significantly enough) Verga, L’amante di Gramigna. When the project was refused by the censors he turned instead to a suggestion of Renoir’s, an adaptation of an American thriller, James Cain’s The Postman Always Rings Twice, which had already served as the basis for a French film in 1939 and was to be filmed again by Tay Garnett in Hollywood in 1946. The story, widespread but poorly documented, has it that the choice of Cain’s novel as scenario was a subterfuge to deceive Fascist censorship, which rubber-stamped the project as inoffensive on paper but was then horrified to see the most un-Fascist image of Italian life portrayed in the finished film, which transferred the action to an Italian setting. The censors then attempted to ban the film outright, but it was reprieved, so the story runs, only on personal instructions from the Duce himself.

This story, though somewhat inaccurate, is quite significant. It manages at the same time to exalt Visconti as a crusader for the new realism and to denigrate him subtly by suggesting that this aristocratic dilettante had friends at court who gave him an influence and an escape route denied to lesser mortals. In fact Mussolini did not reprieve the film, and Ossessione’s troubles did not end with the end of Fascism. More important, just as the censorship difficulties which Ossessione encountered have been misrepresented as simply a question of Fascist politics (they involved the Church, bien-pensant opinion generally, commercial distributors, and even the American occupying forces), so Visconti’s artistic intentions are simplified and belittled by the emphasis placed on the element of national realism in the adaptation.

Cinema criticism is often curiously nationalistic. While literary critics have acknowledged for a long time the profoundly renovating role played by American literature in the development of the Italian novel in the 1930s and 1940s, their cinema confrères have on the whole failed to recognize the debt of the Italian cinema to the same source—and to the American movies. It is partly the fact that in literature the connections are more obvious to the academic mind: Pavese wrote a thesis on Melville; Visconti did not write a thesis on Griffith. But there remains a strange reluctance to accept the obvious. The fiction persists that Visconti chose The Postman Always Rings Twice for no better reason than that it would not upset the censor and that the changes in his adaptation had no other purpose than to Italianise its indifferent theme. It never occurs to anyone to think that the story might have appealed to him precisely because it was American, and that he might have changed it not just to make it more Italian but to make it more Visconti. Ossessione certainly is very Italian, and it is also more realistic than Tay Garnett’s film of the same novel. But there is a lot more to it than that.

Ossessione is a film about the destructive power of sexual passion. A man turns up by chance at a roadside country inn, stays on as a labourer and falls in love (or in desire) with the inn-keeper’s wife and she with him. They decide to leave together, but after half an hour on the road she turns back and he goes away alone. A few weeks later the husband and wife encounter him again by chance in a nearby town and the husband, innocently, insists that he go back with them. On the journey the lovers, mainly at her instigation, murder the husband in a staged accident. They settle down uneasily to run the café. Unease and mutual mistrust grow when she collects the old man’s life insurance and he suspects her of having used him to wield the hatchet to serve her own financial purposes. In retaliation he spends an afternoon with another girl, but slips away when he realizes that the police are closing in. The lovers are reconciled, but as they drive away to escape imminent arrest their car skids off the road and she is killed. …

Turning Cain’s parable of arbitrariness into a demonstration of necessity required, however, or than a simple alteration of plot mechanics. It meant creating a new structural framework in which to define the actions of the characters, and consequently making the characters themselves different. In the film the lovers, Gino and Giovanna, are both in different ways partial outcasts. They have an uneasy relationship with established society. They are neither totally integrated nor totally independent, and it is their inability either to be fitted in or to break loose that leads to their destruction. …

The theme of betrayal is important. It recurs in various forms in many of Visconti’s films, notably in Senso, which Ossessione most clearly foreshadows. Like that of the roles performed by the characters, this theme has a double significance. On the one hand, taken in isolation, it emerges as a permanent item in the legends a demonstration of necessity required, however, or than a simple alteration of plot mechanics. It meant creating a new structural framework in which to define the actions of the characters, and consequently making the characters themselves different. In the film the lovers, Gino and Giovanna, are both in different ways partial outcasts. They have an uneasy relationship with established society. They are neither totally integrated nor totally independent, and it is their inability either to be fitted in or to break loose that leads to their destruction. …

The theme of betrayal is important. It recurs in various forms in many of Visconti’s films, notably in Senso, which Ossessione most clearly foreshadows. Like that of the roles performed by the characters, this theme has a double significance. On the one hand, taken in isolation, it emerges as a permanent item of Visconti’s thematic concerns, a part of his universe. But it also as a more specific function in the dynamics of the plot. In Ossessione each relationship is seen, at least by one of the parties, as an exclusive commitment and as conferring obligations…. 
The static pattern of *Ossessione*, then, is one in which easy love is shown as preferable to guilty passion and male comradeship as an alternative to either. Passion, particularly sexual, is a disorder which draws the victim out of relation with a society which cannot accommodate him, and then destroys him. Betrayal is a permanent threat, part of the general instability of human relations. This is a pattern which will recur again later and is here clearly announced for the first time. But every bit as interesting as the static pattern is the way things are actually worked out in context, the way for instance that each relationship is formed by impulse or accident and then terminated by an act of betrayal, or the way the narrative receives its formal articulation.

The first striking thing about this formal articulation is how simple it is, and how conventional. The form is that traditional to classical theatre and opera, a series of scenes involving two or at most three people at a time. This formal articulation reflects (or determines; the two are inseparable) the structure and development of the relations between characters, who form a series of couples. Leaving aside the marginal couples—priest/husband, husband/Gino—the main development is expressed in the progression, Bragana/Giovanna, Giovanna/Gino, Spaniard/Gino, and Gino/Anita, or (more simple still) Bragana-Giovanna-Gino-Anita. The movement is linear and progressive, away from the stable world of marriage and village life towards a more fluid relation of couples. Leaving aside the marginal couples for the first time. But every bit as interesting as the static pattern is the pattern which will recur again later and is here clearly announced for the first time. But every bit as interesting as the static pattern is the pattern which will recur again later and is here clearly announced for the first time. But every bit as interesting as the static pattern is the pattern which will recur again later and is here clearly announced for the first time.

Stylistically, *Ossessione* is the most realistic of Visconti’s films. At the same time it cannot be called, without qualification, a work of neo-realism. It is visually naturalistic in its use of realistic locations, presented with a minimum of expressive distortion. It is also rooted in a naturalistic conception of character, and places character in landscape in a way which is generally unaffected but does not exclude certain sophisticated expressive effects. One thinks notably of the scene of Bragana and the lovers at the singing contest, which has a quite extraordinary similarity to Flaubert’s description of the *comices agricile* in *Madame Bovary*. More importantly it excludes explicit moral and political judgments but approaches its subject from the point of view of the participants in the action. Like the other features observed, the general cultural dissociation is just a fact about the setting: it is not explicitly significant….

One of the most interesting features of *Ossessione* is its lack of political and historical perspectives. This in itself is sufficient to mark it off from almost all Visconti’s later films on the one hand and the bulk of neo-realist production on the other….The trajectory of Visconti’s career sweeps in a wide arc round the general area known as neo-realist. *Ossessione* is pre-neo-realist; it anticipates certain of the themes and styles that were to become the stock-in-trade of the movement, but, for good historical reasons, necessarily misses out on others. It is, one might say, realism without the neo-. Then, for six years, he does not make another film, and when he does, with *La terra trema*, it sets him moving on a new path, away from neo-realism altogether.

From *Conversations with Fellini*. Ed. by Costanzo Costantini. Harcourt Brace NY 1995:

I’m not as meticulous as Luchino Visconti was, but I pay great attention to detail.

---

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXII:**

Feb 15 Robert Bresson AUHASARD BALTHAZAR 1966
Feb 22 Martin Ritt THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD 1965
  Mar 1 Nicholas Roeg WALKABOUT 1971
Mar 8 John Mackenzie THE LONG GOOD FRIDAY 1980
Mar 22 Bertrand Tavernier COUP DE TORCHON/CLEAN SLATE 1981
  Mar 29 Werner Herzog FITZCARRALDO 1982
Apr 5 Nagisa Ôshima MERRY CHRISTMAS MR. LAWRENCE 1983
  Apr 12 Stephen Frears THE GRIFTERS 1990
Apr 19 Jafar Panahi DAYEREH/THE CIRCLE 2000
  Apr 26 Ridley Scott BLADE RUNNER 1982

**CONTACTS:**

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
...email Bruce Jackson b.jackson@buffalo.edu
...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com
...for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center
and State University of New York at Buffalo
with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News