Visconti’s *Senso* and the Evolving Italian Cinema

BY JOHN BENNETT

A sea change occurred in the tenor of Italian cinema in the twenty-five years between the end of World War II and the close of the 1960s. The Rome of Roberto Rossellini’s *Open City* (1945) is austere and naturalistic; characters in the war-torn city desperately try to resist the German forces and just as desperately try to eek out humble lives from meager resources, as many ordinary people might have done in real life in Rome during the war.¹ The Rome of Federico Fellini’s *Satyricon* (1969), however, is spectacular and ancient and strange; the characters behave outlandishly and opulently within their highly stylized environment.² The Valastros, the poor family struggling in the fishing town of Aci Trezza depicted in Luchino Visconti’s *La Terra trema* (1948) are a far cry from the powerful, destructive Von Essenbecks, the wealthy central family in Visconti’s later work, *The Damned* (1969).³ The contrast in these films typifies the evolution that Italian cinema underwent from the neorealist films produced in the years immediately following World War II to the more stylized auteur films made in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s.

Visconti’s fourth feature, *Senso* (1954), exemplifies this transformation. While most academic evaluations of *Senso* examine the film in relation to the politics of the time the film depicts and the time in which it was made (see Millicent Marcus, Henry Bacon, Peter Bondanella, and many others), this paper examines *Senso’s* idiosyncratic position within the context of a roughly twenty-five year span of Italian cinema. I will argue that *Senso* should be read as a middle ground between neorealism and auteur-driven cinema in its representation of class, its use of *mise-en-scène*, and its depiction of female characters.

Two factors helped mobilize the gradual transformation of Italian cinema. First, Italy experienced “an economic boom on a scale never before known in its history” in the 1950s. With more money circulating in the Italian economy, films became more spectacular. Where neo-realist directors filmed on war-torn location and used non-professional actors, the economic boom allowed for 50s and 60s directors’ films to be more studio-bound and visually stunning, featuring stars of both American and Italian movies like Ingrid Bergman, Anthony Quinn, Farley Granger, Burt Lancaster, Marcello Mastroianni, Sophia Loren, and Claudia Cardinale.

The second agent of change in Italian cinema involved auteur filmmakers beginning to break away from realism to pursue more personal projects. In a 1966 BBC interview, Visconti, whose oeuvre strongly represents this evolution in Italian cinema, stated in reference to *La Terra trema* that an artist “can never be completely oggettivo [objective] in art,” suggesting that objectively filming life as it was in war-ravaged Italy must eventually be replaced by films that were not only more artistically subjective, but also less concerned with pressing contemporary social

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issues. Auteurs like Visconti, Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni all went on to make very personal, stylish films after having had a hand in the neo-realist movement.

*Senso* takes place in Risorgimento-era Italy, the historical period during which Italian revolutionaries were on the brink of expelling Austrian occupiers and becoming a unified nation. The story revolves around a 19th Century countess, Livia Serpieri (Alida Valli), who meets Austrian lieutenant Franz Mahler (Farley Granger) while interceding in a duel he is supposed to have with her revolutionary cousin, Roberto Ussoni (Massimo Girotti). After just a few meetings, Livia and the lieutenant begin an affair. By the time she and her husband, Count Serpieri, move from Venice to their country villa, Livia’s love has turned into obsessive passion. She usurps funds intended for Roberto’s militia so that Franz can bribe a doctor to claim Franz is unfit for battle. Consequently, Ussoni and his troops lose the key battle of Custoza against the Austrians. After some time has passed, Livia seeks Franz out in Verona, only to discover he has embezzled her money and has not remained faithful. She proceeds to turn Franz in to the Austrian authorities. In the final scene, Franz is executed by a firing squad while Livia wanders the streets of Verona calling out his name.

In its depiction of class, *Senso* represents emotionally unsettled upper-class characters of the 1960s Italian auteurist tradition, albeit with a commitment to realism that recalls Italian films of the 1940’s. During the neorealist years, many of the most important screen characters came from poverty and felt true-to-life because of their circumstances. Roberto Rossellini, one of the founders of the movement, depicted financially struggling resistance members fighting against the occupying Germans in *Open City*, a film often described as being a “chronicle,”
implying the story’s journalistic factuality. Rossellini’s *Paisan* (1946), a film with an episodic structure made the following year, is equally interested in depicting the lower class realistically, especially in the film’s fifth episode, which tells the story of struggling Catholic monks (who, incidentally, take vows of poverty). Vittorio De Sica brought a man struggling to find work and an old, resigned victim of circumstance to the screen in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952) respectively, both filmed with a strong sense of realism. In Visconti’s first three features, *Ossessione* (1943), *La Terra trema* (1948), and *Bellissima* (1951), he was interested in impoverished characters and how they coped economically within the family unit. A sense of realism emerges to a certain extent even when Fellini depicts the poor, as he did in *La Strada* (1954) and *Nights of Cabiria* (1957).

However, many Italian films produced in the decade and a half or so after *Senso* began to feature more emotionally distraught upper class characters, whose conflicts grew less and less grounded in a tradition of political realism. De Sica’s *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (1963) consists of three episodes, two of which involve middle and upper-class couples whose conflicts

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8 *Paisan*, dir. Roberto Rossellini, perf. Carmela Sazio, Roberto Van Loon, and Benjamin Emanuel, Organizzazione Film Internazionale, 1946.
12 Italian cinema would of course re-politicize by the 1970’s. In many cases, the presence of politics was still felt in 60’s Italian cinema, albeit not nearly as strongly as the preceding and following decades. This return to politics would be brought about by artists like Bertolucci, Wertmuller, and Pasolini, many of whom combine “neorealist commitment and stylistic virtuosity” in their work. Marcus, *Italian Film*, 187.
are chiefly farcical. The same could be said of the second half of his *Marriage—Italian Style* (1964). Both Fellini and Antonioni depicted increasingly wealthy characters in increasingly surreal circumstances. Fellini expresses angst through the dream-like states in which Guido Anselmi and Giulietta Boldrini find themselves in *8 ½* (1963) and *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965). Antonioni’s 60s heroines, often played by Monica Vitti, were as rich as they were emotionally detached from any sense of reality in films like *L’avventura* (1960) and *Red Desert* (1964). After *Senso*, Visconti almost exclusively represented aristocratic characters in his films. Many of these films, like *The Leopard* (1963) and *The Damned*, contain characters who resemble fictional Titans more than real people; it’s telling that *The Damned’s* Italian title, *La caduta degli dei*, literally translates into “the fall of the gods.”

While *Senso’s* characters’ conflicts often resemble those of 60s auteur cinema, Visconti illustrates them with a strong commitment to realism. All of *Senso’s* principle characters come from wealth, like many other characters in Italian auteurist cinema of the late 50s and early 60s. Livia’s anguish over Franz’s infidelity bears a strong resemblance to Giulietta’s anguish under similar circumstances in *Juliet of the Spirits*. Franz deceives Livia in order to usurp her funds much like Filomena does to Domeinco in *Marriage—Italian Style*. In these thematic areas of *Senso*, the film can almost come across as an “anti-political” study of the Risorgimento era,

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much like the more melodramatic parts of *The Leopard.*\(^{18}\) Additionally, Roberto and Count Serpieri have conflicts wealthy people would have: Roberto requires a large amount of funds and a reputation in order to mobilize his resistance movement just as Count Serpieri curries the favor of the Austrians in order to keep his money and reputation intact.

But in these last few instances, the conflicts of *Senso*’s characters become less melodramatic and more political, thus belonging to a more realistic world. *Senso*’s fidelity to political realism resembles the impulse of the neorealism era. In *La Terra trema,* perhaps Visconti’s most ideologically neorealist work, the director sought to “construct, through the Sicilian village, a universal symbol of the harshness of the class struggle.”\(^{19}\) Visconti also employs symbolism of this nature in *Senso* by having his characters represent larger groups of people. With *Senso,* this brand of realism uses microcosmic symbols to paint a larger political portrait, just like *La Terra trema* and many other neorealist films, but transposed to the Risorgimento-era upper class. Count Serpieri’s cozying up to Austrian officials, Franz’s recklessness and fear regarding his military position, and Ussoni’s revolutionary idealism could all be applicable to members of the milieus from which each of these characters came.\(^{20}\) And even realist Risorgimento politics were not too different from what was happening in Italy before and around the time *Senso* was made. André Bazin noted that *Senso*’s treatment of the Austrian occupation of Italy and idealistic Italians’ subsequent resistance strongly parallels the

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situation that occurred between the Germans and the Italians in World War II.\textsuperscript{21} In \textit{Senso}, the boorish group of Austrian officials lodging in lush Venetian apartments screams German occupation. The spreading of the \textit{trecolori} confetti by Italian revolutionaries in the \textit{La Fenice} Opera house screams Italian Resistance. By the time Visconti made \textit{The Leopard}, however, he abandoned the Ussoni character—the revolutionary microcosm—in favor of a more outrageous and fickle revolutionary, Alain Delon’s Tancredi.\textsuperscript{22} Visconti, while retaining his fascination with aristocratic characters, would rarely return to the political realism he practiced in \textit{Senso}.

Just as \textit{Senso}’s class depiction straddles two aesthetic worlds, so does its use of \textit{mise-en-scène}. Because many scenes in neo-realist films were shot on location with limited funding, the décor in these films tends to be sparse, brought to the screen with a strong sense of grit. The landscapes in \textit{Bicycle Thieves}, \textit{Open City}, \textit{Paisan}, and \textit{Umberto D.} all depict cities physically torn apart by the war, with citizens experiencing the ensuing economic hardships. The homes of the coastal village in \textit{La Terra trema} are bare. Long stretches of road in \textit{Ossessione} are eerily empty. The walls of the hospital in \textit{Europa ’51} are blank.\textsuperscript{23} The bedrooms in \textit{Ossessione} and \textit{Paisan} aren’t adorned with much more than necessary furniture and some peeling wallpaper. A prison in \textit{Shoeshine} has a solitary portrait on the wall adjacent to the jail-cells. Even \textit{Cinecittà}, Italy’s premier film studio, seems bare when \textit{Bellissima}’s characters visit it. In all of these films, the character’s costumes are dirty, wrinkled, and simple. Even in instances when sets and cinematic


\textsuperscript{22} Millicent Marcus, \textit{Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 47.

artifice were necessary for getting a story or point across (because remember, this is neorealism, not *Dogme 95*), sets were constructed in available areas as opposed to studios, as when Rosselini filmed in “the basement of a vacant building” for *Open City*. In all of these instances, the directors (along with costume and set designers) adapt the *mise-en-scène* in the service of verisimilitude.

Auteur driven films of the late 50s and 60s do not use *mise-en-scène* in order to illustrate how life actually is or was, but rather use it elaborately to explore themes that interested the directors. In both *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *Satyricon*, Fellini critiques the opulence of Roman society (contemporary in the former, ancient in the latter) by parading in front of the screen neon lights and elaborate frescos, fashionable dresses and Roman togas, a bustling *Via Veneto* and Roman war scenes, and, in both cases, a menagerie of grotesque performances. In *8½*, the elegant beauty of the shot compositions and Piero Gherardi’s over-the-top set decoration makes ironic the central character’s inability to express himself artistically. Gherardi’s flowery artistic design of Suzy’s rococo mansion in *Juliet of the Spirits* parallels Sandra Milo’s character’s sexual inhibition. In *Il Grido* (1957), *L’avventura*, and *Red Desert*, Antonioni explores emotional isolation via surreally unpopulated sets. *Red Desert* goes even further with its bizarrely industrialized *mise-en-scène* in the service of Antonioni’s interest in abstraction. Director Elio Petri and production designer Piero Poletto create a lavish dystopia for *10th Victim* (1965) in order to

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24 Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York; Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2009), 70.
satirize its “Most Dangerous Game” inspired plot.\textsuperscript{27} Even if Visconti never turned as surreal as many of his contemporaries during this period, he went on to use more spectacular mises-en-scène as well. The iconic 45 minute ballroom scene from The Leopard and the baroque, decadent decoration of The Damned belong more to a theatrical than a real universe.

*Senso*’s mise-en-scène, however, evinces both the theatricality of 60s auteur cinema and the verity of neorealism. Visconti (with designers Ottavio Scotti, Gino Brosio, Marcel Escoffier, and Piero Tosi) sets out to establish the film’s theatricality via the mise-en-scène from the outset by setting the opening credits and first scenes during a performance of Verdi’s *Il trovatore* at Venice’s La Fenice opera house. Though the film begins with *Il trovatore*, its structure strongly resembles another Verdi opera, *La traviata*. Both the film and the opera tell the story of a socially prominent woman (Livia Seprieri/Violetta) ruined by love. Both follow a three-act structure (for the film, each change of location has the feel of a different act: Act I is Venice, Act II is the country Villa, Act III is Verona). Act II of both works takes place in a country home, and Act III of both works takes place in a boudoir. Early in the film Livia notably professes a love for opera, but “not when it takes place outside of the stage.”\textsuperscript{28} Fortunately for Livia, her own melodrama might as well have taken place on a stage, given the theatricality of many of the sets and performances. To a certain extent, the lushness of the sets, especially those of the opera house and Livia’s country home, coldly and ironically comment on the characters’ decadent behavior as their class decays and history progresses.


Yet how can this be reconciled with Millicent Marcus’ view that Senso’s mise-en-scène has “no ironic detachment” or critical judgment of “the dazzling, sensual surface of the film?”

Visconti himself answered this question in reference to Senso when he claimed, “I shall not abandon the line of cinematographic realism I have followed to this day, nor lose contact with my characters just because they wear 19th century costumes.” So while the gilded cherubs of the opera house, Livia’s elegant dresses, and the official regalia of the Austrian headquarters all bear highly theatrical witness to the moral decline of the characters and the classes they represent, these elements also represent what real life was like for these types of characters. Visconti’s own aristocratic upbringing itself proves this to be true, as the “objets d’art, luxurious trappings, and opulent furnishings” that adorn Senso were a real part of his aristocratic upbringing.

While Senso’s mise-en-scène seems theatrical, it belongs to a real world, a world in which Visconti had actually lived. So even if La Fenice, or the Serpieri’s country villa, or Franz’s cluttered Verona apartment are lavishly decorated in a way that resembles 60s auteur films, they also belong to a tradition that accurately represents life as it was.

Furthermore, Senso serves as a middle ground for the two aesthetic worlds in its representation of its principal female character, Livia. During the neorealist years, female characters in Italian films were largely passive wife or mother figures whose primary function was to provide moral support and encourage economic and social advancement for male characters while relying on them at the same time. This is true of Anna Magnani’s Pina in Open City, who aids her boyfriend in the Italian Resistance; Irene Smordoni’s unnamed mother

29 Marcus, Italian Film, 187.
character in *Shoeshine*, who gives food and advice to her prison-bound son; Lianella Carrel’s Maria in *Bicycle Thieves*, who pawns her bed sheets so her husband can purchase a bicycle for his job; and Maria Pia Casilio’s Maria in *Umberto D.*, who provides the title character with emotional refuge from his monstrous landlady. Even in pre-*Senso* films featuring female characters as principals like *Bellissima* and *Europa ’51*, the leading lady, while having a more developed emotional identity, lacks any trace of a sexual one. In these films, the main characters function as mother figures who exist solely for the advancement of other characters. In *Bellissima*, Anna Magnani’s character, who desperately tries to make a better life for her young daughter, flatly declines a promising but compromising proposition. As a saintly mother figure, she seems almost incapable of doing otherwise. Ironically, the depiction of female characters in the neorealist cinema does not come across as especially realistic, unlike these films’ representation of class and use of *mise-en-scène*.

Female characters in late 50s and 60s auteur Italian cinema developed more independent emotional and sexual identities. In *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), Visconti’s second feature after *Senso*, Annie Girardot portrays Nadia, a prostitute, as a sensitive, emotionally wounded, complicated individual, ruined by her love for the title character and her destructive sexual ties to his older brother.  

32 Claudia Cardinale is equally sensitive and complicated in Zurlini’s *Girl with a Suitcase* (1961).  

33 De Sica’s neorealist tragic hero found himself replaced by a voluptuous Sophia Loren in early 60s films like *Two Women*;  

34 *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*; and *Marriage—Italian Style*. In all of these films, Loren plays characters with finely tuned emotional

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identities. Fellini began to integrate hyper-sexualized (if by no stretch of the imagination emotionally mature) nightmare women into his 60s films, like Anita Ekberg in La Dolce Vita, Eddra Gale in 8 ½, Sandra Milo in Juliet of the Spirits, and virtually every female cast member of Satyricon, each more extreme and nymphomaniacal than the last. The conflicts of Monica Vitti’s central heroines in Antonioni films like L’Avventura and Red Desert arise from complicated—maybe even overdeveloped—emotional and sexual identities. In Visconti’s The Damned, Ingrid Thulin’s monstrously selfish and lecherous Sophie Von Essenbeck is countered by Charlotte Rampling’s clear-eyed and emotionally distraught Elisabeth Thallman.

And where does Livia, a formidable yet flawed female character, fit on this spectrum? Of all the thematic areas that make Senso a revolutionary film, its depiction of Livia rarely merits academic attention. Even in From Reverence to Rape, Molly Haskell’s influential book on female representation in film, Haskell only briefly touches on Livia, lumping her in with Visconti’s other female characters in observing that Visconti’s “fear and awe of women was raised to a high C of operatic intensity.”

Visconti and actress Alida Valli realize the Countess as both sexually and emotionally complex, something that had not been seen in many Italian female characters until this point. Pre-Senso women traditionally weren’t as passionate about their love affairs as Livia is with Franz, and they committed adultery even less frequently. In her voice-over narration, the countess does not shy away from describing the slow, sumptuous development of her emotional and sexual feelings toward Franz. She seems to represent the evolution of the neorealist woman when she asks herself “How could I have passed a night

36 A rare but notable exception is Clara Calamai’s Giovanna in Ossessione. Millicent Marcus, email interview, 7 August 2012.
with someone I hardly knew…An Austrian Officer? I—an Italian woman, married, a woman who had never before in her life committed the slightest indiscretion?” By the time the affair has soured and Livia has discovered that Franz has embezzled her money on luxury, Valli’s portrayal of Livia becomes one of the most ferocious and pained in all of cinema to date, let alone Italian film of the 50s. After hearing Franz’s other lover’s voice in his Verona apartment, a look of pure terror washes over Livia’s face, emphasized by quick camera movements. Once Franz taunts her for loving him, the look of terror is replaced by one of sheer agony. Finally, once Franz informs Livia that he denounced Ussonni to the police, Livia’s scream is blood curdling. In all of these instances, Livia certainly comes across as a powerful yet wounded individual. Because Senso focuses so intently on Livia’s indiscretion and emotion, the film almost comes across as a “woman’s picture,” a term that could not be applied to the majority of neorealist films.37

Yet Livia, like Visconti, has a foot in both worlds. She retains certain qualities that preclude her from achieving the completeness of identity necessary to make Senso a “woman’s picture,” or at least to make Livia too closely resemble the female characters of Italian auteur cinema. The countess’s incompleteness results from her need to depend upon and serve the film’s male characters, much in the tradition of the neorealist female. Visconti suggests this inability for self-actualization and the need to find fulfillment from others from the outset, as he immediately establishes Livia as practicing revolutionary politics vicariously through her cousin while also depending completely on her husband for wealth and social prominence.38 By

38 Millicent Marcus, email interview.
the time she has fallen in love with Franz, what was at first suggested could now be considered fact. Livia’s betrayal of her cousin’s army and her former convictions in order to support a shiftless, cowardly man proves her to be an amoral and incomplete character who would rather serve men and their ideals than formulate and defend independently cultivated ideals of her own. In this sense, Livia serves the function of the neorealist woman. Ultimately, Livia is as much an element of middle ground in Senso as the film’s depiction of class or mise-en-scène, as demonstrated by her individuality paired with her dependency on and service towards the male characters.

Senso holds a complex and idiosyncratic position within the context of Italian cinema; it’s a film that seems constantly to be at aesthetic odds with itself. Henry Bacon argues this point when he says the film’s style “amounts to a refutation of the world of opera in the most lovingly operatic manner conceivable.” On an even larger and more abstract level, Visconti’s political and personal identity seems to argue this point as well; he was a political Marxist from an aristocratic background. Senso should ultimately be read as a stylistic and narrative blend of what preceded it and what was yet to come in Italian cinema. Through its complicated treatment of class representation, mise-en-scène, and female characterization, Senso serves as an aesthetic middle ground between neorealist cinema produced immediately after World War II and the auteur driven films produced throughout the 1960s.