

VISCONTI, LUCHINO (1906–1976)

Italian director of films, theatre, and opera. On his father's side Visconti was descended from ancient Milanese nobility, while his mother inherited great wealth from her industrialist father. The belle époque luxury of his homelife and performances in the family's private theatre were to be utilized in his later directing career. When Visconti was nine his parents were divorced, a step brought on in part by his father's "hobby" of having affairs with young men.

In his twenties, Visconti lived the life of a playboy, his only passion being horses. This interest, however, led him to Paris which he found stimulating both for its intellectual circles and for its sexual freedom. In 1934 he had his first serious affair with a man, the anti-Nazi German photographer Horst Horst. This liaison awakened his interest in film, and he served for a time as an assistant to the great director Jean Renoir. Visconti was also influenced by the poetic cinema of Jean Cocteau, who lived openly with his leading actor, Jean Marais.

Visconti's first major feature, *Ossessione* (1942), which was based on the novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* by James M. Cain, heralded the neo-realist school of Italian cinema. During the war years in Rome Visconti took an active part in the resistance, which led to his joining the Italian Communist Party. Although the party used him as one of its leading intellectuals, major Communist leaders stayed clear of any direct contact with Visconti because of his homosexuality. In the 1940s and 1950s he directed many foreign plays, which had the effect of a revelation in an Italy that had been culturally isolated by twenty years of fascist dictatorship. He also began to direct operas at Milan's La Scala, which had fascinated him from the age of seven when the house was under the control of Arturo Toscanini. In the view of some critics, the melodrama and artificiality of grand opera

spilled over into his films, and not to their advantage.

Visconti made one more major neo-realist film, *La Terra Trema* (1948), a story of Sicilian fishermen in which he used untrained local actors. He first achieved major international acclaim, however, with *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), a story of the disintegration of a southern Italian family which had settled in Milan. Visconti thus took his place beside Federico Fellini and his former collaborator, Michelangelo Antonioni, as a standard bearer of the Italian "new wave." Four years later he released *The Leopard*, a loving creation of Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel of the life of a Sicilian aristocrat. During this period Visconti was intimate with Helmut Berger, a handsome but green young German, whom he groomed as a major actor. In *The Damned* (1969), a recreation of the "Night of the Long Knives" in which Hitler's agents murdered Captain Ernst Röhm and his homosexual associates, Berger made a striking appearance in a transvestite parody of Marlene Dietrich. *Death in Venice* (1971) starred Dirk Bogarde in an almost spectral rendering of one of Visconti's favorite works, the Thomas Mann novella of the same name, while *Ludwig* (1973), in which Berger returned, portrayed the mad homosexual king of Bavaria, Ludwig II.

With this trio of great films that openly treated homosexuality, Visconti found a place in the select company of such major contemporary directors as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, John Schlesinger, and Franco Zeffirelli, who not only have been openly gay, but insisted on treating the orientation honestly in their films. At the same time, his loving evocations of European aristocratic life before 1914, the world of Proust and Mann, Mahler and Klimt, made him a link to the manners and sentiments of a vanished world—that of the belle époque.

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