Ossessione in Context:
An Analysis of the Foundations and Achievements of Luchino Visconti's First Film

Marco Della Motta
Department of Italian Studies
McGill University, Montreal
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ABSTRACT

The following thesis focuses on the Italian director, Luchino Visconti and his first feature film, *Ossessione*. It evaluates his film in relation not only to the director's biography but also to its historical and cinematic context. It deals with the manner in which *Ossessione* was adapted from an American roman noir, refashioning it in its own distinctive way. In addition, it analyses the film's relation to generic modes of representation, specifically realism and melodrama, and concludes by situating the work as a precursor of the Neorealist movement of the mid-20th century.

RÉSUMÉ

Le mémoire suivant se concentre sur le réalisateur italien Luchino Visconti et son tout premier film, *Ossessione*. Il étudie le film en relation à la biographie de l'auteur, de même qu'à son contexte historique et cinématographique. Il se concentre aussi sur la façon dont Luchino Visconti a adapté *Ossessione* à partir d'un romain noir américain. Enfin, il analyse le film et sa relation aux modes génériques de représentation, particulièrement au réalisme et mélodrame, et le situe comme un exemple précurseur du mouvement néoréaliste.

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Introduction

To the initiated, the name Luchino Visconti conjures contradictory associations and impressions. An aristocrat by birth yet Communist by ideology who lived his life throughout in the comfort of luxury and was consequently mocked for his choice of lifestyle by other supposed Leftists, the likes among whom even include one of the most eccentric of the past century's artists, Salvador Dali. His homosexuality was a subject of great ambivalence, a subject which at times expressed itself through contempt for others homosexuals and homosexuality in general and, of course, did not go unnoticed. A man who possessed a remarkable generosity and by turns an equally remarkable capacity for tyranny over others in his circle and those with whom he worked. An artist who relished tradition, who could not and did not want to extricate himself from that very tradition yet constantly sought innovation in his art through the very tradition he so venerated. Visconti was all these things and much more. He was a contradictory figure but that is part of what has made him a fascinating, or at the very least, an intriguing one.

His career in the cinema spanned forty years, from his initial apprenticeship with Jean Renoir until his last film in the mid-1970s entitled, *L'Innocente* [*The Innocent*]. Although not as celebrated and recognized outside Italy, his lifelong passion, devotion, and relationship to the theatre and to opera paralleled his output in the field of cinema. However the essay here will concern itself solely with Visconti's cinematic oeuvre, in particular his first feature film entitled *Ossessione,* which has been heralded by various scholars and critics as, on the one hand, a precursor to the Italian neorealist movement and on the other as the very first neorealist film. Naturally such contentions tend to provoke debate, sometimes heated debate on the given issue. Among other topics, this

essay will also address the methods of categorization which have been applied to deem whether *Ossessione* is indeed a neorealist film or merely a harbinger of what was to emerge on the Italian cultural landscape immediately after the Second World War.

Yet rather than assess Visconti's first film retrospectively, as simply a part in the overall trajectory of his oeuvre, the first part of the present essay will seek to trace his development as a kind of 'artist-in-waiting or, perhaps, mindful of Bazin's work, I should say 'auteur-in-waiting.' I will suggest that certain experiences in Visconti's early life set in motion a process of intellectual maturation which led him to become a film director and to his spectacular debut behind the camera in *Ossessione*. These experiences and their significance to Visconti's evolution can best be grasped within the context of a brief biographical narrative which will occupy the first chapters of this study and which will underscore key formative experiences in Visconti's life, such as his 'Paris years' which doubtless had a profound effect and influence on his emotional and intellectual development. Inasmuch as Visconti is responsible for the realisation of *Ossessione*, the various influences, colleagues, associates, and artists who assisted and guided Visconti directly or indirectly will not be neglected or left on the periphery. Also, forces political and cultural will be examined in relation to the impact they had on Visconti and his artistic development and how these all shaped the making of *Ossessione* and its initial reception. This will constitute the first part of this essay.

The second part of the essay will initially concern itself with an in-depth analysis of the film, in addition to which, attention will be paid not only to how Visconti moulded this critical realist-melodrama but also how the film is situated within, and arguably without, the neorealist movement. An examination of the film's critical assessment in

relation to neorealism will be necessarily broached. The central concern, however, will not be *Ossessione*'s credentials as a neorealist film but rather to demonstrate that Visconti's first feature film is a highly interesting and sophisticated achievement. Made at a time and under circumstances that a contemporary reader may find hard to believe, *Ossessione* is a cinematic masterpiece whose artistic merit and significance go much beyond its relationship to the movement it helped germinate and foster.

The analysis of the circumstances under which Visconti's first feature film came to be made will also consider the connection between *Ossessione* and James M. Cain's 'noir' novella *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Were it not for the fact that Jean Renoir one day placed a typewritten French translation of the Cain's work into Visconti's hands, *Ossessione* would have never been made. What will be of import to this essay is the fact that Visconti's film is an adaptation and inaugurates an intense dialogue with literature which is a constant in Visconti's career: indeed the vast majority of his films are literary adaptations (e.g., Verga in *La terra trema*, Boito in *Senso*, Dostoyevsky in *Le notti bianche*, di Lampedusa in *Il gattopardo*, Camus in *Lo straniero*, Mann in *Morte a Venezia*, D'Annunzio in *L'innocente*). Much will be taken into account of exactly how Visconti adapted the novella to his own artistic ambition and vision. It is well recognised that a cinematic adaptation typically involves an abridgment or condensation of its literary source -- in Bazin's terminology, the film is a "digest" of the literary text. Interestingly, however, *Ossessione* is one of a small group of films that actually takes the opposite route to adaptation. Rather than merely condensing the novella, Visconti expands it, reworking the narrative material and ultimately quite radically recasting Cain's story in terms of plot, character, and themes. Elements not found in Cain's text

are woven into Visconti's screen adaptation in a refreshing manner that does not deter from the chilling refinement and terseness of the original. Certainly *Ossessione* casts *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in a new light and offers a different cross-cultural interpretation of the American narrative. Yet, this adaptation/reinterpretation is in itself formidably original and exciting, even and, perhaps, especially for those viewers already familiar with Cain's cult classic (which, incidentally, has been adapted on three other occasions).[1] While the present study will not compare *Ossessione* to the other adaptations, it is interesting to note the pot-boiler's widespread appeal on both side of the Atlantic.

In conclusion, mention should be made that the methodological approach adopted in this thesis is rooted in what is generally known as 'auteur theory.' Originally articulated by André Bazin (1971) whose work, after a few decades of relative oblivion, is currently undergoing a revival, 'auteur theory' has developed over the years into a complex field which cannot be fully canvassed in this context. For the purposes of this discussion, a key point of reference in this field is Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and specifically his formulation of the fundamental tenet of 'author theory' as: "a principle of method (that) the theory requires the critic to recognise one basic fact, which is that the author exists, and to organise his analysis of the work round that fact" (Nowell-Smith 10). The objective of this essay is crystallised in those terms.

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[1] The three "official" adaptations of James M. Cain's novel are Pierre Chenal's *Le dernier tournant* (1936), Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981).

Chapter 1

Pomp and Circumstance

"Mine was such an extraordinary family." -- Luchino Visconti

Upon reading about Visconti's life, one is struck by the impression that in many respects, his life reads like a modernist novel that might have been written by Henry James or perhaps a novel written by one of Visconti's own literary idols, Marcel Proust. In taking into consideration Visconti's background and his upbringing, the fact that in the early nineteen sixties, Visconti would adapt Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo* seems perfectly natural and consequential. Indeed it would have well been surprising had the aristocratic auteur not been attracted to a novel which stages so many of Visconti's own contradictions.

The purpose of this account, however, is not so much to laboriously retell in detail Visconti's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood until the point at which he makes his first film. Such an exercise would be superfluous and surely unnecessary considering that the biographies which have already been written provide constructions of his life much more meticulous and thorough than can be encapsulated within the scope of this study. Therefore emphasis will be placed on episodes and experiences which seem to have had a decisive influence on him and his artistic formation. Rather than a Proustian or Jamesian intimate epic, the genre which this biographical account will evoke is the *Bildungsroman.*

Visconti was a descendant of the illustrious Milanese family, Visconti di Modrone, whose ancestry dates back to the thirteenth century (Servadio 5). The Viscontis were patrons of the arts, especially opera, as the family not only provided financial support but also contributed to the management of the most celebrated of all opera houses, La Scala (Servadio 7).

Visconti's maternal family, on the other hand, came from an altogether different social milieu. His mother, Carla Erba, came from a highly respected bourgeois family whose paterfamilias, Carlo Erba, was someone upon whom can be conferred the title of 'self-made man.' Carlo Erba, trained as a pharmacist, made his fortune and elevated the status of his family through the homonymous firm which he established at the end of the 19th century and which became one of the most important players in Italy's pharmaceutical industry. The fortune of the Visconti family and eventually of Luchino himself was owed not to the aristocratic titles of the paternal side but rather to the wealth that the Erba family amassed and his mother inherited (Schifano 9). This fortune would often help Visconti produce his films, thus making it easier for the director to pursue his personal vision relatively unaffected by commercial concerns.

Luchino was born on the 2nd of November 1906, just one hour before the curtain was to rise at La Scala for the opening of the season with a performance of Verdi's *La Traviata*, or so the director's theatrical imagination would have us believe. However, while in her biography Servadio accepts unhesitatingly Visconti's poetic recounting of his birth, a recounting clearly driven by the desire to place himself under the inspirational aegis of Verdi (Servadio 13), Laurence Schifano, a more cautious biographer, probed the legend a little further and provides to what seems a more probable though no less flowery

account: "He [Luchino Visconti] chose his star arbitrarily. The curtain at La Scala could not have risen on the 2nd of November 1906, on the drama of Violetta's sacrifice for love because by tradition the theatre's season doesn't open until Saint Ambrose's day, December 7. Visconti also knew that the brilliant 1906-07 season began not with *La Traviata* but with *Carmen*, under the direction of the fiery Arturo Toscanini" (Schifano 40). We encounter here for the first time an important element in Visconti's biography: a tendency to understand oneself and one's life less in terms of facts than in literary and cultural terms. As the filmmaker himself stated: "I myself belong to the times of Mann, Proust, and Mahler. I was born in 1906 and the world which surrounded me -- the artistic, the literary, the musical -- was that world: it is not by chance that I relate to it" (Servadio 13). The rather pretentious flourish and thinly veiled elitism manifest a sensibility which sees the world primarily through the filters of high-brow artistic traditions and legacies.

The director adored and cherished his family life and in particular his parents, whose influence instilled in Luchino an early appreciation of virtually all areas of artistic expression. About his father, Visconti once said, "A nobleman, yes, but certainly not a frivolous man, still less a fool. He was a cultured, sensitive man who loved music and theatre. A man who helped us all to understand and appreciate art" (Schifano 27). In addition to fostering a love of the arts, the filmmaker claimed that his father did not permit his children to lead idle lives, solely relying on their class status and the benefits which accompanied it: "My father taught me that I could not claim rights or privileges through birth. I have never made a thing about my nobility.... I was not brought up to be an idiot aristocrat growing fat and soft on the family inheritance" (Schifano 27).

Yet it was his mother who captivated him and whom he idealised throughout his life. In Servadio's biography of him, he is quoted, stating:

> My mother was a bourgeoise. An Erba. Her family sold pharmaceutics. They were self-made people; they had started by selling medicine from a cart on the street. My mother loved social life, great balls, glittering parties, but she also loved her children; and she, too, adored music and the theatre. It was she who looked after our daily education. It was she who made me learn the cello. We were not left to ourselves. We were not accustomed to lead an empty and frivolous life, like so many aristocrats. (Servadio 13)

Visconti's deep emotional connection with his mother had direct consequences for his cinematic work. The director himself remarked that: "From *Bellissima* to *Rocco and His Brothers* and *The Damned*, the doting mother transmits her enthusiasms and her errors to her children along with her problems, her traumas and her aspirations (cited in Schifano 59-60). On the other hand, Visconti's respect and attachment for his father has left a rather different and somewhat puzzling trace in his oeuvre. In his comprehensive study of Visconti, Henry Bacon has noted that: "the centrality of families in Visconti's films is marked by the conspicuous absence of fathers" (Bacon 100-1) -- an observation which will be developed in the analysis of *Ossessione*.

There can be little doubt that Visconti's parents succeeded in transmitting their love for the lyric theatre, acting and, perhaps more generally, spectacle and melodrama to their children and especially Luchino. So great was his parents' admiration for the stage that Visconti's father, Don Giuseppe, built a private theatre in their home, the Palazzo Visconti, on Via Cerva in Milan (Servadio 15). There the family staged their own

productions which were usually performed in the Milanese dialect but also ranged from Goldoni's plays to vaudeville shows and even satirical revues which were written by Don Giuseppe under the Germanized anagram 'Josef von Icsti' (Schifano 52). It was through the mutual love of theatre that Visconti and his father shared one of their strongest bonds. According to one Visconti's biographers, it was the theatre that became the young Visconti's first love. Visconti would later comment: "The city bubbled when a new play opened. Given my boyhood, how could I have helped being smitten with the theatre?" (Schifano 51). In the 1930s, Visconti would finally begin to render the amateur attempts of his boyhood and adolescence into a marked professionalism which ran parallel to his ambitions in filmmaking.

Inasmuch as the theatre was treasured by his parents and ultimately the entire family, it was apparently music which held the highest esteem in the Visconti household. It was also music which held the deepest and fondest memories and associations connected to his beloved mother. It was she, in fact, who gave her children lessons in counterpoint and harmony at promptly six every morning and in relation to this daily ritual Visconti later recalled, "This may be my dearest memory. I can still see the dim early light shining on my cello. I can feel the light weight of my mother's hand on my shoulder" (Schifano 53). So proficient were his abilities on the instrument that at the age of fourteen, the young Visconti had already begun playing cello sonatas at public concerts in the Milan conservatory. Indeed his talent on the cello was actually once described as "splendid mastery" by a Milanese daily, La Sera, on the 9th of June 1920. On that date Visconti performed Benedetto Marcello's Sonata in Two Quarter Time and the newspaper review even mentioned the boy having the promise of a concert cellist

(Schifano 57). The role of music in Visconti's cinematic oeuvre is unequivocal in its importance from his very first feature to his last, from being a device in creating mood or atmosphere to conveying a character's emotional or psychological state to even becoming so crucial to the film that one could go so far as to deem it as another dramatis persona, such as his use of it particularly in *Morte a Venezia* [*Death in Venice*], *La caduta degli dei* [*The Damned*], and even *Senso*.

Ritual and the continuity of certain traditions within the Visconti household were of paramount importance and were also upheld with the strictest rigour. One such ritual, which practically held the status of being sacred, was the evening family dinner. On each evening, the whole family assembled in the dining-room for dinner which was always served on silver dishes by a major-domo and two liveried, white-gloved footmen. The ceremonious exactitude of this daily occasion is explicit in Schifano's description:

> Don Giuseppe was meticulous in preserving the solemn, immutable ritual that his son would later recreate in *La caduta degli dei*. Punctuality and elegance were mandatory. Donna Carla and her daughter Anna wore evening dresses, the count and Guido dinner jackets, and the children were encased in black velvet suits and spotless white silk shirts. (Schifano 50).

An account from Visconti's sister, Uberta, confirms the ceremoniousness of these elaborate daily occasions, "In his films my brother often showed these big family tables and there is certainly something of us Viscontis in those pictures" (Schifano 50). She also commented that throughout his life, Visconti always respected the family tradition "of having meals served on Irish lace tablecloths by white-gloved servants in black and yellow livery" (Schifano 50). With respect to this household ritual, Visconti would later

deduce a few generalizations: "Life is a hive. Everyone lives and works in his own cell. Then we all gather in a central nucleus around the queen bee. That is when the tragedies erupt" (Schifano 50). These conclusions naturally found their way into some of his films, such as *Vaghe stelle dell'orsa* [*Sandra*] and *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* [*Conversation Piece*]. Concerning *Ossessione*, the dinners which are represented there are more akin to the "carnivalesque banquets" -- a term coined by Sam Rohdie (*The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini,* 1995) in relation to the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini -- than the sumptuous affairs recreated in other Visconti films such as *Il gattopardo* and *La caduta degli dei.*

Families, family upheavals, and family taboos are prominent features in Visconti's films. The deeply personal dimension of this 'obsession' with family dynamics is confirmed by the director himself who stated:

> My dream is to make a film about a great Milanese family, the Visconti di Modrone. A film based in Lombardy from the beginning of the century up till the bombing of Milan. A film which would recount all the stories of my father, of my mother, of my brothers, of all my relatives. One day I shall succeed in doing it; and then, maybe, I shall stop making films about other families. (Servadio 17)

Visconti's families are anything but idyllic social units. They are emotional vortexes where the centripetal force of family loyalty and the centrifugal force of individual aspirations violently collide (Bacon 99). Visconti was always intrigued by the family as the nucleus of society, an especially rich and problematic *pars pro toto*, and in response to the question of the importance families have in his films, he answered:

> Maybe for old reasons of my own, maybe because it is within the family that there still exists those unique taboos, the moral and social prohibitions, the last impossible loves. In any case the family nucleus seems to me very important. All our way of being, of living, derives from there, from the inheritance we carry with us, from the happiness or unhappiness of our childhood. Each of us is the product of this smallest social cell, before being the product of society. Often an unchangeable product, or capable of modifications only with great difficulty. So the family represents a kind of fate, of destiny, impossible to elude. The relationships, the contrasts, the intrigues, the upheavals within the family always interest me passionately. (Bacon 99)

These statements have a relevance which not only resonates in Visconti's life but also his theatrical and cinematic output from the very beginning of his career until its end. The emphasis on the important role that families play in his films does not merely pertain to his Risorgimento films (*Senso* and *Il gattopardo*) or his German trilogy (*La caduta degli dei*, *Morte a Venezia*, and *Ludwig*), but it spans every period in his filmmaking, even his neorealist films (*La terra trema*, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*) and of course, his 'proto-neorealist' film -- the one on which this study focuses -- *Ossessione*.

A brief analysis of Visconti's early years has served to establish the influence that a rather unique family experience had on the director's outlook on life and, more importantly for the purposes of this work, on his artistic sensibility. However, Visconti's artistic talents might not have turned to cinema as a privileged expressive medium had it not been for the pivotal period which the young Luchino spent in Paris in the 1930s. It is

in tumultuous Paris of the *entre-deux-guerres* that Visconti discovered his vocation as a film director.

Chapter 2

The Paris Years

"One's an ass to leave Paris." -- Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

The years, nearly a decade, that Visconti spent shuttling back and forth from Milan, Rome and Paris were some of the most formative ones in his life, specifically in terms of his artistic development and political awareness. In many respects, and despite his aristocratic breeding and grooming, Visconti's mentality and outlook at the debut of his Parisian sojourn were rather provincial and, in some ways, quite narrow. However, his status and wealth enabled him entry into virtually all the fashionable salons of the time. There, he either became acquainted with or befriended many of the leading intellectual and cultural figures of the first half of the twentieth-century. The variety of Visconti's frequentations is truly impressive (Schifano 117). Visconti moved easily in these artistic circles well before he had any accomplishments or demonstrable talents, other than in the admittedly aristocratic art of horse-breeding!

1. A Berlin Prelude

Before settling into a hectic Parisian social life, Visconti travelled extensively throughout western and central Europe (Schifano 114). He visited Britain, Austria, and France. He was in Germany at the time of the burning of the Reichstag and there he witnessed Nazi parades and spectacles. Considering Visconti's later status as a card-carrying member of the Italian Communist Party, it is curious to note that after one of his return from a trip to

Germany in 1934, his sister Uberta claimed that, "he went on and on describing the beauty and strength of those young men on parade carrying I don't know what, a very heavy staff, I think" (Schifano 114). Whether the Freudian slip was the sister's or Visconti's own, we cannot definitively determine, but in any event's Visconti's latent homosexuality becomes glaringly manifest in his initial reaction to the Nazi's aestheticization and phallic eroticization of politics.

Nonetheless, Visconti's short-lived admiration of fascism and Nazism did not rest exclusively on aesthetic and not-so-subtle male homoerotic grounds. For a brief time, he was tempted by reactionary ideology and the ideal of "a man who believes only in action, who combines the virtues of an athlete with those of a monk, a soldier and a militant" (Schifano 114). He was even temporarily obsessed by the hero Siegfried, "not because of Wagner, who was out of fashion then anyway, but as a mythological hero, the perfect human being, heroic and Aryan. In 1933 and 1934 he often talked about it" (Servadio 46).

It is not surprising then that when Visconti saw Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, featuring the 1934 Party congress at Nuremberg, he admired it for "the freedom and strength of the director, the beauty of the photography, and also the context" (Servadio 47). Immediately after her description of Visconti's appreciation of Riefenstahl's film, Servadio inserts a short sentence which clearly suggests to the reader that the director's fascination with Nazism was more likely rooted in aesthetics and homoeroticism than in ideology: "Later, Visconti once, but only once, confided in a friend and described to him some of his visits to Munich, where he would go, driven by his chauffeur for short stays, admiring Hitler's 'shows' but also longingly watching the

blond, sadistic boys in uniform" (Servadio 47). Though formulated in a tone and style uncomfortably reminiscent of tabloid gossip, Servadio's comment points out that Visconti was ashamed and embarrassed about his early infatuation with the Nazi regime and thus wished to keep his visits to Germany in the mid-1930s a secret.

Visconti did, however, find a striking contrast and a curative to his Nazi admiration and this came in the form of the heady and contagiously creative atmosphere of Paris. France, French culture, and of course, the French language were much more familiar territory to Visconti than Germany. He once said that, "French culture was very formative for me because from boyhood on I lived a lot in France. I discovered German culture much later" (Schifano 115). This assertion by Visconti is slightly perplexing and contradicts another admission made by the director regarding the influence of German culture over him: "I have always had a strong interest in German culture, literature, and music. After Goethe, I love Thomas Mann. In one way or another, all my films are dipped in Mann, if you look at them. And German music, Mahler, Wagner" (Servadio 46). Rather than begging the question, "Well, which is it, Luchino? The Germans or the French?", it is more sensible to acknowledge that both cultures had a profound influence on him. Perhaps the 'contradiction' is only apparent given that both German and French culture played a key role in defining the literary and cultural tradition with which Visconti deeply identified.

2. *Celebrities and Other Distractions*

In Paris, Visconti took up residence in the area around the Place de la Concorde and the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, staying in its luxury hotels. The French capital surrounded him

with an atmosphere of fashionable frivolity and sophisticated hedonism, but also with a rich cultural life which neither Milan nor Rome could rival. Immersing himself in the arts which continued to flourish into the 1930s, even after the mythical decade of Paris' Roaring Twenties, Visconti avidly went to Stravinsky's ballets, sought the productions of Christian Berard, the most famous stage and ballet designer of the 1930s, and never missed a play by Cocteau (Servadio 48).

Among the attractions which cosmopolitan Paris offered to the young aristocrat were the coveted and famous Parisian *salons* which vied to attract international celebrities, such as Salvador Dali, Serge Lifar, Kurt Weil, the afore-mentioned Christian Berard, Elsa Schiaparelli, Igor Markevitch, Oscar Dominguez, Alberto Giacometti, Jean Cocteau and, finally, Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, with whom Visconti formed an intimate and providential friendship (Servadio 49). In fact, it was through his friendship with Coco Chanel that Visconti met and befriended Jean Renoir, the man who would play a decisive role as his cinematic mentor.

Paris and its creative environment were infectious and inspiring for Visconti. In reminiscence of that feverish time, Visconti commented, "Today I look back on those years as so astonishing for their boldness, their picturesqueness, their bohemianism, their creative power" (Schifano 122). Back in Milan after one of his stays in Paris, Visconti finally purchased a camera and began to make a few amateur 16-millimetre films: mostly adventure and detective stories for which he would cast his friends and relatives. His ambitions grew and, in 1934, he attempted to make a more substantial film in 35-millimetre. For this project, he earnestly undertook the hiring of a crew, including a cameraman and an assistant. Considering that Visconti and the genre of melodrama have

almost always been inextricably bound together, it is not really surprising that the script he wrote for the failed project was an intensely melodramatic story centering around three women who meet a boy of sixteen upon his arrival in Milan from the provinces. The plot 'thickens' as the protagonist "has a baby with a young girl who dies in childbirth. A prostitute leads him into vice, while another young woman, ideally lovely, represents the purity that he cannot attain. When all the boy's dreams sink into the slime of reality, suicide is the only way out" (Schifano 122). Interestingly, there are a few elements from this rather abysmal project which find their way into Visconti's first film: a young man arrives from an uncertain place, and falls in love with a woman who was a prostitute, who becomes pregnant by him and perishes before giving birth. While these three elements provide no more than a very mediocre synopsis to *Ossessione*, they provide a recognizable pattern which links the two projects and help to establish the genealogy of the successful film.

In the winter of 1934-35 in Kitzbuhel, Visconti met, apparently fell in love with, and became engaged to Princess Irma Windish-Graetz, the twenty-one year old daughter of Princess Leontine Furstenberg and Prince Hugo, a descendent from one of Austria's oldest families (Servadio 50). Although the love affair never materialised in marriage, the young princess was reputed to possess the sort of beauty which "would always conquer Visconti, and that he would see again in actresses Maria Schell and Romy Schneider. They were Austrians too: blonde, with light, bright, laughing eyes, a freshness hoarded from childhood" (Schifano 125). Visconti ascribed the nickname Pupe (Doll) to the princess and, appropriately enough, when in 1962 Visconti made the short entitled *Il lavoro* [*The Job*] for the film *Boccaccio 70*, "he gave the name [Pupe] to the

young German countess, played by Romy Schneider, who is married to and deserted by a rich Milanese count" (Schifano 125). The collapse of this short lived engagement with an ideal aristocratic wife forced Visconti to come to terms with the issue of his sexual orientation. Servadio's observations on this matter are useful:

> When he gave up Pupe, Visconti also gave up his internal struggle. This was not a question of sexual choice but of his whole way of life; in rejecting the conventional choice of a quiet family life, of children, a conservative aristocratic social life, a nucleus of steady affection, he had chosen the more difficult alternative, that of a nomad of love. Since he was not going to make his mark on life by creating a family, he decided to do so through Art." (Servadio 53)

Servadio is certainly correct in her assessment that Visconti's acceptance of his homosexuality was not merely a question of "choice" (probably not the most accurate noun one could use) but rather a question of a whole way of life. However, she seems to gloss over how difficult in fact it was for Visconti to relinquish the conventional life which society and his upbringing dictated. Precisely because it was not a simple matter of object preference but rather connected with a whole sensibility and outlook, homosexuality would continue to cause Visconti anxiety and he would struggle with it for much of his life.

The engagement and its dissolution mark a turning point in Visconti's life. From then on, he was able to begin forging his own identity, and to pursue more resolutely his own desires, wishes, and needs. Laurence Schifano pointedly elaborates, stating:

> Precisely when his freedom was being most distressingly monitored and curbed in both Italy and Austria, he gulped great breaths of non-conformism and creativity in Paris. More and more French words stud his letters. In Paris he lived fully, marvelling at the dynamism he saw working everywhere -- in the theatre, during the period that Jean-Louis Barrault called 'the enlightened years,' in films, fashion, music, ballet. And Paris was alive with the impulse to live, to live now, which he so strongly wanted to do and which is normally checked by adults' eternal admonition to children: 'Wait.' (Schifano 132-3)

However, Visconti would not have been able to leap ahead so quickly without the emotional support and intellectual guidance of his friends. Three people, two men and a woman, were especially instrumental in helping Visconti shape his life in the direction of his aspirations.

3. *Love? Ideology? Aesthetics? Paris of course!*

The first of these three people was a blond German man with those "laughing blue eyes" (Schifano 133) which always held Visconti spellbound, whether possessed by a man or a woman. His name was Horst P. Horst. He came from a small town in Thuringia called Weissenfels-an-der-Saale. The same age as Visconti, Horst was already a successful and busy photographer. From the day after they first met, they began a relationship which lasted three years and which would slowly and importantly bring the filmmaker to a reconciliation with his homosexuality.

When speaking of their relationship, Horst reported that Visconti was still struggling with his homosexuality and consequently led for a long time a double life in

fear of gossip and recrimination by the society from which he came. According to the photographer, Visconti always tried to keep their affair a secret, particularly from his family and his family's circles. By contrast, Horst's attitude was remarkably serene: "To me, homosexuality was anything but a problem, but it wasn't the same for him. I made him more sure of himself, precisely because no one could have tormented him less on the subject than I did" (Schifano 137).

However, the air of Paris and an intense homosexual relationship were not enough to rid Visconti of certain parochialisms. Horst recounts an anecdote about a day in Tunisia where the two men went on a trip. According to Horst, Visconti was fiddling with his radio dial when he chanced upon an announcement, transmitted in Italian, of an Italian victory in Abyssinia. The broadcast was followed by the fascist hymn and, on hearing it, Visconti shot straight up, stood at salute, and insisted that his friend do the same. Horst thought the scene ludicrous and declined, pointing out that he was not Italian and they were not in Italy. Insulted, Visconti then insisted on leaving at that very instant (Schifano 138).

Horst's place in Visconti's life is important. If their relationship did not completely heal Visconti's conflictual relationship with his sexual orientation, it was at the very least an important first step on the road to reconciliation and better self-understanding. As Jean Marais commented, "When I knew him (Visconti) in 1937, homosexuality was no problem for him; he simply avoided flaunting it" (Schifano 139).

In addition to Horst, the second person of the trio who was instrumental in setting Visconti on a course which he followed for the rest of his life was none other than the iconic Coco Chanel. Much older than him, in fact only three years younger than his

mother, Chanel was a woman Visconti intensely admired and kept as a close friend for the rest of his life. Surprisingly, she was more than just a close friend to the young Visconti when he first met her in the mid-1930s. Schifano writes: "she was to be his advisor, passionate lover and surrogate mother, tougher, less feminine but just as strong, energetic, realistic, and combative as his real mother" (Schifano 139) -- the Oedipal component of the relationship cannot be overlooked. Even Horst attested to the powerful emotions that both Chanel and Visconti had for one another: "No one could have been more fascinated than Chanel was by Luchino. He held back. She was mad about him and made him drunk with the sound of her voice" (Schifano 140). Conversely, Visconti's sister, Umberta, claimed that, throughout her brother and Chanel's long and devoted relationship, they were never "more than friends. Yes, she was very much in love with Luchino. He was above all charmed by that very strong character of a woman who did things, who worked" (Schifano 142).

In the end, the exact nature (sexual or not) of the relation between Visconti and Chanel is of secondary importance. Of primary importance is the inspiration and the creative and emotional support that her friendship gave to Visconti. Chanel was also responsible for Visconti being introduced to Jean Renoir the final member in this pivotal trio who had such a substantial role in moulding what Visconti would finally become.

In 1936, Visconti was attempting to finance the adaptation of two works for the screen, *Mayerling* (the notorious hunting lodge where the Archduke Rudolf of Habsburg, Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary and his mistress the Baroness Marie Vetsera were found dead) and *November* which was based on a story by Flaubert. His idea for the project was soundly rejected by Alexander Korda, who Visconti went to see in London

for the sole purpose of finding a producer for the intended film (Servadio 58). Upon his return to Paris, he dejectedly complained to Chanel that his plans had come to naught, to which she responded, "You're going to meet (Jean) Renoir. He's a serious man" (Schifano 142).

Visconti then met Renoir over lunch at Chanel's and regardless of the then aspiring filmmaker's timidity, the two got along well. Yet it was Chanel who explained to Renoir how her young friend was hoping to work in the cinema and requested his assistance. Renoir accepted and offered to help, thus giving Visconti the direction he would need (Servadio 59). From then onwards, Visconti would go and watch Renoir make his films. In regards to the effect that Renoir exerted on Visconti, the director's own words carry the exactitude needed without the embellishments Visconti was usually prone to in his other autobiographical recollections:

> It was in fact my stay in France and my meeting with a man like Renoir that opened my eyes to a lot of things. I realised that films could be the way to touch on truths we were very far away from, especially in Italy. I remember seeing Renoir's *La vie est à nous* soon after I arrived in France; the film impressed me deeply. During that burning period -- that of the Popular Front -- I subscribed to every idea, all the aesthetic principles, and not only aesthetic, but political, too. Renoir's group was distinctly leftist, and Renoir himself, although he was not a card-carrier, was undoubtedly very close to the Communist Party. I really opened my eyes then; I came from a fascist country where it was impossible to know anything, to read anything, to learn

> anything or have personal experiences. I had a shock. When I went back to Italy I was really transformed. (cited in Schifano 143)

Visconti was well aware that Renoir's circle was very different from the social environment he was used to: "When I was in Paris, I was a kind of imbecile -- not a Fascist, but unconsciously affected by Fascism, 'coloured' by it; but the people around Renoir were all Communists, card-carrying Communists" (Servadio 59). In contrast to Servadio's rather slim account, Schifano portrays in some detail those first encounters of Visconti with Renoir's entourage. The Italian filmmaker was reported as having stated:

> The whole group that gravitated to Renoir, was made up of Communists. At first, naturally, I was looked on with suspicion. To them I was an Italian, I came from a fascist country and, to top it all off, I bore the weight of an aristocratic name. That suspicion melted almost at once, however, and we became fast friends. (Schifano 146)

This impression may have been more due to anxieties and prejudices which Visconti projected onto Renoir's crew since one of those crew members, Henri Cartier-Bresson, contested Visconti's perception that he had to overcome ideologically based suspicions: "That [political ideology] never intruded on the set or in our relationships with one another. In Renoir, as in all Prévert's friends, there was a fundamental streak of anarchism. It is wrong to say we had any bias against Visconti" (Schifano 146).

The collaboration with Renoir clearly had an important role in awakening and sharpening Visconti's political awareness. Equally strong and, for our purposes more important, was Renoir's influence on Visconti's evolution into a filmmaker: for the first time Visconti saw a master cinematic craftsman at work and had the opportunity to learn

from his directorial style. In the end, the ideological and aesthetic elements in the inspiration that Visconti drew from Renoir cannot be disentangled. Renoir's "rich humanity, his affection for people and their work, his extraordinary skill at directing actors, his meticulousness, his technique" (Schifano 147) were all lessons that he would carry with him into his own career and would first receive expression in *Ossessione*.

While Renoir and his circle provided a clear and refreshing alternative to Visconti's fascist fellow-travelling, not all credit for the director's change of ideological heart can be attributed to them. Horst's influence must also be taken into account. As Servadio notes "[Horst's] knowledge of and hatred for Nazi Germany had slowly sunk into Visconti's consciousness" (Servadio 60). Moreover, the integrity and sophistication of those by whom he was surrounded in Paris "could not but lead him to reject the gross, ridiculous image of the Fascist regime, especially now that information was beginning to emerge about the harassment of Jews and intellectuals in Germany" (Servadio 60).

However, clearly, it was Renoir that became Visconti's mentor: " I [Visconti] felt that I was talking to him like a brother" (Schifano 147). While Renoir has often been associated with a style of direction which gives actors a great deal of freedom and allows for improvisation, Visconti understood the rigour which underlies Renoir's method on the set and made that rigour a hallmark of his own style:

> [L]ike Visconti, he [Renoir] always knew exactly what he wanted; he built fully developed scenes, laid out complete outlines of his films, carefully planned shooting schedules and rehearsals. He manipulated his actors shrewdly and skilfully, letting them believe they were inventing their own characters, making up their own lines, that they were in control, never

realising that he was taking them exactly where he wanted them to go. (Schifano 149)

This description of Renoir's working practices could easily be applied to Visconti's own style. Even their use of the camera and mise-en-scène is very similar: the signature long-shot sequences, tracking shots and pans with meticulously arranged backgrounds which "were designed so exactly that the characters -- and the actors -- were never cut off from the real world or isolated from everything around them" (Schifano 150).

After having observed the second half of shooting for Renoir's *La vie est à nous*, Visconti was invited to work on Renoir's next film *A Day in the Country* as third assistant director after Jacques Becker and Cartier-Bresson. The film was an adaptation of a short story by Maupassant which was set in 1880. Visconti was given the task of looking after the costumes for the film. Visconti's methodical precision, care, and tirelessness are in evidence even at this early stage of his career as he "had gathered an impressive number of documents on the costumes of the period (1880), which he showed to Jean Renoir and Sylvia Bataille. He had done his research at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and in books; he was scholarly and cultivated, and he planned the costumes with extreme care" (Servadio 61). Disappointingly, *A Day in the Country* was never finished. From the outset, the film was plagued with problems. The buoyant summer weather which Renoir needed to make the film never came and the enforced inactivity grew into tedium and ill-humour, which were usually absent from Renoir's other productions (Servadio 62). Finally by the 5th of September, the crew were still only on their fourth day of shooting because of the bad weather and after a visit from Renoir's friend and producer, Pierre Braunberger, they stopped shooting (Servadio 62).

In spite of his disappointment, Visconti came away from this experience with a wealth of inspiration and knowledge that he was anxious to put to use. Working on the set with Renoir was an ideal classroom and workshop for the aspiring filmmaker. When the shooting could actually take place, Visconti was always on set. He learned by watching Renoir: "he silently studied everything -- actors, camera movements, lighting" (Servadio 63). This experience with Renoir was extremely important since it consolidated for Visconti the direction his life would take -- the cinema.

Then one day, Renoir gave Visconti a typed translation of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, which had been given to Renoir by the director Duvivier. Renoir passed it onto Visconti because he thought that he might be able to use it (Servadio 62) but the French director probably did not suspect that the typewritten translation of an American roman noir would eventually provide the impetus and the inspiration for Visconti's first masterpiece.

Chapter 3

The Making of *Ossessione*

"You cannot venture into the cinema world unless you know you are surrounded by accomplices. A film is a lot like a burglary." -- Jean Renoir

Ossessione was made during Mussolini's Fascist regime at a time when much of Europe was already at war. While the vicissitudes of the film are in part related to these exceptional circumstances, the story of the making of Visconti's first film should begin with a brief of the key developments which had marked the Italian film industry during the two preceding decades.

1. Italian Cinema Entre-Deux-Guerres: The Foundations of a Cinematic Renaissance

At least up until the end of the First World War, Italian cinema had experienced an incredible period of growth, creativity, innovation, success, and respect, both domestically and internationally. The mere mention of a group of select titles dating from the 1910s is enough to warrant recognition of the Italian industry's place in the early history of the art: *The Last Days of Pompei* (1913), *Quo Vadis?* (1913), *Cabiria* (1914) and probably the most famous melodrama of the Italian silent era, *Assunta Spina* (1915). As one can infer from the titles of these films, Italian filmmakers and producers were preoccupied by historical subjects and it was through these very films that the Italian film industry gained its first appeal, international respect and recognition, and lest

we forget, financial success in both domestic and foreign markets, particularly the American market (Sorlin 35).

Regrettably the initial successes of the 1910s were not sustained into the 1920s and many of the film production companies either went bankrupt or were subsumed under the few that survived. The 1920s were, in fact, a stark fallow period in the history of Italian cinema, one in which saw the standstill, if not the near collapse, of the once flourishing film industry and a period which fell prey to fierce American competition that slowly came to dominate the Italian market (Bondanella 12).

After a long period of neglect, some recent critical work by scholars, such as Marcia Landy, has been reoriented towards the decade preceding and leading up to the Second World War. Film scholars have always garnered a few films from this period which have merited critical attention, praise, and study, yet for the most part, the Italian cinema of the thirties has largely remained in Lino Micciché's words, a "skeleton in the closet" (Landy, *Fascism*, 5). Among one of the few films garnered worthy of attention by scholars from this forgotten period is *Ossessione*.

Strangely enough, it took some time for the Fascist regime to react to the issue of the ailing film industry and to develop "the commercial cinema as an apparatus [...] to appeal to all classes, to create a sense of collective social endeavour, to make the 'new order' attractive through the development of cultural forms aimed at penetrating all forms of social life: the family, the workplace, and even leisure activities" (Landy, *Fascism*, 7). Although on account of the failing film industry, Landy notes elsewhere that "the first priority of the Italian commercial cinema was profit rather than strict ideological conformity. The cinema of the Fascist era was instructive for the disjunctions as well as

the collaborative relations that were evident between official Fascist culture and the economic opportunism of the commercial film industry" (Landy, *Italian Film*, 9).

In his classic survey of Italian cinema, Peter Bondanella also concurs with Landy's assessment, and elaborates on the relative ideological leniency the regime showed in this area noting that film could certainly had been utilized to a much greater degree than it was as a propaganda tool:

> In spite of the regime's theoretical interest in influencing all levels of Italian society, its impact upon the Italian film industry was somewhat less pervasive; indeed, only a small percentage of the over seven hundred films produced during the Fascist period can truly be termed Fascist or propaganda films, although it is impossible to determine the degree to which Italian directors might have turned to social criticism and less oblique attacks upon Italian institutions or values if the government had been more permissive. (Bondanella 18)

It was only in 1931 that the regime began a series of interventions in the films industry which would slowly set it upon a steady course of growth. The first step was the introduction of protectionist measures, which were "designed to stem the overwhelming competition from Hollywood and to enhance Italian production. A quota system was initiated, which stipulated that for every ten films programmed in theatres, there must be one Italian film. Furthermore, foreign films that were not dubbed in Italian were prohibited" (Landy, *Fascism*, 12).

One year later, the Venice Film Festival, which later became one of the most prestigious film festivals in the world, was inaugurated. Apparently, the annual event

was originally intended to attract American and European intellectuals and filmmakers to Italy. However, in 1935 rule was instituted in order to help in promote the national industry: festival awards were reserved for Italian films (Sorlin 70).

Another measure to spur the growth of the renascent film industry was implemented in 1934, when the regime enacted a law taxing foreign films produced in Italy and then redirecting those funds to Italian producers. In that same year, a controversial figure in Italian cinematic history arrived on the scene: Luigi Freddi was appointed Director General of Cinematography and there began what became known as the 'Freddi era.'

Freddi's leadership is often associated with the 'white telephone' films of the 1930s and early 1940s (Landy, *Fascism*, 12). However, Freddi introduced important reforms which were aimed at "the modernization of the industry along Hollywood lines and a production policy that favoured entertainment over propaganda" (Landy, *Fascism*, 12). Additionally, "Freddi played a significant role in redesigning the structure of the Italian cinema. Recognizing the need for more experimentation, more professionalism, better scripts and acting, and film education, he laid the groundwork for the development of a popular cinema" (Landy, *Fascism*, 12).

Pierre Sorlin, however, offers a striking counterpoint to Landy's account of the role that Freddi played in the revitalization of the Italian film industry. Sorlin states that Mussolini wanted to accustom Italians to the consumption and enjoyment of modern media and to make them members of a "public" through the systematic use of radio and posters, and through the free screenings of propaganda films (Sorlin 61). According to Sorlin's interpretation, the objective of making people participate was of much greater value for the Fascist regime than persuasion and the achievement of an explicit

ideological consensus, and this explains the dearth of propaganda films -- only three of the many films made between 1933 and 1935 overtly glorified the regime. His argument, which involves a reassessment of Freddi's role, is worth quoting:

> The assumption has been made that, after 1935, Fascists did not want people to recall they had seized power violently and, instead of emphasizing their long fight against Socialists and Communists, stressed their desire to unify all Italians. Evidence supporting this conclusion is found in the memoirs of a former Director General of Italian Cinematography, Luigi Freddi, who states that when 'Old Guard', the last of the overtly Fascist pictures (1935) was released, "I should have forbidden it, for our regime did not need a reconstitution of the past which might turn out to be damaging to it." This is a perfectly plain statement but Freddi was Director only briefly, was never an influential person and wrote his memoirs some fourteen years after the events. We are faced here with a classical artefact: since Fascist cinematic policy is poorly documented historians are tempted to take Freddi's words at their face value. (Sorlin 61)

Sorlin describes Freddi as "a megalomaniac" who "dreamed of introducing Hollywood's practices in Italy but nothing was more alien to Italian ways than the American methods" (Sorlin 63), thus directly challenging Landy's view of the importance of Freddi's leadership in the modernization of the Italian film industry following the Hollywood model.

While Freddi's figure remains controversial, it is universally acknowledged that the creation in 1935 of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia represented an important

stride in the rebuilding of the Italian film industry. This institution, which quickly gained an international reputation for excellence, was founded to ameliorate the quality of film production and to assemble under a single roof essential resources, such as a film school, a library, and a film library (Landy, *Fascism*, 13). The Centro promoted the publication of books and cinema journals and, under the dynamic leadership of Luigi Chiarini, provided directors such as Alessandro Blasetti and writers such as Umberto Barbaro with the opportunity to work and teach in a lively intellectual environment (Landy, *Fascism*, 13). It was also due to the influence of Chiarini and Barbaro that translations of theoretical works on cinema by the likes of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Balàzs, among others, were read and discussed. These new ideas about cinema were disseminated among the students at the Centro and gradually seeped into the Italian intellectual scene.

The opening to other cinematic traditions which took place thanks to the activities of the Centro, has led to a debate about the importance of Soviet cinema and film theory on the Italian directors who were trained at the Centro during the 1930s and 1940s. Bondanella upholds the view that, although Soviet films *per se* were not a particularly strong influence on this generation of Italian filmmakers, Russian film theory assisted in a reorientation toward a "penchant for realism" (Bondanella 24). On the other hand, in his essay *An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism*, Bazin emphasizes the importance of Soviet films rather than theory: "Was it not from the outset their search for realism that characterized the Russian films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovjenko as revolutionary both in art and politics, in contrast to the expressionist aestheticism of the German films and Hollywood's mawkish star worship?" (Bazin 16). Finally, in her study of Italian

cinema during the Fascist period, Landy provides a perspective which lends support to Bazin's observation without necessarily contradicting Bondanella's assessment:

> What is surprising, however, is the influence of Soviet style of filmmaking (Blasetti's *1860* is a notable example). This tendency emanated most conspicuously from the 'fascists of the left' whose interest was in a vision of fascism as a new and revolutionary movement. Soviet montage in the films of the era was not indicative of adherence to Marxist theory and practice but a recognition of the effectiveness of montage in the treatment of 'epic' subjects, of historical events, and of mass action. (Fascism, 15).

Landy leaves open the possibility that the theories of montage expounded by Eisenstein and Pudovkin added to the 'penchant for realism' which became a hallmark of Italian post-war cinema.

For the purposes of this study, the key message delivered by this controversy is that the Centro played a central role in expanding the cultural horizons of aspiring Italian filmmakers such as Visconti. In this context, a major contribution to the Italian cinematic revival was made by another foreign influence, namely the flourishing French cinema. In addition to Jean Renoir, whose influence on Visconti was a directly personal one, the works of Marcel Carné and René Clair (among others) had a crucial impact on the generation of filmmakers to which Visconti belonged, particularly since the number of Hollywood films imported in the country continued to lessen (Bondanella 24). For instance, Vittorio De Sica greatly admired Clair's surrealist comic style and would eventually come to imitate it, while Michelangelo Antonioni served as Carné's assistant during the making of *The Devil's Own Envoy* (Bondanella 24).

The lively, international and innovative spirit which animated the Centro, is attested to by the fact that it provided a home for a group of young, non-fascist intellectuals and aspiring filmmakers who, through journals such as *Bianco e nero* and *Cinema*, began to explore new paths for Italian cinema. Subsequently associated with antifascism and neorealism, Massimo Mida, Giuseppe De Santis, Luigi Zampa, Mario Alicata, Cesare Zavattini, Carlo Lizzani and, of course, Luchino Visconti were all representative of the critics who "called for new directions" (Landy, *Fascism*, 14).

In addition to the founding of the Centro Sperimentale, the most important contribution and innovation that the regime introduced in Italian cinema was the financing of the huge Cinecittà studios in suburban Rome. At first privately owned and the studios were transferred to the State in 1938 (Sorlin 70). At the time of its inauguration, Cinecittà contained the most modern cinema workshop in Europe and today still remains one of the world's great film complexes. The date of its inauguration is significant, April 21, 1937, for it is supposedly the mythical anniversary of the founding of Rome and there on that day to perform the opening ceremonies was none other than Mussolini himself (Bondanella 13).

It is in this relatively buoyant atmosphere that Visconti's collaboration with the recently established journal *Cinema* intensified. The journal gravitated more and more frequently toward the question of 'realism' and its discourse became more radical: the issue was not achieving a kind of cinematic realism but capturing reality itself on celluloid. The dialogue which was opened up by the *Cinema* critics not only centred on their dissatisfaction with the state of Italian commercial cinema at the time but also began to elaborate a remedy for cinematic artificiality and the "trashy histories, our rehashes of

the 19th century, and our trifling comedies" (Landy, *Italian Film*, 13). From 1941 to 1943, *Cinema* critics voiced an increasingly fervent consensus and articulated a new aesthetic ideal based on Verga, American fiction, and the films of Jean Renoir, a model that clearly expressed the critics' desire for a realist mode. Landy perceptively suggests that "the dialogue over realism was, in part, an attempt to make contact with pre-fascist literary and ideological movements and to develop new cultural models for the future based on European and American writers and filmmakers" (Landy, *Fascism*, 16). Even Italian films of the silent era such as *Assunta spina* and *Sperduti nel buio* were lauded by Umberto Barbaro who praised them for their "depiction of the ordinary, everyday life of typical Italians" (Landy, *Italian Film*, 13). The energies mobilized in this polemic for new directions would eventually find artistic expression into the movement known as neorealism. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the term 'neorealism' was "first applied not to post-war Italian cinema but, instead, to the French films of the thirties in an article written by Umberto Barbaro in 1943" (Bondanella 24). *Ossessione*, was one of the first children of this lively intellectual atmosphere but before examining in detail Visconti's achievement, it is important to recover another important set of determining factors of a less intellectual and more practical nature: numerous tergiversations and the mysteries of Fascist censorship.

2. *Fascism Has Its Say*

As has already been mentioned, the genesis of *Ossessione* begins at the shooting of *A Day in the Country* when Renoir presented Visconti with a translation of Cain's *The*

Postman Always Rings Twice. However, the path that leads from that moment to the making of *Ossessione* is a long and tortuous one.

To begin with, Cain's novella was not Visconti's first choice for his debut as a film director. In fact, many projects were quashed or abandoned before he would remember the American 'noire' narrative. The first novel that Visconti wanted to adapt was Henri Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* but he was thwarted in his plans by Alain-Fournier's widow who opposed the project and refused to sell the book's copyright (Servadio 70). Visconti then toyed with the idea of adapting Julien Green's novel *Adrienne Mesurat*, which he proceeded to translate into Italian (Schifano 167). Soon abandoning the idea of the Green's novel adaptation, Visconti asked Mario Alicata to write a screenplay adapting *La Dame aux camélias* by Dumas fils, a story dear to Visconti since it was also the source for the libretto of one of his most cherished operas: Verdi's *La Traviata* (Schifano 167).[2] Visconti put also Alicata to work on another project, this time teaming him up with Gianni Puccini and Cesare Zavattini, to adapt for the screen Maupassant's short story *Les Tombales*. In addition to the writing projects he had already set in motion with Alicata, Visconti commissioned Massimo Puccini, Antonio Pietrangeli, and Umberto Barbaro to draw up a screenplay based on Thomas Mann's *Early Sorrow* (Schifano 167). Still unsure of his plans, Visconti then joined Alicata and Pietro Ingrao in working on an adaptation first of Verga's *Ieli the Shepherd* and later of Melville's *Billy Budd*. The latter treatment was sent to the Ministry of Popular Culture which returned it with a negative judgement (Servadio 70).

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[2] We may note in passing that music from Verdi's *La Traviata* would eventually find its way into *Ossessione*.

Visconti's team, assembled from the young intellectuals who gravitated around the journal *Cinema*, worked on a film treatment for Verga's narrative sketch *L'amante di Gramigna*. Visconti went so far as choosing his cast with Massimo Girotti and Luisa Ferida in the leading roles and selecting the shooting locations before discovering through Gianni Puccini that the Ministry of Popular Culture not only did not approve the film but the Minister himself wrote across the front page of the script in red pencil, "Enough of these brigands!" (Schifano 168-69). -- a somewhat ambiguous phrase since one could well wonder whether the word "brigands" referred more to the characters in the story than to the *Cinema* group which kept proposing unviable scripts!

After all these aborted projects, Visconti finally turned his attention to the typewritten translation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* which he had received from Renoir. Considering the 'noire' subject matter of the novella, the fact that it belonged to literature that had already been banned by the regime, and the restrictions of the Fascist censors, it is bewildering that Visconti would even consider the idea of an adaptation of Cain's work. Yet, Visconti and his scriptwriters were undeterred and indeed unanimously enthusiastic about rendering *The Postman* for the screen (Schifano 172).

The original working title of the scenario was *Palude* and somehow, miraculously, it was passed by the censors. Attempting to find a reason for the censor's surprising approval, Schifano speculates that "censorship was less vigilant then, with Fascism beginning to founder" (Schifano 172), while Henry Bacon claims, more persuasively, that "the story was probably thought to be a melodrama with the message that 'crime doesn't pay' " (Bacon 14). The script having passed the preliminary stage, shooting was scheduled to begin on 15 June 1942.

For the male lead Visconti cast once again the actor he had chosen for the rejected *L'amante di Gramigna.* Visconti first met Girotti on the set of *Tosca,* the film based on the famous opera by Giacomo Puccini, which the regime had invited Renoir to direct in 1939.[3]

With Girotti in the male lead as the drifter, Gino, Visconti now looked for his female lead to an actress he had admired for some time: Anna Magnani. He wanted her as Giovanna and she was apparently eager to work for this unknown director (Schifano 174). Yet before she was scheduled to begin shooting her scenes, she had announced to Visconti that she was already into her fourth month of pregnancy. She had to pull out of the project and the part went instead to Clara Calamai. At that time, Calamai was one of Italy's most sophisticated leading ladies who usually played the roles of high-society women. Intending a startling departure for Calamai who in her previous roles was adorned with peroxide-blonde curls, Visconti expressed his desire to have her without make-up, dishevelled, "'realistic' almost to the point of ugliness" (Schifano 174).

Even though both Girotti and Calamai were rising stars of Italian cinema, Visconti showed no deference as he resolutely pursued his wish to strip "the glamour and polished mannerisms from their performances" and to capture "the rugged quality of Cain's novel and to use it for his own purposes" (Bacon 15). His actors played against type and both gave exceptional performances under the novice director, who, uninhibited by his lack of experience, asserted his authority through the meticulous thought, and methodical

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[3] The invitation was politically motivated: a gesture of diplomacy aimed at maintaining good relations between Italy and France. However, the war intervened. Jean Renoir was attacked, though not seriously hurt, by a group of Fascists and left for France. The film was finished by the German director Karl Koch. Visconti was credited as assistant director and co-writer.

planning and execution which would always characterise Visconti's working style. Bacon stresses Visconti's craftsmanship on the set of his first film:

> Visconti could be dictatorial on the set also...because he produced and to a large extent financed the film himself. He also astonished the film crew with his enormous store of energy and ability to control the shooting situations. Although he had no formal education in this field and not that much experience either, he was able to make decisions about composition, camera locations, and length of shot without the slightest hesitation. (Bacon 15)

Visconti's remarkable talent for careful framing as well as his sophisticated use of depth of field in both exterior and interior shots -- a technique which enabled him to flawlessly capture various levels of action occurring in the mise-en-scène (Bondanella 71) -- are already well in evidence in *Ossessione*.

Turbulence, however, was not foreign to the production as political surveillance was mounted against Visconti and his team, all of whom were either card-carrying Communists or Communist sympathisers. The crew was regularly subjected to insistent questioning by the police. On one such occasion, in December 1942, Mario Alicata, Gianni Puccini and his brother, Dario, were arrested as subversives and sent to Regina Coeli prison. Though Visconti and the rest of his crew continued to be closely watched their work was fortunately not interfered with.

Ossessione received its premiere in May 1943 at a film festival hosted by none other than the Duce's son, Vittorio Mussolini. Most accounts of the premiere that have been circulated describe a mixed scene: the film was well received, that the audience applauded enthusiastically, but Vittorio Mussolini stormed out of the auditorium,

shouting the now famous words: "This is not Italy!". Visconti and De Santis give different accounts which, however, seem both improbable. Visconti described the occasion as having shocked the invited spectators dressed in their furs and diamonds, while De Santis related the episode as having been a "success among the intellectuals who had gathered to see it," oddly adding that Vittorio Mussolini "passed along to Visconti the favourable opinion of his father" (Bacon 16).

The film was deplored by local authorities and was regarded as an act of provocation by censors and government officials in spite of the fact that Mussolini had himself examined the film and allowed it to be distributed (Bondanella 29). In many Italian cities, *Ossessione* was "always sequestered for a while and then heavily cut before exhibition" (Schifano 180). Polverelli, the Minister of Culture, denounced it as "a film that stinks of latrines" (Schifano 180). On the whole, the critics, at least those not aligned with Fascist officialdom, were positive about the film and many thought that it "truly captured something of the material and spiritual reality of Italy" (Bacon 16).

In Rome, the first public screenings of the film did not actually take place until May 1945, even though a special screening was held in June 1943 in the same theatre in which it had its premiere. At that screening, the film had barely begun before it was interrupted by the police with the order to take down the names of those in attendance. Shortly thereafter, the Fascists confiscated the original negative and brought it to their film studio in Venice, where they edited the 140 minute film into a forty minute version. The negative was then either misplaced or destroyed and the only copies that remain have been made from a duplicate negative "which according to Visconti's own statement is incomplete" (Bacon 16). The version that received its premiere was reportedly, as has

been already stated, 140 minutes in length while the copies available run at approximately 135 minutes. There is no account of what the 5 missing minutes might have contained.

Chapter 3

The Melodrama of a Certain Realism

> "If you believe, as the Greeks did, that man is at the mercy of the gods, then you write tragedy. The end is inevitable from the beginning. But if you believe that man can solve his own problems and is at nobody's mercy, then you probably write melodrama." -- Lillian Hellman

As the title of this chapter suggests, two registers of representation inform Visconti's cinematic work. On the one hand, there is a preoccupation with realism and on the other the influence of a narrative genre which Visconti, more than any other Italian auteur of his generation, exploited in an extensive and original fashion: melodrama. The objective of this discussion is to examine the way in which critics have been able to situate *Ossessione*, on the one hand, within the generic mode of melodrama and, more specifically, family melodrama, but also, on the other hand, within the concept of realism in cinema elaborated principally by Siegfried Kracauer and Andre Bazin. Finally, we will consider the critics who have focused on the contribution that the dynamic tension between these two registers makes to the very special cinematic experience provided by *Ossessione*.

1. The Fickleness of Melodrama

Barbara Klinger, in her work on Douglas Sirk and melodrama, offers a perspective of the family melodrama's potential as a cinematic genre. She refers to the critics of the British film journal *Screen* who:

> focused on how the family melodrama exhibited unconscious dynamics that undermined the dominant ideological values the genre might otherwise seem to endorse. Although the extent of subversiveness varied, all critics agreed that the family melodrama raised the contradictions inherent in bourgeois and patriarchal ideologies [...]. Critics regarded the genre's representation of the family as a microcosm of the repressive social and sexual structures of the era." In addition, those same *Screen* critics also interpreted melodrama's subversiveness in the manner in which it either did or did not contain, or ultimately resolve, ideological tensions raised in course of the given narrative. (Klinger 23)

A key feature recognised in the more sophisticated family melodramas is that it "attains a transgressive ideological status by producing excess tension that cannot find resolution through the happy ending" (Klinger 23).

However, the critical appraisal of the genre's merits in unmasking or at least highlighting the hegemonic structures at work does not provide a definition of melodrama. Defining this genre rigorously is no simple task and one that could hardly be accomplished within the scope of this study. Nevertheless, we shall attempt to synthesize the main thrust of the current discussions.

As Ben Singer has noted in his impressive contribution to melodrama criticism and studies, the definition of melodrama alone may travel along different paths. He stipulates that in defining melodrama, two approaches have usually been taken: "One approach is to highlight a primary defining element that manifests itself in various ways throughout all the genre's many permutations, or in other words, to discern an underlying foundation that structures the genre's array of surface attributes and conventions" (Singer 38). One such feature that is certainly identified with melodrama is the quality of being overwrought or exaggerated, a quality that can be more generally conveyed by the term 'excess.' In fact, in an essay entitled "Minnelli and Melodrama," the Visconti expert, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith put forth an argument couched explicitly in psychoanalytic terms. Nowell-Smith suggested that the genre was subject to a kind of "conversion hysteria" (in Singer, *Melodrama & Modernity*, 39). In other words, melodrama activates psychic energies and emotions that are then repressed by the narrative. The melodramatic story hinders or bars full expression, gratification, or resolution of these emotional energies "because they are fundamentally incompatible with the demands of dominant patriarchal ideology" (Singer 39). This repression on a narrative level results in undischarged emotions which, since they "cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family, lineage, inheritance" are then "siphoned off" (Singer 39). In melodramas, this siphoning off finds an outlet, much like neurotic symptoms, through other channels of expression, such as non-naturalistic mise-en-scène and swelling, histrionic music.

Nowell-Smith elaborates on this theory of melodrama by arguing that "where there is material which cannot be expressed in discourse or in the actions of the character [...] a

conversion can take place [...] The hysterical moment of the text can be identified as the point at which the realistic representative convention breaks down" and seeks an outlet through antinaturalistic or nonnaturalistic means (in Klinger, *Melodrama & Meaning*, 24).

The second approach to the definition of melodrama which Singer undertakes is via the vital element of 'situation.' Much like melodrama, the concept 'situation' is not easily articulated. The synthetic definition provided by Singer is:

> [A] striking and exciting incident that momentarily arrests the narrative action while the characters encounter a powerful new circumstance and the audience relishes the heightened dramatic tension. Situation often entails a startling reversal or twist of events that creates a dramatic impasse, a momentary paralysis stemming from a deadlock or dilemma or predicament that constrains the protagonist's ability to respond immediately. (Singer 41)

When looked at through the lens of situation, it could be said that a film like *Ossessione* does contain elements linking it to this concept of melodrama, but then again, so do many other genre films, such as suspense films (or any film with suspenseful sequences, for that matter), action films, horror films, and of course, the film noir, just to name a few. While useful, the notion of situation is so broad and malleable that it clearly cannot provide the distinguishing feature of melodrama.

In the end, Singer opts for a more complex approach, which does not force him to select one overriding key concept, and suggests configuring melodrama as a "cluster concept" (Singer 44). Rather than ascribing to the genre one basic feature, melodrama should, in Singer's view, be multifaceted, encompassing a constellation of five key

features which allow the analysis of the genre to be both more flexible and yet more concise.

The five key factors he enumerates are pathos, overwrought emotion, moral polarization, nonclassical narrative structure (by which he means a contrast to classical narrative's logical cause-and-effect structure through a "greater tolerance, or indeed a preference, for outrageous coincidence, implausibility, convoluted plotting, *deus ex machina* resolutions, and episodic strings of action that stuff too many events together to be kept in line by a cause-and-effect chain of narrative progression" [Singer 44]), and the fifth is sensationalism, "defined as an emphasis on action, violence, thrills, awesome sights, and spectacles of physical peril" (Singer 48).

In his study on the first hundred years of Italian cinema, Pierre Sorlin also expresses the difficulty in elaborating a precise definition of melodrama:

> Defining melodrama is hard, since indeterminacy has always acted as a powerful drive in the evolution of this hybrid 'genre' composed of different conventions. Melodrama sought less to narrate a coherent story than to establish an open space in which spectators found predictable, standard stories but could also insert their own wishes and fantasies. The only stable pattern was the presence of women at the core of these fictions. (Sorlin 39)

In reference to the popularity of the genre among Italian audiences during the first half of the twentieth century, Sorlin claims that "it is no accident that melodrama, filled with sex but never exhibiting it, fulfilling in images repressed impulses and at the same time warning against sexual drives, was immensely appreciated in Italy at a time when sexual issues could not be discussed publicly" (Sorlin 39). This observation by Sorlin

provides an interesting gloss to Landy's view that the most ideologically challenging and aesthetically superior films made during the Fascist era are the melodramas of the early 1940s and specifically those that focus on the family (*Fascism*, 276). In her assessment, melodrama, more than any other form of traditional narrative, "seems to be an appropriate vehicle to explore and criticise prevailing social attitudes" with the use of the family "at the intersection of economic, political, and social conflict" (*Fascism*, 276-77).

Thomas Elsaesser, another critic who attempted to articulate more thoroughly the mechanisms of melodrama, explained how the genre relies heavily on strong psychological effects, emphasising emotional crises, as well as:

> [The] exploration of failure [...] embedded in a style that makes it possible to identify ideological operations. For example, the sexual conflict, the presence of ruptures and discontinuities, the stylized and figurative treatment, the transformation of conflict from the social into the psychic area are keys to unlocking the ideological and political impact of the genre. (qtd. in Landy, *Fascism*, 278)

These comments converge on the view that in the late 1930s to the early 1940s -- i.e., the period which immediately precedes the making of *Ossessione* -- Italian cinematic melodramas demonstrate how the genre was effective in exposing social conflict. The films generally include psychological conflict as a central component and give due emphasis to conflicts engendered by obsessional behaviour, encompassing jealousy, thwarted sexuality, fetishism, violence, and disintegrating identity. Such obsessions, for obsession is constitutive of melodrama, are usually correlated to economic, class, and political conflicts, also involving issues such as "class differences

that thwart gratification, violent or manipulative responses to the confining world of work, or the desire to escape the restrictive demands of an authority figure -- father, husband, mother, or wife. In all these films, one can find a desire for freedom that is distorted, misdirected, and frustrated" (Landy, *Fascism*, 280). Landy's astute criticism is directly applicable to Visconti's first film.

2. *Searching for Reality*

If melodrama is difficult to define, a definition of realism is a task that few would dare to undertake. And yet a working definition is essential for this study. Accordingly, in order to avoid at least the ontological and phenomenological entanglements bound up with the issue of realism, it is best to confine the discussion to an exposition of realism as a style, a way of representing events. Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer can be considered the two theorists who have contributed most to the elaboration of a Realist film theory. This is not to say that they necessarily shared mutually compatible conceptions of what realism in cinema entails, but for both of them the capturing of reality by means of the cinema was the key ambition of the seventh art. Our discussion will focus on the concepts they developed.

2.1 Kracauer, Realism and Narrative

Siegfried Kracauer published his magnum opus *Theory of Film* in 1960 and the film scholar J. Dudley Andrew described it as "clearly organized, systematic, and utterly transparent. It stands before us as a huge homogeneous block of realist theory: direct,

self-consciously academic, thorough" (Andrew 106). From the outset, Kracauer makes the point that his is "a material aesthetics, not a formal one" (Kracauer xlix). By this, he meant that his work privileges content whereas some of his predecessors gave priority to form. According to Kracauer's theory, the film as an artistic medium is an inextricable blend of subject matter and subject treatment, of cinematic raw material and cinematic technique for "film is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it" (Monaco 399). In his view, formalist theories only allow films to "attain to the level of art to the extent to which they escape the constraints of physical reality," thus organizing "the raw material to which they resort into some self-sufficient composition instead of accepting it as an element in its own right" (Kracauer 37).

In contrast to these formalist approaches, Kracauer asserts the precedence of physical reality in cinema and considers this presence the very foundation of cinema's artistic credentials. For the German critic, "even the most creative filmmaker is much less independent of nature in the raw than the painter or poet; (the filmmaker's) creativity manifests itself in letting nature in and penetrating it" (Kracauer 40). As a result, Kracauer claims that the concept of art as the organization of reality into autonomous compositions "does not, and cannot, cover truly 'cinematic' films -- films, that is, which incorporate aspects of physical reality with a view to making us experience them. And yet it is they, not the films reminiscent of traditional art works, which are valid aesthetically" (Kracauer 39). The question then is: what subjects are most suitable for cinematic representation under Kracauer's theory? and how does a filmmaker represent in a truly "cinematic" manner?

In answering these questions, one might be tempted to assume that Kracauer's contentions about the proximity of film to capturing reality would necessarily lead him to privilege the film record, the newsreel, and the documentary, i.e., non-fiction, over the fiction film. In his investigation of compositional forms and film types, he divides them into two broad categories: story film and non-story film. Kracauer places the documentary in the non-story film and, as he assesses experimental films and films of fact, he concludes that the documentary, as the main genre of the film of fact, exhibits:

> concern for the visible world [...] They [documentaries] channel their messages through the given natural material instead of using the visuals merely as a padding. Moreover, relieved from the burden of advancing an intrigue, they are free to explore the continuum of physical existence. The suppression of the story enables the camera to follow, without constraint, a course of its own and record otherwise inaccessible phenomena. (Kracauer 211-12)

This passage would appear to designate the documentary as Kracauer's ideal film type. Interestingly, this is not, in fact, the case. In its stead, he considers it a drawback that the film type is "confined [...] to the rendering of our environment (and therefore) misses those aspects of potentially visible reality which only personal involvement is apt to summon. Their appearance is inseparable from human drama, as conveyed by an intrigue" (Kracauer 212). Elsewhere, Kracauer states that without stories, cinema relegates and confines itself to merely a surface view of life: "In the case of the film of fact, it opens only on part of the world. Newsreels as well as documentaries feature not so much the individual and his inner conflicts as the world he lives in [...] The

suspension of the story, then, not only benefits the documentary but puts it at a disadvantage also" (in Andrew, *Major Film Theories*, 120).

Hence, it is narrative which affords cinema its opportunity for complete development. Kracauer attempts to evade the seemingly paradoxical nature of his argument by summoning the concept of 'balance.' Through this concept, Kracauer intends to fuse the realistic impulse which seeks to record the object flatly and the formative impulse which seeks to reveal the object's meaning, thereby achieving "the proper film form as a balance between the documentary which tries to follow the random flow of nature and the story film which strives to pull nature into a human shape" (Andrew 120). Herein lies the crucial shift in Kracauer from a preoccupation of *reality* and film, to a preoccupation with *realism* and film.

For Kracauer, the story film can be reduced to three sub-categories, them being the theatrical film, the adaptation, and the 'found story.' The last of these three categories embodies Kracauer's cinematic ideal:

> When you have watched for long enough the surface of a river or a lake, you will detect certain patterns in the water which may have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in the nature of such patterns. Being discovered rather than contrived, they are inseparable from films animated by documentary intentions. Accordingly they come closest to satisfying that demand for the story which "re-emerges within the womb of the non-story film." (Andrew 123)

The 'found story' film is fiction but, crucially, this fiction or narrative is "discovered rather than contrived" (Monaco 400). This means that the plot cannot disengage itself

from the environment out of which it is borne; rather it must be derived from reality itself, from the chaotic, unpredictable whirl of life, "since the found story is part and parcel of the raw material in which it lies dormant, it cannot possibly develop into a self-contained whole" (Monaco 400). In the 'found story' film, the individual neither initiates nor really dictates or controls the plot but, instead, exists in order to accentuate or foreground the human dimension of a broad and objective situation, thereby making us "as spectators view it deeply and passionately rather than for its informational content as we might view a documentary about the same problem" (Andrew 123).

A quotation from Gilberto Perez provides an illuminating final comment on Kracauer's theory. In his excellent book *The Material Ghost*, Perez criticizes of Kracauer's insistence on cinema's capacity to seize physical reality and lucidly confronts the paradox which Kracauer ran up against -- fiction as film's ideal mode of 'realistic' representation:

> The images on the screen are neither a reproduction of reality nor an illusion of it: rather they are a construction, derived from reality but distinct from it, a parallel realm that may look recognizably like reality but that nobody can mistake for it. The picture of reality may be convincing, but in the way fiction is convincing; we respond to the picture not as we would to reality but as we respond to the constructs of representation. The images on the screen are a representation of reality -- an imitation or mimesis in the Aristotelian sense -- as a novel or a play or a painting is a representation. (Perez 17)

In the end, Kracauer rediscovers the inescapable tension between reality and representation: his theory of realism emerges as an attempt to negotiate productively this

tension in the new expressive context provided by photography and cinematic technology.

2.2 Bazin and the Artifice of Realism

Even though he never actually published a book-length study on the subject, André Bazin is noted to have contributed a more nuanced and complex theory of cinematic realism than even Kracauer's *Theory of Film*. While accepting Kracauer's basic arguments, Bazin sought to articulate more lucidly and clearly the meaning of the statement that the goal of cinema as an artistic medium was to capture the real. Bazin's first key contribution to the debate on realism was the thesis that cinema is dependent upon a visual and spatial reality. For Bazin, the core realism that cinema conveys is not "the realism of subject matter or realism of expression, but that realism of space without which moving pictures do not constitute cinema" (Andrew 137). Bazin then added a psychological component to his thesis. In his view, photography and, naturally, cinema (as photography's heir and successor) are defined by the ability to mechanically record and reproduce objects, via the "instrumentality of a non-living agent" (in Andrew, *Major Film Theories*, 138). It thus follows that, in psychological terms, realism has also to do with the spectator's belief or cognitive relation to the photographic/filmic reproduction, a relation grounded in the 'objective' physical process which mediates between the seer and the seen. Bazin makes this explicit in the following citation:

> The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making [...] We are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *represented*, set before us, that is

> to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this *transference of reality* from the thing to its reproduction. (Andrew 138-39) (my emphasis)

Bazin was not so naïve as to assume that the image taken is reality itself. Rather he is emphasizing that the image is produced by tracings left by reality on celluloid, a "transference of reality" achieved through 'objective,' technical, mechanical means (Andrew 138). Neither the photograph nor the film image is the same as the reality from which it comes. They are "fingerprints," comprehensible impressions of the objects, affecting the viewer "*like* a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake" (Andrew 138 & 140). Charges of naturalization may be levelled at Bazin for taking as natural something that is in fact cultural, a human construction, but Bazin does not claim that the photograph and even the film image *are* phenomena of nature, only that they affect us in this way (Perez 30). Cinema, then, exists in relation to the world, looking *like* the world, recording and reproducing its visual and spatial reality for us. But how does a filmmaker go about capturing the visual and spatial reality? What techniques and conventions must s/he use?

David Bordwell, in his masterful study, *On The History of Film Style*, provides useful explanations. For Bazin, the driving force behind the power of the medium is cinema's reproductive power. Cinema's photographic basis allows it to reproduce tangible, unique events, and it is "from this capacity to record the world springs the specific qualities of filmic 'realism'" (Bordwell 71). Bazin championed the achievements of directors such as Orson Welles, William Wyler, and Jean Renoir because they made stylistic choices that "harmonize with the essential nature of the

medium" (Bordwell 71). For Bazin, the stylistic options at a director's disposal included deep-focus cinematography or depth-of-field, long takes, and fluid camera movement, all of which "respect the spatial and temporal continuum of the everyday world -- exactly the quality that motion picture photography is best equipped to capture" (Bordwell 71). The primary ways a director may seek to capture reality have been intimated but now the question still remains: on what should s/he turn the camera?

In his survey of Bazin's work, Dudley Andrew provides some indication of where the answer to this question may lie. Andrew begins by noting that Bazin has a more complex, multilayered conception of reality than Kracauer. Bazin maintains that, within empirical reality, the camera is able to discover "correspondences and interrelationships" (Andrew 155). Bazin acknowledges that humanity has created a political, social, and artistic reality atop 'natural' reality and that, therefore, this additional layer is also available to the camera (Andrew 155) -- in this connection Andrew identifies neorealism as exemplary for Bazin's idea of cinema since the Italian post-war movement comprises many films which purport to "transfer the complexity of social reality onto celluloid without artistic transformation" (Andrew 168). Andrew also notes that the depth-of-field techniques privileged by Bazin are crucial and valuable to a theory of cinematic of realism, insofar as what is being represented on screen must elicit the spectator's trust as s/he accepts the story as something that "exists beyond any film of it and beyond any one interpretation...put there by one man for one purpose" (Andrew 168).

However, in spite of its greater sophistication, which Andrew has helped us grasp, Bazin's theory runs against the same paradox encountered by Kracauer. In his essay "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism" (1971), Bazin states frankly: "realism in art can only

be achieved in one way -- through artifice" ("Aesthetics of Reality," 26). Bazin realized the impasse that the film image reaches in its relation to reality, and Perez stresses that the French critic "wasn't the simpleminded realist some imagine" (*The Material Ghost*, 85). Bazin was aware that, no matter how much reverence a filmmaker may have for the reality before the camera, s/he must rely on:

> the artifice of representation, to express any sort of attitude, including a humble respect for things as they are. Much though it may profit from the camera's directness, a film could express nothing, signify nothing, were it not for the distance separating it from immediate experience, the remove that enables the arranging hand of meaning to put together articulate forms. (Perez 38-39)

In the same essay mentioned above, Bazin comes to a succinct but somewhat tautological conclusion: "We would define as 'realist', then, all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen" ("Aesthetics of Reality," 27). This definition of a realist film fundamentally relies, like Kracauer's, on fiction and narrative.

In the end, then, Bazin's view is that film and its spatial and visual dimensions seem more real to us than, for instance, theatre on account of the familiarity – we could say the 'naturalness' -- of the cinematic artifice and the greater ease with which we accept its conventions:

> Film imitates the way that in real life we focus on something always in the context of something larger, but in a film both what we focus on at each moment and the larger context of our attention, both what we see on the screen and what we take to be there in the space off screen, are arranged for

us, a *fiction* arranged for us and asking us to go along with it. (Perez 85) (my emphasis)

As we have seen, in the summaries of the respective theorists' discourses, what ultimately emerges is certainly, for that was to be expected, the centrality of reality but also and perhaps more surprisingly the centrality of fictional narrative as the ideal mode of representation. Kracauer's and Bazin's theories of cinematic realism are fundamentally theories of narrative cinema (albeit, of a certain type of narrative). Naturally, they identified stylistic techniques and themes to be utilized as ways through which to *represent* reality, yet, it is on the shoulders of fictional narrative that they ultimately come to rest. It is this insight that provides the key to reconciling realism and melodrama, as we will attempt to do in the final section of this chapter.

3. *The Realism of Melodrama?*

Given the impact of realism and melodrama on Visconti's entire cinematic oeuvre, it is imperative to explore how these two modes of representation were incorporated and fused into his art. The inevitable starting point of this line of enquiry is the intuition that there is a tension between realism and melodrama. Indeed, in common usage, when we tend to use the term 'melodramatic' and 'unrealistic' in one and the same breath when we describe a scene that in some way shocks our sense of verisimilitude. The 'excess' which, as we have seen, is an essential ingredient of melodrama is precisely a shocking intensification that challenges the conventional boundaries of realistic narrative. Yet, many critics of melodrama have pointed to the connection between two genres, in spite of the tension, even seeming incompatibility, between them. These scholars have called

attention to the fact that melodrama is able to probe beneath a realism of mere surface, a shallow representation of reality. At its best, melodrama can locate and expose "important underlying dimensions of experience" and even "the underlying forces governing surface phenomena" (Singer 51). A central facet of melodrama's 'excessive' realism is its psychological reach: the genre has developed strategies of representation capable of revealing "the reality of the psyche" (Singer 51). Clearly, these views rely on the psychoanalytic idea of repression which, they argue, melodrama can overcome, thus giving full rein "to the magnified passions, the intensities of love and hate residing deep (or not so deep) within us all" (Singer 51). Eric Bentley explicitly correlates the melodramatic vision to an important aspect of reality: "It is the spontaneous, uninhibited way of seeing things [...] [M]elodrama is not an exaggeration of our dreams but a duplication of them. In that respect, melodrama is the Naturalism of dream life [...] Melodrama is not so much exaggerated as uninhibited" (Singer 52). It seems that melodrama's realism is focussed on 'subjective' human experience, rather than 'objective' natural phenomena.[4]

An interesting trend in the criticism proposes to consider melodrama realistic in that it portrays life as "casual instead of causal...Nearly all the good or ill that happens to us is drifted to us, uncommanded, undeserved, upon the tides of chance. It is this immutable truth -- the persistency of chance in the serious concerns of life and the inevitable influence of accident in character -- that melodrama aims to represent" (Singer 52).

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[4] I am placing 'subjective' and 'objective' within quotations marks because I use the term in the most neutral way possible as meaning 'relating to the subject/object.' In sum, I am attempting to avoid the rather intractable epistemological-cum-ontological issues these adjectives raise.

Singer himself contends that melodrama has persisted as a dramatic mode precisely because "it succeeds in expressing 'the truth of life,' capturing a crucial existential truth, an aspect of life that affects everyone -- namely that ultimately, we are all governed by random forces of happenstance" (*Melodrama*, 52). However, Singer does not accept the view that chance and discontinuity constitute a metaphysical constant (either in existence or in melodrama), and instead he posits the importance of understanding these forces and their representation in melodrama within "a socio-historical trajectory" (Singer 53).

The manner in which these critics relate melodrama to realism places a strong emphasis on corporeality, chance, and vulnerability, elements which are inextricably associated with life and human experience (and therefore eminently real) and yet which have often been marginalized by the kind of rationalist decorum which characterizes realism in art. Melodrama does focus on emotional and existential extremes but is nonetheless firmly anchored in social reality and, if utilized successfully, can represent very incisively:

> the relation between psychology, morality, and class consciousness, by emphasizing so clearly an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces directed oppressingly inward, and with which the characters themselves unwittingly collude to become their agents" (Elsaesser qtd. in Bacon 117).

With respect to *Ossessione*, Bacon makes a convincing case for the success of Visconti's integration of realism and melodrama. While the influences of melodrama in general and, specifically, of the Italian family melodrama described by Landy are clear, Bacon also stresses how Visconti diverges from "certain patterns of representation that

characterized Italian cinema of the time" (Bacon 23) thanks to the influence of Renoir and other French directors of the period. Significantly, Bacon quotes Lino Micciché's apt description of the way in which Visconti succeeded in creating a film that was pervasively bleak and subversive of the stereotypes the regime wanted to uphold:

> As regards sex the ethereal spiritual sublimation became a dense physiological carnality; as regards people, the beautified unity changed into the sour solitude of an aggregate of individuals; as regards the world of peasants the site of unity became a site of fragmentation; as regards the landscape the idyllic backdrop became a turbid scenery. (qtd. in Bacon 23)

Rather than succumbing to the conventions of a genre, Visconti employed a realistic framework not only "to explore how the characters behave in a given situation" but to ensure "that the melodrama appears meaningful and relevant, as a way of evoking reality in its flesh and blood with maximum emotional and existential intensity" (Bacon 23-24).

The characters in *Ossessione* are, to a certain extent, at the whims of chance and driven by life-forces that not in their control. Bacon notes that "the situation the protagonists find themselves in imposes certain severely limiting conditions on them. Their passion is pitted against their intellectual limitations and inability to conceive any viable alternatives for themselves" (*Visconti*, 23). Gino and Giovanna are clearly melodramatic figures. However, Bacon promptly points out that: "the charting of a certain human situation had become at least as important as the telling of a story" (*Visconti*, 23). It is this kind of observation that leads Bacon identify a mixed style of representation as one of the distinguishing trademarks of the Visconti's art. Bacon makes this style "melodramatic realism" and defines it as "a mode of presentation that gives full

credence to the feelings and passions of the characters, allowing the viewer to identify with the character while keeping the intellectual, the critical mode in constant operation" (*Visconti*, 79). One may safely assume that the melodramatic component is contained within the "full credence to the feelings and passions of the characters" while the realistic component is bound up in the "critical mode" which the definition encompasses. Bacon's interpretation of Visconti's style, sheds light on Visconti's own poetics. In his essay *Anthropomorphic Cinema*, the director eloquently argues for a cinema more grounded in visceral humanity, a cinema in which, "the most humble gesture of a man, his face, his hesitations and his impulses, impart poetry and life to the things which surround him and to the setting in which they take place" (qtd. in Bondanella 26). *Ossessione* is the first great cinematic work born out of this life-long commitment.

Chapter 4

Crimes of Obsession

> "The truth of the matter was that right up to the last moment he had never even dreamt that such a dénoument might be possible." -- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

The discussion of Visconti's *Ossessione* will trace in detail the development of the narrative. The objective is to allow the trajectory of the film to emerge clearly and to explore key episodes from a thematic and stylistic perspective. For greater clarity, the discussion has been divided in three parts to suggest that one of the principle of composition was the familiar three-act structure of grand opera. Throughout our analysis we will explore how two basic narrative registers, the realist and the melodramatic, coalesce in providing the unique cinematic experience that constitutes *Ossessione*'s achievement.

1. Act 1: The Business of Seduction

Ossessione begins with point of view shot. We are behind the windshield of a vehicle with an open road in view as the opening credits roll. The soundtrack begins jarringly, quite dramatically, much more than one would expect, considering there is no dramatic action is unfolding before the viewer's eyes. With the conclusion of the opening credits, a truck arrives at a *trattoria* which also serves as a gas station in an unspecified area of the Po Valley. We get a first glimpse of the protagonist when the driver of the truck finds

him sleeping in the back of the truck and wakes him up. The vagabond drifter hoists himself off the truck and wanders off in the direction of the *trattoria*, while the corpulent proprietor, Signor Bragana, of the inn and fill-up station, begins filling the tank of the truck. The drifter moves in the direction of the trattoria, enters, presumably looking for food, and while standing at the bar, his attention is captured by a woman's singing voice. This is an intriguing opening which already encapsulates many of the themes of the film and immediately establishes the mixed nature of the narrative. The setting is prosaic, even a little shabby, and yet there are already elements that project this prosaic images onto a different plane, a plane of mystery, excitement, excess -- the plane of melodrama.

1.1 The Siren's Call

The drifter whom we encounter at the beginning of Visconti's first film is like a lonely, latter-day Ulysses in Homer's homonymous poem: without friends to restrain him and without the heroic cunning and knowledge of his predecessor, Gino is following in enchantment of the siren's call without realising he is being led to his demise. And at this point in the film, neither does the viewer. The drifter follows the charming singing voice all the way into the *trattoria*'s kitchen where he finds Bragana's young wife, Giovanna. But before the viewer is permitted to see Giovanna, Visconti shows us the drifter's back as he stands in the doorway to the kitchen and beyond him, we then see a pair of lovely legs, dangling off a table. There is a cut to the first shot of her face and upon noticing Gino, Giovanna stops her singing. A countershot follows in which the viewer finally sees the drifter, Gino's face. Bacon's description of this scene is eloquently rendered and conveys exactly the message it delivers to the audience: "The moment is further

emphasized by a slight track-in to a close-up and a momentary lack of ambient sound. The erotic tension between them is immediate; from their first gaze, they communicate in the language of their bodies" (Bacon 17).

A smouldering sensuality pervades this kitchen sequence. It is evident in the way Gino intrudes without asking for permission into the kitchen and moves through the room: uncouthly and carnally sampling Giovanna's cooking, looking at her in an almost predatory fashion. Gino's intentions leave little doubt about the fact that the two characters are responding to each other's bodily presence, to a sexual call. From the beginning, it is Gino who embodies this overwhelming sexual energy while Giovanna, though her attraction to him is clearly discernible, is more guarded in speech and behaviour. Gino simply desires, while Giovanna already calculates the uses to which his and her own desire may be put.

While Gino begins to eat, Bragana re-enters the *trattoria* and calls to Giovanna, warning her that "a chicken thief" was found aboard a truck and that he may still be lurking around the premises. There is an obvious clear irony in what Bragana says. He is the one who speaks of using caution with vagrants such as Gino who, in Bragana's view, are capable of anything ("Questi tipi non si sa mai che cos'hanno in testa"). But in fact, Bragana will befriend Gino even before Giovanna decides he may be of use, and in this way makes it possible for Gino to commit a crime that goes well beyond what Bragana had boisterously and ineffectually anticipated. It is him that let the chicken thief in and what Gino will steal is much more than a chicken, it is Bragana's wife and, in the end, Bragana's very life.

When Bragana enters the kitchen, he finds sitting at the table the very person he was cautioning Giovanna about. He admonishes Giovanna for letting the drifter into kitchen. Gino has already paid and gets up to leave at Bragana's insistence. As Bragana continues his brouhaha, Giovanna furtively picks up the coins Gino has left and says bluntly to Bragana that, in his righteous indignation, he has allowed the drifter to leave without paying. When Bragana turns to go after the drifter, the camera tracks-in on Giovanna with a medium shot that captures her with an expression that leaves no doubt about the fact that she has a plan.

Once Bragana catches up with Gino and accuses him of failing to pay, Gino insists that he has paid until Bragana informs Gino that it was his wife who told him so. Gino then realizes that this is Giovanna's way of enticing him back. Accordingly, Gino gently coaxes Bragana in permitting him to stay and repay for the food he has eaten by doing odd jobs and mechanical repairs around the property. Bragana agrees and asks Gino to take a look at his truck. Seizing the opportunity, Gino surreptitiously removes a part of the motor, and informs Bragana that the truck cannot be fixed until the part is obtained, thus buying some time and setting up Bragana's departure which leave the Gino and Giovanna alone. Once Bragana leaves for town, Gino hears Giovanna singing the same song she was singing when he first saw her and takes the siren's song as a summon.

When Gino enters the empty trattoria, he locks its doors and proceeds to the kitchen. This sequence is a fine example of Visconti's combination of fluid camera work and deep focus photography. The camera follows Gino through the dining area of the *trattoria* to the kitchen threshold where Gino stands leaning against the door jamb. The camera then tracks slightly back and over, enframing and keeping in focus both Gino

from behind and a view of the kitchen interior where Giovanna moves to the table and into view, posing coquettishly there and giving Gino a knowing, tantalizing look. Nothing more needs to be shown for their body language intimates precisely that the flirting is over and the physical magnetism between the two characters imperiously demands consummation.

1.2 Confessions in the Bedroom

The bedroom sequence immediately follows the second kitchen meeting between Gino and Giovanna -- the narrative leaps over the sexual consummation that had to be kept off scene in 1943. The obviously post-coital scene opens with a detail of a basin full of water and a hand dipping a comb into it. The camera tracks back until it captures a medium shot of Gino combing his hair in front of a mirror in which we see not Gino's reflection but a reflection of Giovanna lying somewhat languorously in bed and looking at Gino.

As the sequence unfolds, Giovanna recounts the story of her marriage to Bragana and her life prior to it to Gino. She talks of the misery and poverty she had to endure before having met Bragana, asking him if he understands what it means "farsi invitare a cena dagli uomini" ["to be invited out for dinner by men"] -- an obvious euphemism for prostitution. She hoped and expected to save herself through to her marriage to Bragana, who had "la catena d'oro al taschino" when she first met him, a sign of wealth and refinement to her, but soon realized that she had condemned herself to another type of misery, one even worse than before. Although she loathes her life with Bragana and pities herself because of it, she dares not leave her security when Gino suggests that they

start afresh somewhere else. Giovanna is too afraid that a new life might mean "ricominciare a farsi invitare a cena dagli uomini" or as the English subtitles indicate more bluntly, "being propositioned again."

During this sequence, Giovanna's sense of alienation is perfectly illustrated not only through her monologue but also in the scene in which she moves to and sits in a chair near a barren corner of the room. Nothing surrounds her and she seems momentarily cut adrift from everything, everyone, and even herself. The isolation she feels is mirrored by her environment at this precise moment.

In the same scene, Visconti inserts a few cuts to Gino who is standing by the dresser, contenting himself with childlike enjoyment with a conch, and seemingly inattentive to Giovanna's monologue. He then attends to Giovanna, providing some comfort and consolation by first putting the conch to her ear and letting her hear the sound of waves, and then nestling close to her and suggesting that they start a new life. The entire sequence encapsulates the film's basic conflict between "insecure freedom and secure confinement" (Bacon 18). It also supports Bacon's interpretation that: "Money and economic relationships are immediately posited as a crucial factor controlling human and sexual relationships" (Bacon 18).

Visconti's use of mirrors in this sequence is especially worth noting. They appear in four shots: the first at the beginning of the sequence when we see Giovanna lying in bed; the second while Giovanna is putting on a black dress and she briefly peers into a mirror to arrange her hair; the third after her anguished monologue from the chair as she scans her face in a fretful and agitated manner, passing her hand over her face as if she were seeking wholeness and integrity in her reflection to oppose the fragmentation she

feels inside; and finally, the fourth time at the end of the sequence as the camera captures Gino and Giovanna's embrace reflected in the mirror on the bedroom armoire's door which opens displaying Bragana's clothes as a sort of visual metonymy for the man being cuckolded.

Overall, the sequence, which lasts approximately ten minutes, is divided into thirteen takes of moderate length, allowing the characters to move and interact in their environment and with each other at a relatively leisurely pace, so that the viewer has the time to observe their circumstances and behaviour with great detail and exactitude. This technique provides support for the claim that Visconti drew from Renoir's use of long-shot sequences, tracking shots, pans, and meticulously arranged backgrounds to show that "the characters -- and the actors -- were never cut off from the real world or isolated from everything around them" (Schifano 150).

1.3 Death's Shadow

Upon Bragana's return, Gino is allowed to remain for a few days and the parties convene for the evening meal. The dinner sequence is made ominous by foreshadowing. When Bragana leaves the table to attend to a customer who has pulled into the filling station, Gino and Giovanna discuss how the three of them cannot continue to live under the same roof, that something must be done. While they have yet to broach the subject of murder, the possibility of violence begins to float in the air and is indeed made explicit when Bragana returns to relate an anecdote he has just heard about an acquaintance killed by one of his workers who had an affair with his boss's wife.

One could construe in this sequence as foreshadowing not only Bragana's eventual murder at the hands of his wife and her lover, but also Gino and Giovanna's tragic end. Giovanna's agitation is emphasized throughout this sequence. She is exasperated by the wailing of cats outside: they are in heat. At his wife's behest, Bragana taking up his shotgun and goes outside. We hear two shots fired and silence is achieved, as if only death and violence can put an end to the throes of desire. The animals are a metaphor for Gino and Giovanna and Bragana once again plays the fool, the executioner blind to his own impending doom.

Visconti lets the camera linger once Bragana has left the scene, inviting the viewer to observe the characters' behaviour: Gino and Giovanna draw near each other, as finally he pulls her into his arms to comfort her. The purpose behind the camera's lingering is to develop the psychology of the characters and dramatize the impossible triangular situation they are sliding into. It also underscores one more time the irony of Bragana's behaviour: the animals he should be watching are inside the house not outside!

1.4 Love on the Run?

After the dinner sequence, Giovanna disgust for he husband seems so visceral that she consents, contrary to her previous indications, to leave with Gino. A shot of the two protagonists walking along a desolate road in the Po Valley is reminiscent of scenes from Antonioni's *Il Grido* and contributes to the viewer's sense that this escape will not provide Gino and Giovanna with a fresh start.

Gino walks ahead of Giovanna, amusing himself by playing his mouth organ, oblivious to the difficulty Giovanna is having as she lags behind. Soon enough, she start

telling him that she cannot lead a drifter's life as he can. She asks him to return with her but he angrily refuses. One of the central conflicts of the film -- the choice between insecure freedom and secure confinement -- asserts itself again in this scene, causing their first separation as Gino walks away in silence while Giovanna calls after him to no avail. One could say that realism seems to be taking its revenge on melodrama in this scene. Giovanna is uncomfortable, her feet are hurting her, she's not dressed for the life Gino 'irresponsibly' proposes. And yet, we see that the camera is on Gino's side: his boyish buoyancy is winning, while Giovanna's remonstrances, however reasonable, are irritating. Giovanna's realism will have to mask itself in darker colours before it can lay a hold of Gino's will.

2. *Act II: Transgressions*

The second part of Ossessione begins on a train heading for the port city of Ancona. Gino has boarded it without a ticket and when the conductor comes Gino informs him that he has no money to pay for one. The exchange between Gino and the conductor causes the intervention of a fellow passenger who comes to Gino's aid and insists on covering his fare. More formal introductions take place and the viewer is introduced to perhaps the most enigmatic character of film, 'Lo Spagnolo.' We learn that the new character is a travelling artist-entertainer who has spent some time in Spain (thus the nickname) and espouses a rather selfless, communal philosophy.

2.1 The Vicissitudes of a Character

The figure of Lo Spagnolo has caused a fair amount of speculation and debate which is useful to canvass briefly insofar as it reveals once again the tension between the historico-realistic and melodramatic register in Visconti's film. In her examination of the Ossessione, Landy reads a great deal into the nickname which in her view signals the character's role in the film as "an outsider, as someone enjoying a freer life" and "his specific association with the Republican cause in Spain (which) was expunged by censors" (Landy, *Fascism*, 303). Interestingly, Renzo Renzi provides a slightly different account, one in which Lo Spagnolo underwent significant alteration and transformation. Initially, Mario Alicata, one of *Ossessione*'s screenwriters, had very noble intentions and aspirations for the character. Alicata conceived Lo Spagnolo as an anti-fascist proletariat, a communist who participated in the Spanish Civil War, and who travelled clandestinely in order to spread the message of revolution (Renzi 40). Moreover, Alicata had in mind a more central role for Lo Spagnolo, whose figure would become the "critical conscience" of the film (Renzi 41). This character would embody a positive potential for a different way of life, and at the same time function as a positive example and counterpoint to the baseness and negativity of the murderous protagonists. In essence, according to Renzi, Alicata (who was later to become one of the leading cultural critics of the Italian communist party and eventually the director of the communist run Gramsci Institute) wanted the film to be a revolutionary manifesto and Lo Spagnolo had a crucial function in steering the narrative in that direction. However, when Alicata and Pietro Ingrao (another crewmember of the film) were arrested and imprisoned for clandestine anti-fascist activity, and Visconti took complete control of the film's orientation, the character

of Lo Spagnolo became less a one-dimensional mouthpiece for revolutionary ideology and a more complex, indeed ambiguous character. In his analysis of the film, Nowell-Smith, argues that Spagnolo has too often been interpreted as a "positive hero" and contends instead that he is "not altogether agreeable [...] he is a law unto himself and consistent with himself" (24). Nowell-Smith's contention is interesting but in need of some qualification. Lo Spagnolo does live by a certain code of conduct and ethics, to which he is steadfastly attached. However, far from being "a law unto himself," he is someone governed by laws that are in accordance not only with those of the community and social strata to which he belongs but also with those of a fundamental humanism. As Spagnolo says to Gino after the latter thanks the former for his generosity in paying for his train fare, "Bisogna aiutarsi l'uno con l'altro, no?" ["We need to help one another, don't we?"]. Additional examples of Spagnolo's goodwill and sympathy toward others is demonstrated by the fact that though Gino is a complete stranger to him, he invites Gino to travel and stay with him, and once they reach Ancona and check into a hotel, the owner, who becomes flustered by Gino's possibly untruthful intention to pay the next morning, is assuaged by Spagnolo, telling him, "Voi siete un buon figliolo...[then indicating Gino with a nod of her head]...ma lui!" ["You're good boy...but him!"]. In sum, Lo Spagnolo is neither a brooding Romantic hero nor a Nietzschean *ubermensch.*

2.2 The Question of the Gaze

The entire sequence in the hotel room at Ancona is noteworthy for several reasons. The first point of tension between Gino and Spagnolo occurs when Spagnolo mocks Gino for dealing in women's clothing when Gino's suitcase opens and its contents of said articles

tumble to the floor. Gino takes offence at Spagnolo's sardonic comment, which, as Nowell-Smith notes, is in response to "Gino's betrayal both of true male comradeship (the Spagnolo is a homosexual) and of the wanderer's basic rule to form no attachments" (22-24). Secondly, towards the end of the sequence, when the two itinerants decide to bunk down in the same bed, Gino rolls on his side with his back turned to Spagnolo. Spagnolo beholds Gino for a moment and then turns off the lamp beside the bed. There is momentary total darkness until the strike of a match is heard, whose flame illuminates Spagnolo's face. With match in hand, he moves it towards Gino's sleeping body and holds it aloft, looking at the sleeper and the camera looking with him. He then lights a cigarette and blows out the match, engulfing once again the room in darkness and ending the sequence. It is at this particular point that the viewer wonders why Spagnolo has looked at Gino in the way he has and begins to speculate about and suspect his homosexuality. This speculation is never resolved by the film, and draws its strength primarily from this scene: the way Spagnolo looks at Gino suggests something more than mere camaraderie.

However, for the argument developed in this study, the most important aspect of this scene is not so much to suggest Lo Spagnolo's homosexuality, but rather to draw the audience attention to the fact that Gino, more than any other character in the film, is subjected to looks, is the main target of the cinematic gaze. The visual scrutiny under which he is placed is primarily threefold: that of the camera which narrates his story (and with which the audience is aligned), that of Giovanna, and that of Lo Spagnolo. Gino is an object of scopophilia from very early on. He is the only character whose body is significantly exposed: he is often shirtless and wears tank tops or tight-fitting shirts

throughout most of the film. It is remarkable how in the sexually charged opening sequence at the trattoria, the camera captures Giovanna rather quickly in a medium-close up shot and when it turns on Gino the countershot is longer, at first from the same medium-close distance but then tracking in closer. While the camera lingering on Gino can be justified in terms of the lines of dialogue he has to deliver, the driving force of the scene is sexual attraction and the camera movement emphasises the extent to which Giovanna is immediately attracted by the handsome vagrant. And yet there is more, the camera moving in on Gino can only metaphorically be related to Giovanna's attraction (she does not move at first) and in fact suggests that at stake in this scene is also the relationship between the character and the camera itself, a relationship momentarily mediated by Giovanna presence but in fact independent of it. This scene positions Gino as the object of desire not only in the film but of the film.

As the sequence progresses, the viewer is also witnessing Gino's attraction to Giovanna but the camera does not convey his desire in quite the same fashion: Gino's attraction is generic and conventional, the camera takes it for granted and has no interest in probing it. As Gino strolls through the kitchen looking for food, he takes off his jacket as he is standing near the stove, revealing his naked torso underneath the threadbare undershirt. There follows a medium shot of Giovanna who turns around and is evidently impressed by the figure she sees. She even remarks, "Hai le spalle come un cavallo" ["You're built like a horse"]. Gino's desire seems to be a reverberation of the intense sexual heat generated by Giovanna's and the camera's gazes.

There are clear parallels between the sequence in the trattoria and the hotel room sequence at the beginning of the second section of the film: indeed these similarities

provide a strong vindication of the narrative scansion this study proposes. In the hotel room, Lo Spagnolo gazes at Gino twice: before he turns off the lamp and then by match light. The specific object of the gaze is Gino's broad shoulders -- the same body part Giovanna had praised. In her landmark essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey speaks of how traditional narrative film relies on women's bodies as both "an indispensable element of spectacle" and a device "to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 62). In *Ossessione*, this statement clearly applies not to the female characters, but to Gino and confirms his status as the sexual object of the film. In the kitchen scene, Giovanna seems literally arrested for a moment upon seeing Gino's entering frame, and later, in the hotel sequence, Lo Spagnolo freezes the flow of action when he looks at Gino's sleeping body in a not so subtle moment of erotic contemplation. The gaze is present but in this film its desire is clearly directed on a man and, if we accept Mulvey's notion that the camera has been constructed as a male gaze, then in *Ossessione* that gaze is homosexual.[5] Standard cinematic practice is subverted in this film to the extent that the main male character is the one looked at, first subjected to Giovanna's gaze and then to Spagnolo's homosexual gaze (Bacon 21), but finally and most importantly to the constant homosexual investment of the camera.

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[5] Mulvey's article is as controversial as it is influential. For the purposes of this study, it seems sufficient to say that in *Ossessione* the camera clearly espouses a male perspective. The fact that the director is a homosexual man provides pertinent though extrinsic evidence. Of greater probative value are the elements of misogyny and gynophobia in the representation of Giovanna. Our discussion leaves unanswered the question of whether the male homosexual gaze encountered in *Ossessione* can be incorporated as a variant in Mulvey's theory or requires a radical reformulation of it.

2.3 Murder

After the hotel sequence, Lo Spagnolo and Gino begin working together. The film does not tell us for how long, however, and the narrative leaps to the moment that Bragana and Giovanna re-enter the scene. Gino and Spagnolo are still in Ancona working at a fair that Bragana and Giovanna happens to visit. It is Bragana who first spots Gino. The latter is wearing a boyish sailor's suit and sporting a placard which advertises an opera-singing contest: both the suit and the placard are a little ridiculous, embarrassing and humiliating -- they suggest a regression in age and control that marks a kind of emasculation of the character. Bragana greets Gino enthusiastically, while Giovanna's responds somewhat sheepishly as Gino addresses her with formal decorum as "Signora Bragana." Husband and wife find themselves at the fair specifically on account of the singing contest which Bragana has entered. Gino seizes the opportunity to quit his job (briefly signifying his frustration to Lo Spagnolo) and accompany them. At the cafe where the contest is being held, Gino tells Giovanna of his inability to rid his mind of her. He asks her to come away with him but she reiterates her refusal.

Bragana wins the contest and, after celebrating the victory celebration with heavy drinking, Gino, who has agreed to return to the trattoria, and the Braganas retrieve the truck to return home. When the inebriated Bragana moves out of the frame to find the parking attendant, adulterers steal a kiss and an embrace, after which the two of them look directly into the camera and Giovanna whispers the enigmatic words: "Subito!...Capisci?...Subito," ["Right away!...Understand?...Right away"]. The viewer does not know what they plan to do, yet the conclusion is easily drawn that their intentions are not good ones.

The next sequence culminates in the murder of Bragana. At first, he is behind the wheel, though intoxicated and beginning to feel ill. Then, at Giovanna's insistence, the wheel is entrusted to Gino. There is a panoramic long shot of the truck as it winds along the road, followed by a cut to a day exterior medium shot of the murder scene taken: the hillside beneath the road. A police investigation is underway and though neither Gino nor Giovanna is apprehended, the police continue to harbour suspicions about Gino and Giovanna's role in the accident. It is worth noting that Visconti handles this potentially highly melodramatic event with great economy and subtlety, achieving a convincingly realistic narration.

3. *Act III: Retribution*

The third part of the film begins with Gino and Giovanna back in the trattoria. All is not well, however, as the lovers have an agitated discussion about the immediate future. This is merely the first of a series of escalating confrontations that erode not only Gino's feelings for Giovanna (whatever they might have been) but ultimately bring him to the threshold of an insane paranoia. Gino feels they are being watched by a community which already knows of their crime and, like the police, is just waiting for them to 'slip up' (see his reaction to the customer who interrupts his first fight with Giovanna). Gino also begins to suspect Giovanna's real motives. When she finds her inspecting some of Bragana's possessions, he immediately asks her to show him what she has been looking at. Giovanna refuses and Gino chases her around the room. Even though time their struggle ends on the bed, and their anger dissipating in a kiss, the camera captures Giovanna's hand hangs off the side of the bed with Bragana's pocket-watch dangling

from the gold chain that first caught her attention. She's hanging on to the symbol of her security and the audience begins to suspect her as much as Gino. From this moment on the camera will lose no opportunity to portray Giovanna in a negative light, while presenting Gino as the tragic victim of a doom he was incapable of escaping.

3.1 Greed and Guilt

As the confrontations between Gino and Giovanna intensify, it becomes clear that Giovanna has no intention of leaving the trattoria inherited from her husband. She always emphasizes prudence, patience, and above all the fear of poverty and destitution. Gino, on the other hand, is racked by guilt and wants with increasing desperation to leave and "ricominciare a vivere" ["truly start all over"]. The irreconcilability of the two characters' needs and priorities is underscored by death imagery, such as the appearance of an old woman clothed in black with a wide-brimmed hat which shadows her face save for her mouth, and sickle in hand.

The conflict between Gino's guilt and Giovanna's concern for material well-being is also emphasized at the party that she organizes in order to increase their business. While she is downstairs working, Gino is in the bedroom where picks up and looks at Bragana's pocket-watch and gold chain, before placing it back inside the drawer. The pocket-watch and gold chain continue to be a visual and tangible metonymy for the murdered man and force Gino to betray discernible remorse for Bragana's death.

3.2 The Last Chance

The trattoria party scene is an important moment in the narrative because while on the one hand it underscores the separation between Gino and Giovanna, on the other hand, it provides the setting for Gino's last meeting with Lo Spagnolo: at the end of this sequence the two adulterers emerge as definitively locked in a deadly embrace.

Gino is standing by the bedroom window when he sees Lo Spagnolo approaching the trattoria. He rushes down the stairs and out of the trattoria to greet him. When Gino asks Lo Spagnolo how he managed to find the place, the latter replies that it was not a difficult task since "Non si parla che di te in giro" ["Everyone around is talking about you"]. Gino does not ask Lo Spagnolo to elaborate and does not seem overly concerned. However, Gino lead Lo Spagnolo away from the trattoria, insisting on walking in the opposite direction.

This entire reunion sequence with Spagnolo is fraught with ambiguity and tension, both passive and aggressive. The viewer is not certain of the extent to which Spagnolo suspects or is sure of the crime. The English subtitle, "You've acted badly, Gino," does not do justice to Spagnolo's remark in Italian, "Hai fatto una vigliaccheria, Gino," meaning a little more precisely that Gino has done a cowardly thing or committed a cowardly act. And in any event the statement is ambiguous: is Lo Spagnolo referring to Gino's hurried departure (Gino abandoned him, who had been his friend and benefactor, at the drop of a hat) or to Bragana's murder?

Lo Spagnolo and Gino walk toward the marsh. They both sit on the grassy bank while Lo Spagnolo talks about his future plans. This scene is executed in a low-angle medium shot, echoing an earlier scene in which the two of them stroll through the Piazza

di San Ciriaco in Ancona and end up sitting on a parapet overlooking the sea, and sharing a cigarette. In terms of shot composition, there is one significant difference: in the earlier scene, the low-angle shot is positioned at a right-diagonal angle, foregrounding Gino, while in the later scene, the low-angle shot is positioned at a left-diagonal angle, foregrounding Spagnolo, who, incidentally, has virtually all the lines of dialogue save one. In terms of atmosphere the difference is even more marked: in the Piazza scene, there was a sense of camaraderie, possibility, and opportunity as the two men decide to set out together and, in Gino's case, leave the past behind. Even the setting, Ancona's busy harbour, reflects the characters' sense of newness and possibility, a sense consolidated by the vista of the open sea and its infinite horizon which suggest choice and freedom. In the later scene, the sense of entrapment and suffocation Gino has felt since the murder is mirrored by the enclosed, stagnant marsh. There is no open horizon in front of them and the fellowship that existed before between Gino and Spagnolo also seems to have gone. Gino sits beside Spagnolo, appearing to be inattentive to Spagnolo's words and wholly self-absorbed. By the end of the scene, Gino begins muttering repeatedly: "Non mi piace piu` viaggiare" ["I don't like travelling anymore"], to which Spagnolo responds pointedly: "A che punto ti sei ridotto!" ["What a state are you in!"]. The repetition of this mantra, which grows steadily angrier, is "too blatant to pass even for self-deception" (Bacon 19). When Gino tells him in a fit of desperation and contempt that he no longer wishes to lead a vagrant's life, Lo Spagnolo realizes the extent to which Gino has forsaken the ideal of freedom they had shared.

The bitterness of the realisation brings Lo Spagnolo to voice the most explicit references yet to Gino's crime: "Certe cose si pagano" ["Certain things you pay for"] and

then, just before he is knocked to the ground by Gino, "Resta qui se ti piace, con quella donna che ti sei guadagnato in questo bel modo" ["Stay here, if you like, with that woman you earned yourself in a such a fine way"].

The altercation between Gino and Lo Spagnolo ends with the latter refusing the help of a detective and apparently walking away once and for all from Gino's life. However, the next sequence which involves a radical change of location brings the startled viewer to the police station. A figure comes into view with his back to the camera, walking into the chief constable's office. As the door closes, the officer articulates: "Tavolato Giuseppe, detto Lo Spagnolo." Spagnolo's presence at the constable's office is surprising. It is difficult to assess whether Spagnolo went there on his own volition to denounce Gino out of a sense of betrayal or justice or both, or if the call the detective made in the preceding scene was an order to bring Spagnolo in for questioning due to his connection to Gino. This ambiguity is an important one because it reiterates the ambivalence in the characterization of Lo Spagnolo and in the portrayal of the relationship between him and Gino. The key interpretive issue is whether the life that the Spagnolo offers Gino is a real alternative or merely another trap. Visconti seems unwilling or unable to decide and, given his ambivalent feelings about homosexuality, this should not be overly surprising. In terms of the tension between realism and melodrama, it is interesting to note that as the narrative draws to its inevitable tragic conclusion, the melodramatic register takes over. It is as if the camera took on the task of showing the world from Gino's increasingly distorted perspective, a perspective marked by guilt and fear, by passions that in their morbidity outstrip the representational canons of realism.

3.3 Confessions in a Brothel

Once Lo Spagnolo is out of the way, the narrative rushes toward its conclusion. Gino and Giovanna have gone for the day to Ferrara where she has gone to enquire about her husband's insurance policy. While waiting in a park for Giovanna, Gino encounters a young woman named Anita, whose features oddly bear a younger resemblance to those of Giovanna. Gino and Anita quickly develop a liking for one another. She asks him to escort her to the theatre, but he declines because he is waiting for someone whose name he does not mention. Once Giovanna returns, she tells Gino of some exciting news: Bragana had a life-insurance policy to which she has been able to cash after some intensive interrogation. Upon hearing news of the deceased's insurance policy, Gino becomes distraught and accuses Giovanna of consciously orchestrating his seduction and Bragana's murder. Gino refuses to believe Giovanna's protestations of ignorance about the insurance policy (was that what she had been looking for when he found her rummaging in Bragana's affair? if so, why didn't she tell him right then?). He leaves Giovanna, finds Anita's address and waits for her to return. When she does, the two seem bashfully content to see each other.

Anita takes Gino to her room and she begins to undress, revealing that she is a prostitute by profession and, as a prostitute, she expects that Gino is not there merely for conversation. When Gino stops her from disrobing, she throws her arms around him, telling him, "Sei tanto diverso dagli altri," ["You're so different from the others"] -- the interaction between the two is governed by melodramatic stereotypes which warn the spectator of the ephemeral nature of this moment of solace. In fact, Gino's lack of interest

in sexual intimacy is a sign of weakness, not of strength. As soon as Gino and Anita leave her dark room, Giovanna spots them and proceeds to make a terrible scene, even threatening to denounce Gino to the police if he does not return with her. Their quarrel ends with Gino slapping Giovanna and leaving her. Gino returns to Anita's room where he finally unburdens himself of his guilt, confessing everything to Anita: who Giovanna is, what they have done, and how he naively thought he could extricate himself from her but now recognizes that he is more bound to her than ever.

Renzo Renzi aptly indicates the manner in which *Ossessione* is Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* set in the Po Valley (Renzi 39). However, on close inspection, the Dostoyevskian facet of the film seems limited to the inclusion of the episodes with Anita. In their scenes, Gino is to Raskolnikov what Anita is to Sonya. Anita, like Sonya in Dostoyevsky's novel, has an innocence and naiveté which endear her to Gino much in the same way that Sonya's attributes endear her to Raskolnikov. Also like Sonya, Anita neither judges nor condemns Gino for what he has done, when asked if she is horrified by what he has done she answers that for her, he remains the same. Anita then helps Gino to elude the detective who has been following him and is rewarded by being rather summarily abandoned and, apparently, quickly forgotten as Gino escapes by the rooftop, in a sequence somewhat reminiscent of the opening episode of a later iconic film, Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*. While there some Dostoyevskian undertones are discernible, in the end one is left wondering whether they are the result of a diffuse

intertextuality (which owes much to opera and melodrama) rather than of a direct link between the Russian writer and the Italian director.[6]

3.4 The Futility of Hope and Reconciliation

Inevitably, Gino returns to the trattoria by truck, just as when he first arrived, but now a much different man. He finds Giovanna in her room. She tells him that she did not denounce him as he surmised and that she loves him and is carrying their child. Gino is mystified by the news, and leaves the room without hearing the rest of what Giovanna has to say.

Then something very odd happens in the film. Gino approaches the little girl whom we have seen quietly walking down the corridor moments before, but whose presence at this point in the film is entirely mysterious. He sits with her and asks if she thinks he is a bad man, to which she answers no. The inclusion of the child at such a late stage of the film is unexplained and her function remains an enigma. Landy interestingly observes that: "children are the agents in uniting the family, sometimes at the expense of their own lives. In the films of the forties, however, children are used to dramatize the breakdown of domestic life, though they may be powerless to avert disaster" (*Fascism*, 22). In sum, this child is an ambiguous sign, does it represent a catalyst in the reunion of Gino and Giovanna or the ultimate breakdown of their life? The fact that the child suddenly appears out of nowhere, suggests perhaps that the young girl is a kind of materialization of the baby Giovanna is herself carrying. Gino, then, could be seen as asking the child for

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[6] In support of a more direct link between the two artists, one could cite the adaptation of Dostoyevsky's short story "White Nights" in Visconti's homonymous 1957 film.

forgiveness in bringing a life into the world under such circumstances. The child grants this forgiveness but the surreal element of the scene suggests that, as in the case of Anita, such forgiveness will not be able to change the unrelenting tragic course of the narrative.

In the penultimate episode of the film, however, we seem to witness a more genuine shift. Gino is shown outdoors on a beach in a long shot walking towards the camera as Giovanna calls his name off camera. They reunite and reconcile. Gino asks her for forgiveness, telling her how the night he spent alone was liberating for him, how he feels like a new man. Heavily laden with ambivalent archetypal imagery (water but also sands), the dialogue and atmosphere suggest not only Gino's rebirth but the rebirth of his love for Giovanna, a new commitment to each other by both of them, and a new beginning for their life together. The fact that the two protagonists are away not only from the trattoria but from any of the environment we have seen so far, strengthened the impression that a new phase is really under way. The cruel irony in this rather idyllic moment is that we are just a few shots away from witnessing the lovers' final punishment.

On closer scrutiny, it is possible to find hints that something is amiss in this beach sequence. Giovanna is all submission and even urges Gino to ignore her in the future: "D'ora in poi quando ti dico di no, non darmi retta" ["From now on, when I say 'no' just ignore me"]. The active role she has been playing throughout the film is discarded in favour of a traditional passive one. Has the child in her womb achieved such a miracle? Or is it that since she has got the insurance money she is now ready to leave and needs Gino to help her? Even more sinister is the fact that Gino seems to accept this submissiveness as a solution to their problems, as if the procreation of a life balanced the

murder they committed rather than compounding their criminal and irresponsible behaviour. On a second viewing especially, it's hard not to see the beach as a moral desert rather than a place of rebirth.

In the film's final episode, Gino and Giovanna quickly stop by the trattoria for the last time and make their getaway in haste for fear of being ensnared by the police. The police are following them, going first to the trattoria to apprehend at least Gino, and are then informed by the child as to their whereabouts -- perhaps her forgiveness is not meant to be taken as a permission to pretend that the past can be forgotten. As Gino and Giovanna are driving away, she begins talking to him of her physical and emotional changes as each day passes in the course of her pregnancy. She expresses worry and asks for reassurance, which Gino provides, assuring her that all will be well, that luck is on their side, and that it cannot abandon two people who are about to have a child ("Vedrai che tutto andrà bene....E poi, il destino ci aiuterà....Non può allontanare due come noi che stanno per avere un figlio" ["You'll see, everything will be fine... And fate will help us... It cannot separate two who are about to have a child"]. She tells him of how he will have to take special considerations in treating her, while Gino, for his part, assumes the role of protector and provider quite naturally, and even seems to relish the responsibility for her welfare and security that she has given him. The exchange of active and passive roles between the lovers is fortified in this last episode, though there is something forced and excessive in the melodramatic way in which Giovanna and Gino express themselves. They need to persuade themselves of the purity of their motives and of their chances for the future; they try a little too hard and make the viewer feel increasingly uncomfortable.

With the police in pursuit, Gino and Giovanna find themselves behind a large truck which is emitting copious amounts of exhaust fumes. Gino attempts to pass the vehicle and ironically suffer the same accident they staged for Bragana's murder. Their jalopy crashes through the rail guard and tumbles down the hill into the water below. The police arrive to find that Giovanna has been killed in the accident and the film ends with Gino's silently awaiting arrest. Visconti's axe has fallen.

4. Tying Loose Ends

A discussion of *Ossessione* would not be complete without devoting some time to the elaboration of a few themes. One of these themes is the marked interest in sexual conflict and "the entrapment in romantic fantasy" (Landy, *Fascism*, 306). Giovanna is contemptuously obsessed with Bragana's boorishness and coarse banality; he is the father-husband figure "who controls her life and whom she seek to destroy" (Landy, *Fascism*, 306). Rather indifferent to her aspirations and grossly insensitive, Bragana exercises his authority over his wife, imposing his unimaginative and unexciting petty bourgeois values on her. In many respects, Gino represents the antithesis of Bragana: young, independent, and carefree, he maintains his romantic ideas of freedom until they are impeded by his desire for Giovanna. As Landy insightfully proposes:

> Giovanna's fantasy is to replace Bragana with the younger man but maintain, even improve, the style of family and business life she has known, while Gino is incapable of extricating himself, bound as he is first by passion but then later by having shared in the crime of destroying Bragana. (Landy, *Fascism*, 306).

The murder they commit in order to achieve a closer union miscarries, alienating them from one another (until the short and ultimately ambiguous reprieve in the beach scene) and entrapping them in their own obsessions: "she becom[es] enslaved to the business and accumulating money, he enslaved to sexual desire and to the notion of enslavement itself" (Landy, *Fascism*, 306).

Another theme that merits more development is the dichotomy between interiors and exteriors. The trattoria signified, for Gino, a locus of confinement, entrapment, and stagnation; his counterpoint to such an environment was the open road and the open sea. On the other hand, for Giovanna, the trattoria signified a place of security, comfort and material gain. Indeed, it is because she invested such visceral desire for security in the trattoria that it became a prison for her and for Gino. As Giovanna continues to submerge herself in the expediencies of the trattoria and "in commerce, the less she derives personal gratification from her desire to replace Bragana and to assume his responsibilities" (Landy, *Fascism*, 306). In the end, as the relation between Gino and Giovanna change, a role reversal occurs and Giovanna "becomes the jailer to Gino that Bragana had earlier been to her" (Landy, *Fascism*, 307). Romantic love and fantasy give way to possessiveness, suffocation, and coercion.

The theme of betrayal looms rather large in *Ossessione* and it occurs at various points throughout the film. While practically every relationship in the film is regarded, by at least one of the parties, as "an exclusive commitment and as conferring obligations" (Nowell-Smith 24), the narrative shows that such exclusive commitments fail and lead to betrayals. This dynamic transpires not only between Bragana and Giovanna in relation to Gino, but also between Lo Spagnolo and Gino, in relation to Giovanna, as well as

between Giovanna and Gino in relation to Anita: infidelity is everywhere. The acts of betrayal are not exclusively sexual ones. The culminating act of betrayal is the murder of Bragana both on the part of Giovanna as his wife and the part of Gino as a friend to whom Bragana showed some avuncular affection.

The last issue that should be mentioned is the representation of women in Visconti's film. The only two female characters of any importance are Giovanna and Anita. The latter is the simpler character, the reduced foil of the original whom she physically resembles. In a sense, Anita is the way Gino would have liked Giovanna to be: submissive, unpossessive, and ever welcoming. During their brief encounter, she makes no demands on Gino, asks for nothing, imposes nothing; she wholeheartedly accepts him for whom he is and assists him without expecting a favour in return. She seems to emanate a purity and innocence of heart, fulfilling the rather stereotypical role of the 'whore with a heart of gold' whom nonetheless Gino discards without a second thought. In contrast, Giovanna is a stronger, more complex and contradictory figure. She resists subordination, instigates transgression and destruction only to be, in her turn, destroyed. A victim and prisoner of Bragana, she ends up victimizing and imprisoning Gino; a taker of life, she is also in her turn punished by death, not only her own but also the one of the child she is carrying. Though ultimately a victim (Landy, *Fascism*, 308), there is something tragic-epic about her story. And yet, especially in the second half of the film, her conflicting emotions fail to raise her figure to the high level of other Visconti's heroines such as Livia in *Senso*. In the end, it must be recognized that the portrayal of Giovanna is perhaps the greatest weakness of an otherwise stunning directorial debut.

Conclusion: Almost Neorealist

Ossessione is not categorized as being a Neorealist film. It may have certain traits or characteristics of Neorealist films but is generally acknowledged as being a precursor and setting a precedent for the cinema to come rather than being indicative of the movement known as Neorealism. Before situating the film within the concept, a brief investigation of what Neorealism means is appropriate. It is no easy task to define it and this essay will not attempt to provide an exhaustive documentation but rather a succinct summary.

Marcia Landy reiterates what many other writers on film have already stated: that Neorealism "means different things to film critics, writers, and filmmakers. There is no standard definition of neorealism any more than there is a fixed definition of realism" (Italian 13). By the beginning of the 1950s, Neorealism became inextricably associated to a political connotation. On a general level, the rubric was upheld and championed not only by the Left but by a good many writers, artists, film critics, and intellectual film magazines, while it was condemned by the Right and the Church (Sorlin 89). Two quotations by David Forgacs and Gian Piero Brunetta add to the chimera of defining Neorealism. Forgacs once said that Neorealism was and still remains "a descriptive category which was produced and developed in criticism," while Brunetta was even more adroit in claiming that Neorealism was "a myth which has now to be explored" (Sorlin 89).

Peter Bondanella writes in his survey of Italian cinema that "the term 'neorealism' was in fact first applied not to post-war Italian cinema but, instead, to the French films of the thirties in an article written by Umberto Barbaro in 1943" (*Italian Cinema* 24). Pierre Sorlin, in his work on the first hundred years of Italian cinema, traces the origins of the

words further back to the beginning of the century as it was used by philosophers "who maintained that there exist objective facts independent of human thoughts. It was then forgotten and resurfaced, at the end of the 1920s, chiefly in literary criticism" (89). Sorlin continues in his assessment, stating that foreign critics were partially responsible for the adoption of the term, attempting to define films, like *Rome, Open City*, they saw at various festivals which combined a "skilful blend of traditional, melodramatic stories and a new manner of filming and acting. Neorealism was a vacant signifier and they adopted it" (89). Sorlin also addresses how the interpretations of the critics were often at variance, ranging from an ultimate description of the moral and physical destruction caused by the war to a profound mediation and "metaphysical image of human beings faced with despair" (89). Therefore, the conception of Neorealism is not simply lacking in unanimity towards a proper definition of it but, "the label itself is confusing, for it limits the parameters of any critical debate to concern with the connection between the films produced and the society or culture which produced them" (Bondanella 31). In the case of Neorealism, the society or culture producing the films is post-World War II Italy. Indeed the formulaic and traditional view of Neorealism depends on select prescriptions which include, in Landy's overview, "the reiterative description of the recourse to location shooting, the use of non-professional actors, the focus on contemporary events and not on the historical past, the loose construction of narration, the intermingling of fiction and non-fiction, and the privileging of marginalized and subaltern groups" (*Italian Film* 14).

Emphasis also fell on Neorealism's "social realism" component, which entailed general characteristics such as "realistic treatment, popular setting, social content,

historical actuality, and political commitment" (Bondanella 31). A further trait to add to the arsenal of what constitutes Neorealism was the shift from classical modes of filmmaking reliant on the exhausted movement-image to the inauguration of a "new image" discovered in the time-image, whose qualities fostered a particularity towards an open rather than a closed image, thus being "descriptive rather than prescriptive, philosophical rather than interpretive. The image 'no longer refers to a situation which is globalizing or synthetic, but rather to one that is dispersive'" (Italian 14). Such a shift in filmmaking could be exemplified by the advances made by Welles and Renoir, both of whom were celebrated by Andre Bazin for their depth-of-field photography as part and parcel of their innovative mise-en-scene techniques, which, along with the practitioners of Neorealism after them, "'respected' the ontological wholeness of the reality they filmed" (Bondanella 32). In keeping with the focus on the cinematic image, Marcia Landy proposes that,

> Neorealism was not a polemic, a conduit for 'messages' concerning ethics, politics, and morality, though it invoked these concerns. It was, foremost, a harbinger of the attention that must be paid to the visual image in a world that had been set in motion by the powers of the visual and their relation to the dynamism of time, motion, and change (*Italian Film* 15).

Her emphasis on the film image challenges somewhat what other writers on Neorealism have expressed. Sorlin notes that Italo Calvino's retrospective response to Cesare Zavattini concerning the debate on Neorealism concentrated on the idea "that the so-called Neorealists had been more a loose federation rather than a closely knit group and that people had been bounded together more by a common antipathies than by an

informed understanding of one another's work" (91). According to Calvino, "Neorealism was not a school. It was a collection of voices, largely marginal, a multiple discovery of the various Italies" (Sorlin 91). The convergence of a group of people around "common antipathies" resonates with Millicent Marcus' insistence that Neorealism was "first and foremost a moral statement". Bondanella agrees with Calvino's assessment that although the Neorealists of cinema especially dealt with the pressing and topical problems of the day, for instance, "the war, the Resistance and the Partisan struggle, unemployment, poverty, and social injustice," he also contends that "there was never a programmatic approach to these questions or any preconceived method of rendering them on celluloid" (34). The artists working underneath the vast and vague canopy that was designated as "Neorealism" never published manifestos like other avant-garde movements, nor was there felt a need for one. In essence, Neorealism was not an artistic "movement" in the usual sense of the word. Some of the features Neorealist films shared were the treatment of "actual problems", the employment of "contemporary stories", and the focus on "believable characters most frequently taken from Italian daily life" (Bondanella 34). The most astute Neorealist directors never privileged "ontological experience" over the cinematic conventions which structured and organized what they projected onto silver screens. In spite of the fact that no dogmatic approach was ever promoted nor did there ever exist a Neorealist school per se, Neorealism emerged historically in the 1950s, becoming "a relatively homogeneous phenomenon, something of a school. In fact, there were enormous variations among the cinematographers who were then grouped together" (Sorlin 91). In that same decade, debate and much discussion arose over the "crisis" of Neorealism or its "betrayal" by certain directors even though these accusations were

"essentially groundless and founded upon ideological disagreements between various critics rather than any abrupt change on the part of the filmmakers themselves" (Bondanella 35).

Moreover, it would be inaccurate and artificial to claim that Neorealism emerged in September 1945, for it had no precise origin. Sorlin attests to this statement by specifying three films made during the war which "can be considered either the forerunners of a new style to be or the first manifestations of a different way of filming" (95). These three films are: Blasetti's *Four Steps in the Clouds* (1942), de Sica's *The Little Martyr* (1944), and Visconti's *Ossessione*.

Germane to the afore-mentioned is a survey of *Ossessione*'s features as a forerunner of Neorealism. To begin with, critics from the pages of *Cinema*, such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Giuseppe De Santis, espoused "a more authentic use of landscape in Italian cinema," to which Visconti responded with a masterful "linkage between his tragic protagonists and their environment" (Bondanella 28). Visconti also began to utilize lengthy medium shots, which would emerge more forcefully in his mature style. The use of this type of shot, however, enabled Visconti to follow the characters and observe their interaction with each other and their surroundings. "Simple gestures, glances, or even the lack of any significant action at all, impart to the work" spatio-temporal, psychological, and existential elements which would become features and even hallmarks of not only Neorealism but also to Rossellini's films of the fifties, and even those of Antonioni of the early sixties (Bacon 23). Scenes such as when Giovanna is cleaning the trattoria after the party and she enters the kitchen and sits at the table to eat something but within seconds, falls asleep there from exhaustion are

memorable. Film time and real time are merged into a startlingly poetic moment, and one which post-war critics such as Bazin cherished and advocated as "fundamental aspects of Neorealist aesthetics" (Bondanella 29). In addition, a prescription that is supposedly typical of Neorealism in that it represents the marginalized and the subaltern is illustrated by the very choice of the characters and the social backgrounds from which they come.

In conclusion, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith categorizes *Ossessione* as "pre-Neorealist," in the sense that while it anticipates certain themes and styles that were to characterize the rubric, it neglects others, such as "its lack of political and historical perspective. This in itself is sufficient to mark it off from almost all of Visconti's later films on the one hand and the bulk of Neorealist production on the other" (*Luchino Visconti*, 30). Peter Bondanella, on the other hand, provides worthy praise of the film's achievement:

> While it is neither a film about wartime experiences, partisans, or social problems, nor one in which non-professional actors and a documentary-like style are employed -- traits often considered to be central to any Neorealist film -- it prepared Italian filmmakers, if not the Italian public or the critics, for an entirely different intellectual and aesthetic climate in which to work. (Bondanella 29-30)

It is through this lens that one ought to examine and evaluate Visconti's freshman effort. For few films (DeSica's *I bambini ci guardano* [*The Children are Watching Us*], as another instance) made during the Fascist regime, and more specifically wartime, pushed the boundaries of representation in Italian cinema. Though it is certainly not Visconti's greatest work, it is nonetheless a remarkable debut film, not only considering the

circumstances under which it was made but particularly the subject matter and themes it exposed and treated in a singular way for its time.

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