Visconti and degradation

Visconti’s protagonists never do anything as dull as get married and have children – for him, love is always infatuation, and infatuation is always degrading.

The end of *Death in Venice* (1971), shows a peculiar but characteristic lack of judgement – the beautiful, “ecstatic” long-shots of nebulous young Tadzio out on the Lido, intercut with increasingly close close-ups of Bogarde as Aschenbach, a sad old faggot in a deckchair whose make-up’s running and who’s having a heart-attack. We can’t reconcile the two perspectives, and they just clash confusingly. It has something to do with the way they’re angled and edited. We don’t sense that we’re sharing Aschenbach’s view of Tadzio – we’re seeing Visconti’s ideal, Apollonian view of Tadzio, then Visconti’s cruel, Dionysiac view of Aschenbach. Whereas in a Mahler symphony the two might be reconciled, in a Visconti movie they just co-exist unhappily.

This is another way of saying that the film doesn’t work.

Neither does *Ludwig* (1972), work. Intended (as it seems), to imitate an opera by Wagner in its length and pace, it fails to find any cinematic equivalent to Wagner’s melodic invention, and is, in consequence, dull as dull can be. The thesis is like that of *Death in Venice* – the disparity between its protagonist’s ideal perception of Wagner as a source of inspiration and even of redemption (a perception at which Wagner, if I’ve got him right, would have nodded with approval), and the world’s perception of Wagner as a sponger, parasite, adulterer and megalomaniac. Visconti’s peculiar but characteristic lack of judgement here is the absence of any staged Wagner to show what all the fuss is about, and only a repetition of the *Liebestod* from *Tristan* on the soundtrack to show you what his music sounds like, at least. Perhaps, if they tried to reproduce an early Bayreuth production of the *Ring*, it would look so stupid (all those fake Viking helmets), that the film’s thesis would collapse – but, we argue, wasn’t Visconti himself a famous opera director – could he not have managed it? However, he directed mostly Verdi and Donizetti.
Later, we get *O du mein holder Abendstern* – from *Tannhäuser* – played on the cello, and illustrating one of Ludwig’s fantasy grottoes, peopled with swans – as if from *Lohengrin*. We get it three times.

Given the amount of passion there was in the historical tale – not just in Wagner’s music, and between Wagner and Cosima von Bülow, but between Ludwig and his various boyfriends – the sexlessness of Visconti’s cinematic tale is startling (and there’s far more of Mahler’s music in *Death in Venice* than there is of Wagner’s in *Ludwig*). Straight-jacketed himself, as it seems, by nineteenth-century court etiquette, all Visconti allows his characters is heel-clicking and hand-kissing. Perhaps he thought of it as aristocratic restraint – in which case, his Marxism should have told him that restraint was the last thing most aristocrats exercised in their private lives.

But, in his films, at least, Visconti’s Marxism is as unconvincing as Bertolucci’s. He offers a standard, not-particularly-Marxist view of aristocratic decadence, but for a view of its working-class alternative, we wait in vain. At the end of Rocco and his Brothers, for instance (see below), the future seems to lie in an Alfa Romeo factory.

In its last forty-five minutes, as Bavaria becomes subsumed into Bismarck’s Greater Germany, as Wagner dies, as fat, greying, unshaven Ludwig gets more isolated in his gay *bier-keller* romps, and as the bureaucrats move in for the kill, the tale of Ludwig does become tense, and you want to know what will happen. But there are three hours of film before that.

The best sequence shows us the world premiere of the *Siegfried Idyll*, with the musicians on the staircase, Cosima and the kids on the landing, and Wagner beaming paternally over all. Such a sudden dose of super-normality brings a lump to the throat, juxtaposed with what’s become of Ludwig in the meanwhile.

Infatuation and self-defeat in Venice had been used by Visconti as a theme before. In *Senso* (1954), sad Italian countess Alida Valli pursues young, obnoxious, cowardly Austrian lieutenant Farley Granger around the canals and alleyways, and ends up miserable, in part because her degradation is political as well as erotic, for this is the time of Garibaldi, and the Austrians will soon be yesterday’s men. When Garibaldi comes, all she can feel is shame and apprehension! “L’idea che si è fatta di me è pura fantasia”, snarls Granger to her, after she’s just found him filthy, unshaven, drunk, and shacked-up with a trollop – a new trollop. It’s what Tadzio might say to Aschenbach, if he could speak Italian and master the concepts.
The lieutenant’s name is Mahler, but that doesn’t stop Visconti from playing Bruckner beneath many of their scenes of love, jealousy, and recrimination. Bruckner stands for Valli’s Austrian passion: for the well-documented Italian love of freedom, we have badly-dubbed Verdi – watch the way the primo tenore in the opening sequence (filmed in La Fenice), storms offstage at the climax of *Di Quella Pira*, his back to the audience, while his final, long-held high C still rings on, in perfect audio-focus, from the front of the stage.

The problem with Visconti’s choice of Bruckner is that he only seems to know, or to like, one movement – inevitably, it’s the slow movement of the Seventh Symphony (immortalised by our own Patrick Moore), and he plays it over and over, irrespective of the scene’s mood.

Things had obviously changed in Venice between Byron’s day (1816-19), and the 1860s, when *Senso* is set. Valli voices-over her guilt at the passion she feels for Granger, saying she’d hitherto been a good, faithful Italian wife! In Byron’s day wives in Venice didn’t feel their marriage was a marriage if they didn’t have a cavalier servente, and were often rumoured to have the right to one written into the pre-nuptial agreement. It’s true that to have a Venetian lover was expected – but Byron records no instances of Venetian wives taking Austrian lovers, so perhaps Valli’s shame would have been understood, even in the early 1820s.

The fascination we find in Visconti’s later films for well-muscled young Germanic youth is there in *Senso*: what surprises is the obvious affection with which he also films Alida Valli in various stages of déshabillé. She’s ten times sexier here than she is in *The Third Man* or *The Paradine Case* – and is a great actress, with a beautiful, infinitely expressive face, and a scream like nobody else’s.

Farley Granger considered this his best performance, and was upset when the film only got a limited U.S. distribution. He certainly gets better and better as his character gets worse and worse. “Povero mio tesoro! Povero mio disperato tesoro!” he croons, as he grubs about at her feet for the money she’s giving him to get himself invalided out of the army … and sure enough, the slow movement of Bruckner’s Seventh grinds out in accompaniment.

Quite long stretches of this film, too, “want incident” – though the Risorgimento action sequences (when they come, and while they last), are impressive – often filmed, like the famous one in *The Leopard*, in single, logistically-challenging takes.
In *La Caduta degli Dei* (aka *The Damned*: 1969), everyone is degraded both politically and erotically just by being who they are where they are – rich deviants in Nazi Germany. It’s much more fun than either of its companions in the late Visconti trilogy. Its Shakespearean plot (old men killed in their beds, children violated, mother / son incest), is reinforced by having as many interior shots as possible lit in part orange, to hint at the hell-fire which will be their final reward. But it’s also marred by another example of Visconti’s peculiar but characteristic lack of judgement, in the way the Hamlet-figure (played by Helmut Berger, the director’s long-time boyfriend, later to be his Ludwig), embodies so many kinky traits as to strain belief – for one man to be a drag artist / Dietrich impersonator, a straight fornicator, a mother-****er, and a paedophile, stretches credibility. Visconti’s greed for references sinks his concept. The incident of the suicide of the little Jewish girl – taken, as every schoolboy knows, from Stavrogin’s confession in Dostoievsky’s *The Possessed* – is a hermetically-sealed irrelevancy, and looks like the director’s self-compensation for a film he didn’t otherwise have time to make.

The gay S.A. men’s orgy is a good deal livelier than Ludwig’s and his buddies’ will be a year or so later, and the massacre of the S.A. by the S.S. which follows is extremely well-staged (particularly the build-up to it, with the S.S. driving into town and boating across the lake as quietly as possible, through the dim morning light).

The *Macbeth* line is well-sustained. There’s even a Banquo’s ghost (in fact, Macduff’s ghost), in the shape of the brother (he’s married to Charlotte Rampling) who returns to the family dinner-table to redeem his daughters from the concentration camp. But if you are going to have as big an in-reference in your title as this (*Caduta degli Dei* is the Italian version of *Götterdämmerung*), then you really should have a Brünnhilde figure to redeem everyone before the final curtain. The plot gets Rampling out of the way too soon, and all we get by way of Wagnerian leitmotiv is a drunken S.A. man singing Isolde’s *Liebestod*.

Ingrid Thulin, in her most important non-Bergman film, is very good as a double echo – at once Dirk Bogarde’s Lady Macbeth and Helmut Berger’s Gertrude – her performance marred only slightly by our intuition that in some of her scenes with Bogarde she’s acting with a stand-in, and vice-versa.¹

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¹: We have Bogarde’s word that when they did his shots in the dinner scene, he was the only actor present in the studio. The illusion of ensemble was all created in the editing suite.
In *Rocco and his Brothers* (1960), the two principle men – the Cain and Abel boxing brothers – ignore women like the middle-class and fecund Claudia Cardinale (as if any normal man would), in favour of the already-degraded Annie Giradot (I suppose some men might), and one ends degraded, killing her.

Visconti directed too much opera to be a good verismo film-maker about the proletariat. Operas create far-out, exaggerated situations through which the melodies of Puccini, Verdi or whoever, carry you with conviction. The relationship here between Alain Delon (Rocco), Renato Salvatore (Simone, his chief brother), and the *putana* Giradot, is operatic in its rivalry and its larger-than-lifesize jealousies – but it’s placed within the framework of a neo-realist movie, and bursts the bounds of credibility, having no melodies to carry you along. “It must be our destiny”, says Delon at one point – and you’re disappointed not to hear the Stella Artois theme swell up on the soundtrack. Not for nothing does Visconti have to set the least believable sequence – Delon’s “renunciation” of Giradot – on the roof of Milan cathedral; even there, it doesn’t work. The bedroom scene in which Katina Paxinou, as the Mama Corleone figure, curses Giradot, is even more operatic (its artificiality enhanced when you realise that Paxinou must, in the studio, have been cursing in either Greek or English, and Giradot reacting in French).
The homoeroticism of boxing is well-suggested for 1960: we can see by the way the crooked manager eyes up Salvatore’s Apollonian physique in the shower that the two doxies behind him are only there for decoration. And the blonde Greg Kinnear lookalike who hangs around with Salvatore sports a leopard-skin jacket that speaks volumes.

(A horrible thought struck me in the middle of the night, after watching Rocco... are the two main brothers gay for one another, and is their both needing to have the same woman an act of displacement? In a famous shot – censored from the initial U.K. release – Salvatore, about to rape Giradot, flings her knickers at Delon, and they dangle from his head for a second before falling. Does Visconti intend a metaphor – “I’d rather be doing this to you, fratello mio”? When, lying on the bed, Salvatore confesses to Delon that he’s killed Giradot, Delon gives a semi-orgasmic scream, and collapses on top of him.

We need a Quentin Tarantino viewpoint here.)

The movie has a quiet first half, taking off as soon as Delon comes back from the army and shows himself to be as good a boxer as Salvatore has been up to then – but the need to parallel their rivalry in the ring with rivalry in bed (or on the ground at a bomb-site), is forced. Still more forced and operatic is the climactic killing, where we suddenly cut to a flat, watery location resembling the Po delta (see below, section on Ossessione); and Visconti treats us to a re-run of the last scene of Carmen, with Delon winning yet another boxing-match, cut-in with Giradot holding out her arms cross-wise while Salvatore stabs her. Then… he stares at his retractable flick-knife, tries to wash the blood off… throws the knife away… and suddenly you see the point of all the reeds and marshland! He’s no longer Don José killing Carmen – he’s Wozzeck killing Marie!

You stare at Rocco e suoi Fratelli, detached, and annoyed that Claudia Cardinale has so little to do. Only a shot of the whole family at a celebration dinner – the composition of which is identical to one you know from somewhere else – pulls you up; and as Rocco talks to the family about Sicily, you know that Francis Coppola saw the film, too.

But then, what was Visconti’s first film? Ossessione (1943), a version of The Postman Always Rings Twice – a tale of … well, yes, erotic obsession and, yet again, degradation, except that in this case it’s mutual heterosexual obsession, as in the famous source-novel. Sexual obsession with a Marxist and Shakespearean slant or two – she can’t go off with him because she fears insecurity and poverty, he can’t stay with her and enjoy their ill-won prosperity because of the guilt he feels at having killed her husband.

What no-one ever mentions is that Ossessione also has another gay subplot, not in the novel. It concerns the man who pays the hero’s train fair and then shares (without physical contact, for this is Italy in 1943), a double bed with him. He’s slim and dark-haired, with a sort of Dirk Bogardey-look, and operates a fairground turn involving a fortune-telling budgerigar, so that one expects Anthony Quinn to emerge from behind him, bursting chains with his pectorals. True to Visconti’s Shakespearean game, this character turns up like Banquo’s ghost at the gala re-opening of the murdered man’s roadside trattoria – a party where, we notice, girls dance with girls and boys with boys. The hero slugs him one on the jaw, and this arouses the suspicion of the police, and in turn …
Ossessione is set (like the last episode in Rossellini’s Paisa), in the Po delta, a sort of Italian fenland, with long roads leading over flood-dykes to infinitely distant, featureless horizons.²

From these obsessive and decadent tangles, two films stand apart: The Leopard (1963), and lastly La Terra Trema (1948), which could be by a different director. The Leopard is a very strange document. It’s Visconti’s most gracefully-crafted film – as well as his most luxuriously expensive – there’s more money in any one of its shots than there is in all of Ossessione put together – with production design, music (by Nino Rota, not by Bruckner), photography, and editing all near-perfect. There’s not a melodramatic moment anywhere in it. It’s slow, meditative, and uneventful. Burt Lancaster in the leading role of Don Fabrizio gives the performance of his life³ – watch the way he flicks the envelope from the letter in the first scene with one wrist-movement, and then flicks the letter open with another.

2: The landscape metaphor is repeated in The Postman Always Rings Twice (Tay Garnett, 1946), but there it’s a lush, isolated California beach, where Lana Turner and John Garfield experience passion, 1940s pin-up style. Turner’s immaculate platinum blonde coiffure and spic-and-span outfits aren’t the only factors putting this movie on a different planet from Ossessione. It’s the high-quality interior of the wayside restaurant, and the high quality of the clientele – no-one here would dance at all, let alone dance with someone of the same sex. The glossy photography, and the absence of any social context from which Turner’s frustration and Garfield’s wanderlust emerge – plus the way the plot develops, not so much into a sexual power struggle (though Garfield is noticeably the weaker of the pair, unlike in Visconti), as into a soap-opera boxing-match between the pair’s two evil lawyers, make The Postman … closer to Dallas than to Bicycle Thieves. At the end of Ossessione, you see the woman’s throat, slit by the car’s shattered windscreen. At the end of The Postman … you don’t see her dead body at all.

In Bob Rafaelson’s 1981 version, you do see it – strangely restful and bloodless, if you remember the effect Visconti achieves. Strangely, because elsewhere Rafaelson can do elsewhere what neither Visconti in 1943 nor Tay Garnett in 1946 could do – sex. Famed as is the Fuck on the Kitchen Table between Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange, it’s much less shocking than the subsequent Fuck next to the Car Crash, where both principals are so turned-on by the need to beat each other about the head (to make it all look like an accident), that they fall-to carnally there and then, with the husband only feet away, not yet definitely dead. With a script by David Mamet, excellent 1930s art direction, and photography by Sven Nykvist (no less), this is in yet another world: beside it, the 1946 version looks like a game they were playing – and Lange, being ten times more real than Turner, is ten times sexier, so you see what the fuss is all about. The Greek family party harks back to the reopening of the trattoria in Ossessione; only the strange intrusion of Anjelica Huston as a Russian lion-tamer [sic] spoils the conviction which Rafaelson, aided by Mamet, has achieved. Sven Nykvist creates some astonishing night-time compositions, completely black except for distant, static house-lights and moving car head-lights – with, in the opening shot, a moving red light, which turns out to be Nicholson’s cigarette. Nicholson’s finger-nails, as he gropes Lange’s crutch, are oily. Realism moved on a long way between the iconic John Garfield, and the still more iconic Jack Nicholson.

3: Except that the dry, strangulated voice of the Italian actor who dubs him spoils the effect.
The letter tells him Garibaldi has landed at Marsala, so we know the unification of Italy is only weeks away. But Don Fabrizio has exactly the same attitude to Garibaldi, the Risorgimento, and the new Italy, as drunken ex-Lieutenant Mahler has in Senso: they mean nothing to him, he wishes himself elsewhere, and proposes to take his pleasures while he can. But Mahler is of course an Austrian reject: Don Fabrizio is an Italian aristocrat. Strictly speaking he’s a Sicilian aristocrat, which gives him an even greater sense of dispassion: that night he drives into town according to routine, and enjoys the company of his favourite prostitute, just as drunken ex-Lieutenant Mahler might. The most important event in the history of Italy is unfolding around him, and it leaves him cold – it’s just, he says, the substitution of one ruling elite by another: “It’s necessary that everything should change, so that everything can stay as it is”.

The country’s unification is confirmed by a plebiscite. The plebiscite is rigged. The announcement of the vote is a farce, with candles being blown out by the wind, and the brass band down below never getting its cues right.

Don Fabrizio is offered a seat in the new Italian upper house – he turns it down, nominating instead the local political fixer – he who rigged the plebiscite – he who is father to Claudia Cardinale – he whom Don Fabrizio despises.

We suddenly see that Don Fabrizio, for all that his style, for all that he’s Burt Lancaster, has given up on living – he’s affected with what he claims is a Sicilian death-wish (“This Sicilian thing that’s been going on for two thousand years!” as Kay Corleone screams at her husband in The Godfather). Visconti (nominally a Marxist), clearly identifies with it, and with Don Fabrizio.

I find The Leopard a great bore.

If only Visconti had had the inclination (or the funding), to make more films like La Terra Trema, how different would, not just his story, but that of European cinema, have been – as it is, we have to wait for The Battle of Algiers, twenty-eight years later, for anything remotely similar. It’s true that Rocco seems to deal with an allied theme (poor Sicilians with mouths to feed), but Rocco is also (see above), a disturbed, melodramatic piece of fantasy. La Terra Trema is the most involving and moving film Visconti ever made. Ossessione is good; but all his later stuff seems self-indulgent by contrast. After it, he gave up – or gave in.

As in The Battle of Algiers, the film is about working-class victims becoming politically aware, and suffering in consequence. You rapidly forget that the actors aren’t actors, but real Sicilian fishermen and their families – they’re as good at acting for Visconti as retired Professor Battisti will be, playing Umberto D for de Sica. Watch the way the grandfather falls back on the bed on hearing that one of his sons has left home – I don’t care how many takes it took: “non-professional” he may be,
but the actor understands exactly how the character feels, and knows how to convey it.

It’s true that as a Marxist film *La Terra Trema* falls short, through the peculiar but characteristic lack of judgement whereby (as in Wesker’s *I’m Talking About Jerusalem*), the failure of a small private business is used as a metaphor for the supposed wider failure of socialism: but where the aspirations of Wesker’s furniture-makers seem middle-class to put it mildly, Visconti’s fishermen are authentically proletarian – down to their Sicilian dialect (incomprehensible to most Italians), which they share, of course, with the Corleones. And the way their tragic story involves the loss of the home and the disintegration of the family (further shades of *Rocco*, and of the Corleones, but oh! how different), gives the narrative tragic inevitability.

Just as Coppola has watched Visconti, so Visconti has watched Robert Flaherty – look at the low-angled shots of the women staring hopelessly out at the sunset for their missing men.

If only …