reviews


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It was an Italian writer, Ricciotto Canudo, who in 1911 proclaimed cinema to be not only the ‘sixth art’ but a synthesis of the others.\(^1\) One could suggest Luchino Visconti as the practical realization of this theory, for the starting point for this new, highly detailed and very rich study by Ivo Blom is that Visconti’s cinema represents the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, the name given by Richard Wagner (who appears as a character in Visconti’s late period piece *Ludwig* [1973]) to his own operatic super-spectacles.

Blom’s ‘reframing’ is a viewing of Visconti through the lens of the pictorial, shown in a grand total of 348 colour and black-and-white images. The man who in his parallel careers introduced ‘Jean Cocteau, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller’ to the Italian stage, and crafted the persona of Maria Callas (p. 9), has found his cinema more usually considered as operatic or theatrical (by scholars including me). The book’s subtitle, ‘Film and Art’, would not, on the other hand, have seemed strange to postwar audiences, for whom Visconti’s position as an artist was inarguable. The Italian Visconti scholar Lino Micciché subtitled his collection on *La Terra trema* (1948) ‘Analyses of a Masterpiece’,\(^2\) and Blom establishes the genesis of his work in a screening of Visconti’s 1954 drama *Senso* in 2006, the year that ‘commemorated the births of Mozart and Rembrandt, as well as the centenary of the filmmaker, Luchino Visconti’ (p. 9). There are two main reasons, however, why this study is more than an act of reverence towards the Grand European Tradition.

The first is the breadth of Blom’s scholarship regarding the range of allusions in Visconti’s work, which include classical portraiture, Romanticism and Expressionism, as well as a history of Italian cinema,

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Classical Hollywood and Visconti’s own late-1930s apprenticeship in France with Jean Renoir on *Une Partie de campagne* (1936). Blom works to elucidate cultural influence in its widest sense, as not simply a heritage of dead white men (although there is plenty of this), but an active and necessary dialogue that makes all art intertextual. Visconti’s films, then, are only a particularly successful rather than a unique set of examples of something fundamental to cultural production. Blom similarly charts the creative decisions that make film a collaborative endeavour rather than one that emerges directly from the mind of the great auteur. Indeed the volume is dedicated to the costume designer Piero Tosi, the art director Mario Garbuglia and cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno, each of whose words appear within the text.

The second is Blom’s use of Visconti to develop our understanding of intermediality, which he seeks to give a cultural and historical basis rather than a purely semiotic one. He considers Visconti’s most famous artistic quotation, *Senso*’s reference to Francesco Hayez’s 1859 late Romantic painting *Il bacio* (The Kiss), which depicts two lovers in a final embrace before the man leaves for war. Its many incarnations include the logo for Perugino’s *Baci* chocolates and *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2005), losing in the process its original reference to revolutionary patriotism. Visconti’s citation returns to this theme, but to criticize it; in his film the man belongs to the Austrian army occupying Italy, and the woman is an Italian aristocrat betraying the national cause. The couple – played by Farley Granger and Alida Valli – reveal the squalid self-interest that lies beneath claims to national liberation, a theme that was powerful enough to scandalize its contemporary public, less than a decade after the victory of the Italian resistance to fascism.

The study is also about our relationship to the cinematic image, a relationship that Visconti emphasizes through common motifs such as veils, flowers placed in front of characters, action occurring within corridors, doorways and windows, and mirror reflections. These compositional aspects form another kind of pictorialism to that of direct reference, and take up the book’s second half. Through the concept of the *repoussoir*, a way of emphasizing depth within the image, Blom shows how Viscontian motifs remind spectators both of the staged nature of the image and of its existence in real time and space. Nowhere is this more evident than in the famous forwards tracking shot over which appear the opening credits of *Il gattopardo/The Leopard* (1963), giving the estate a panoramic scale whose ‘massiveness’ nevertheless entails a ‘lack of evident human activity’ (p. 244) in a film concerned with the decline of the Italian nobility. The detachment implied within pictorialism also gives another perspective on the melancholic role that photography has in Visconti’s cinema, which both captures and destroys the moment’s fleeting essence – a principal theme of *Morte a Venezia/Death in Venice* (1971).
The *repoussoir* encapsulates an apparent paradox about Visconti: that his aestheticism was the vehicle through which he sought to present social reality. Such pictorial motifs capture the particular way that Visconti’s cinema is simultaneously involving and distancing – we as spectators understand the relationship of the characters to their environment even when the characters themselves do not, for the sensual richness of their habitat forecloses any prospect of their conscious progress. Blom thus allies Visconti with Marcel Proust (an adaptation of whose work remained one of Visconti’s unfulfilled ambitions) at the same time as he provides an account of Visconti’s apprenticeship with Jean Renoir, whom he brought to Italy in 1941 to work on the ultimately unfinished opera film *Tosca*. Vistas of the road or sea hold out a hope of freedom that Visconti’s protagonists, unlike those in Renoir’s cinema, are unable to take.

Blom considers pictorialism as a source of dramatic meaning and sensuous effect. In noting the motif of veiled women in Visconti’s films, he traces a tradition from Auguste Renoir’s 1877 painting *Jeune femme à la voilette*, to Marlene Dietrich’s films with Josef von Sternberg, to the roles played by Ingrid Thulin and Charlotte Rampling in Visconti’s *La caduta degli dei/The Damned* (1969). Although Blom does not make this argument directly, his interest in costume and more generally in the gaze puts Visconti’s female characters centre-stage, partially rescuing them from their critical neglect in films whose narratives confer on men the privileged role as representatives of sociohistorical forces.

A tension that I would have liked to see Blom address in this book is that between high art and low culture, or to put it in less loaded terms, between popular and canonical forms. Visconti was both a communist aristocrat who was persuaded by Renoir to renounce fascism, and the Count who forged Italy’s neorealist cinema. He was at home adapting Fyodor Dostoevsky or James M. Cain, and citing Giuseppe Verdi, Georges Bizet or Bill Haley. His films were often both art-house successes and box-office hits, and neorealism is just one in a series of attempts to ennoble the experience of the toiling masses that include Giacomo Puccini’s opera, verist literature and the Macchiaioli painters, all of whom are referenced here. A study of how a cultivating discourse intermingles with artistic populism in Italian cinema will have to wait for another occasion. Ivo Blom has already provided us with a full and enlightening analysis that will contribute greatly to Visconti studies, and will expand and advance the ways through which we see cinema in general.

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