Italian Books on Film

The most useful books for Americans who can read Italian remain the film scripts by Cappelli Editore (via Marsili 9, Bologna 40124). These are valuable because they include careful transcripts of the scenario and generally incorporate introductory comments of some length by significant critics. Just recently Cappelli began issuing an economical edition of books about films that promises to be as respectable, if somewhat less impressive (and less expensive), as Cappelli's former venture into screenplay publishing, the series "Dal soggetto al film." The screenplays of four of Luchino Visconti's films mark the debut of the new series: ***Ossessione, La terra trema, Senso,*** and ***Rocco and His Brothers.*** Of these, the publications of ***Senso*** and ***La terra trema*** constitute a greater achievement than ***Ossessione,*** perfunctorily introduced by Renzo Renzi who predictably calls the film the first of the "neorealist season." In addition to the screenplay, the volume on ***Senso*** includes the original short story by Camillo Boito which Visconti adapted for the screen; the evolution of the screenplay through various versions; transitional comments between stages of production by G.B. Cavallaro elucidating Visconti's purpose; a series of stunning photographs of Livia, Franz, et al., against the brooding backdrops of Venice (Teatre La Fenice) and Verona (the granary), and of the final battle at Custoza; information on lighting, photography, and sound as well as on the battle by the producers for a different ending and a shorter film. Reading this volume, one is reminded that ***Senso*** was the ***1900*** of its generation—beautiful and maligned! ***La terra trema*** has a loving and amusing introduction by Francesco Rosi, assistant director for the film. He describes the selfless devotion of the Aci Trezza (Sicily) fishermen who cast nets at night for their livelihood and from dawn to sundown for Visconti's cameras; the financial vicissitudes of the enterprise (the film was sponsered in part by the Pci, the Italian Communist Party); and the final hissing and booing of the film at the Venice Film Festival.

The screenplay of ***Rocco and His Brothers*** (***Rocco e i suoi fratelli***) is introduced by Guido Aristarco's "Esperienza culturale ed esperienza originale in Luchino Visconti," written in 1960. Aristarco never disguised his boundless admiration for Visconti's "anthropomorphic" cinema, a tag that denotes the director's effort to transform celluloid into flesh, the film theatre into a theatre of life. Aristarco's essay traces the roots of neorealism in the American novel as understood by Elio Vittorini and Cesare Pavese, but points out that only Visconti translated the American ideal of the dignity of the human condition into a cinematic, and a European, experience.

The screenplay of *Bellissima* is commented on by Cesare Zavattini, who was one of three scenarists for the film with Anna Magnani playing a stage mother. Zavattini has little to say beyond verifying the fact that Visconti was a "born director."

Less new, but still worthy of notice are the volumes in the series "Dal soggetto al film" of *Death in Venice (Morte a Venezia)* and of *The Damned (La caduta degli dei).* The volume with the screenplay of *Death in Venice* is a lavish production with a bounty of pictures and an introduction by Lino Micciche, who writes an exhaustive essay on Visconti's career linking it to the theatre and the opera. Included are various versions of the script and interviews with Visconti and Nicola Badalucco, the scenarist. *The Damned* has an interesting interview by Stefano Roncoroni with Visconti, who admits that he made the film about a German family instead of an Italian one because this choice made the difference between tragedy and comedy.

In-depth studies on Visconti are not exactly proliferating, but some recent books with limited critical scope at least testify to the director's permanence as an object of curiosity and sometimes of love and esteem. *Leggero Visconti,* edited by G. Callegari and N. Lodato (Amministrazione Provinciale: Pavia), is a very useful collection of Visconti's writings, interviews, and memoirs accompanied by a detailed bibliography. *Visconti: il teatro,* by Caterina d'Amico de Carvalhe, (Teatro Municipale: Reggio Emilia), a valuable booklet documenting his work in the theatre, is tangentially important to an understanding of his "anthropomorphic" cinema. This booklet is actually a catalogue issued on the occasion of a retrospective of Visconti's work in Reggio Emilia in November of 1977. The issue dedicated by the film magazine *Bianco e Nero* to Visconti ("La controversia Visconti," edited by F. Di Giammateo in *Bianco e Nero,* no. 9/12) is the most accessible of the three and offers some previously unpublished articles by Visconti and some additional essays by di Giammateo, Grasso, and Menon. A fourth book on Visconti, *Album Visconti* by Caterina d'Amico de Carvalhe (Milano: Sonzogno), sounds like a piece of high-fashion exploitation of his aristocratic roots but is actually a poignant document of the themes that haunted him. It is a book of photographs from the life and works but, as critic Stefano Reggiani noted, through it we come to recognize that Visconti didn't have two souls—as has been suggested to explain the Marxist and the aristocratic tendencies in his work; he merely had, in Reggiani's words, "an aristocratic soul persecuted by intelligence."

Paolo and Vittorio Taviani—who should begin to be appreciated in this country for more than their *Padre padrone*—are the subject of a book by Guido Aristarco, *Sotto il segno dello scorpione: il cinema dei fratelli Taviani* (G. D'Anna: Milano). Aristarco examines the Taviani brothers' work by applying the Marx-Lukacs perspective that has informed his thought for the last twenty-five years. He amplifies this critical slant by focusing on their interest in the theatre (and in melodrama particularly) that links them with the Viscontian model. He identifies the motifs recurring in their films: the search for Utopia, the antithetical conflict between personal action and political reality, between the forces of reason and unreason, between Freud and Marx. He praises their efforts to endow their characters with an ironic dimension that unsettles the standard, one-dimensional concept of the hero as celebrated in the less politically complex cinema of

neorealism. Clearly, Aristarco sees the Tavianis as representing the "healthy" current of Italian cinema—both thematically and aesthetically.

The screenplay of *Padre padrone* is available from Cappelli's "Dal soggetto al film." Mino Argentieri writes the laudable introduction where he evaluates the Brechtian scope of the Tavianis, who separate themselves from the sentimental roots of neorealism at the same time that they advance its political lesson by elaborating it in a cinema that appeals to the intellect as well as the emotions. The issue at the heart of *Padre padrone,* Argentieri implies, is education, but the Tavianis make it clear that education is not at all a clearly understood concept. As a shepherd, the illiterate Gavino Ledda, schooled by his brutal father, learned to live in nature, inimically if necessary, but as an emancipated intellectual, the adult Gavino feels alienated from his Sardinian roots and his culture. Illiterate, he lived with the sounds of music of nature, sometimes in awe and terror; educated, he uses words that become a barrier against his past. The ideal education should be a merger of instinct and reason, but this synthesis remains out of reach so that education, as it was for Gavino, is a choice between the individual's harmony with society or with nature.

The volume including *San Michele aveva un gallo* and *Allonsanfan* (Cappelli: Bologna, 1974) has a preface by Guido Aristarco, who praises the Tavianis for making films that appear to correspond to precise "historical moments of our national life." He cites concrete examples: the debut of *Un uomo da bruciare* (*A Man to Burn*) coincides with the death of Communist leader Togliatti and the end of the age of political certainties or at least of the illusion of political alternatives for Italy; *Sotto il segno dello scorpiono* (*Under the Sign of Scorpio*), made in 1968, debunks the utopian myth of the barricades of May 1968; *San Michele aveva un gallo* (*St. Michael Had a Rooster*) faces the "disappearing prospect" of revolution in the 70's as the new decade itself does; and, finally, after disillusionment with utopia "now," the betrayal, the desertion of idealists into the rank of the system, creates the atmosphere of moral chaos that is Italy now and which the Tavianis dissect with surgical clarity in *Allonsanfan.*

Aristarco reminds us that the Tavianis declared that their "cinematographic fathers are Rossellini and Visconti." This inheritance is nowhere more apparent than in *Allonsanfan,* a film full of the Viscontian spectacle of history and of Rossellini's ironic detachment of characterization. "It seems possible to conclude," notes Aristarco, "that Paolo and Vittorio Taviani have conducted within Italian cinema a coherent discourse in terms of both content and style and without partiality to either but with strict interdependence on both."

An annotated bibliography of recent Italian books on film is available upon request to the editor.

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