

History, Romance and Opera: Visconti's 'Senso'

Luca Delbello (March 08, 2011)



The release of the new restored version of Visconti's 'Senso' by the Criterion Collection was celebrated at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò of New York University

There is something about cinema we must have forgotten somewhere along the road, or maybe it's just something we have put away in a safe, far from our minds: the emotions, a word rarely used in contemporary cinema, yet if we think about it, central to the experience of the art.

Luchino Visconti must have been somewhat acquainted with this particular and precious word. You watch the screen and you feel it. It's untouchable but it's there. It might be an old aristocrat dancing with a young lady or an intellectual professor facing a rapidly decaying society, but there is more



than meets the eyes.

On February 24 at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [2], home of the Department of Italian Studies at New York University, we felt it again. Director Stefano Albertini decided to host an event to celebrate the release of the restored version of *Senso* by the [Criterion Collection](#) [3] and a special screening of the movie and a documentary about Visconti, Verdi and opera were shown to a crowded auditorium, filled with a deeply involved audience.

General Consul of Italy in New York Francesco Maria Talò made some welcoming remarks at the beginning of the event, reminding the audience of the celebration for the 150th anniversary of the Italian Unification.

A brief panel discussion was moderated by Stefano Albertini; his special guests were Antonio Monda, professor of film at New York University, the Nation's film critic Stuart Klawans and Issa Club, a producer from Criterion Collection.

Albertini expressed his joy for the astounding work of Criterion Collection and for finally being in possession of this movie, which was almost impossible to find in the States up until now.

Issa Club passionately described the work behind the creation of the Blu-Ray and DVD and the help received by Rotunno and Scorsese to remain as faithful as possible to the original version by the Italian master.

A very informal discussion took place at Casa Italiana. Stating his opinion about *Senso*, Antonio Monda jokes that “a movie with Farley Granger can’t be considered a masterpiece”.

However, an ironic Klawans answered this remark by saying that “Granger was indeed a good choice for the role because Visconti needed a coward and Brando was too good an actor to play that role...”

“It is impossible to compare *The Leopard* written by Tomasi di Lampedusa with *Senso* written by Camillo Boito, a minor novelist”, confessed Antonio Monda.

There is a clear connection between the two movies; they were set at the same time and they both dealt with aristocrats struggling in a society in evolution. Maybe the difference lies in the intention.

The Leopard is about an entire world coming to an end with all its old habits and customs, *Senso* is about disdain for the upper class. *The Leopard* is more “mature”, as Monda affirmed, and there is probably more to read in the “subtext”, whereas *Senso* is an experience for the eyes with its wonderful cinematography and especially for the ears, with its powerful and magnificent operatic soundtrack; but, unlike the aristocrat played by Burt Lancaster in *The Leopard*, the main characters of *Senso* are completely amoral and unappealing.

The lights went down and everybody was left to decide for themselves, helped by secret meetings at midnight and melodramatic love scenes.

Ernst Fischer wrote: “In a decaying society, art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break faith with its social function, art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it”. I don’t know if Visconti succeeded in changing the whole world, but he was surely able to emotionally move the audience in a cinema, at least for the length of a movie.

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[1] <http://ftp.iltaly.org/files/senso-1954-criterion-collection>



[2] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>

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