Ivo Blom

Visconti and the Visual Arts
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**Ivo Blom**

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Ivo Blom teaches Film and Comparative Arts in the Department of Comparative Arts Studies at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. After getting his MA in Art History (1986), with a thesis on Luchino Visconti and Painting, he worked in the Restoration Department of the Netherlands Filmmuseum (1989–1994) and specialized in early cinema (particularly Italian and Dutch), frequently talking at international conferences and publishing with international journals, books, and encyclopedia. In 2000, he received his Ph.D. in Film and Television Studies from the University of Amsterdam, publishing his dissertation Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade (University of Amsterdam Press, 2003). Recently, he contributed to biblioVisconti 3 and published on Visconti in the Dutch journals Jong Holland and Skrien and on [www.luchinovisconti.net](http://www.luchinovisconti.net). Currently, Ivo Blom is preparing a book on Luchino Visconti and the Visual Arts.

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Luchino Visconti was a man who had the pleasure of culture. He was born into an aristocratic and wealthy family, and the arts had always been a part of his everyday life. He was therefore a learned man, but his culture had not been acquired systematically. He was an impassioned, avid reader, and as a young man he wrote — and even published — stories. He was knowledgeable about music and was able to read a score, even though he stopped playing the cello when he got older, of which he had shown great promise as a child. He loved painting and the decorative arts and went to museums and galleries, though he cannot be defined as a collector. He purchased works of art so as to surround himself with beautiful objects, which gave him pure contemplative delight, nonchalantly replacing these with others. In fact, the furnishings of his home were as eclectic as they were changeable. And so the literary, musical, and pictorial references that populate his works have a sentimental, more than intellectual, value. Visconti used music and images just as one uses familiar words: at times to accurately re-create the atmosphere of a past era, at others to evoke emotions and memories. And certainly not to weave a knowing plot, composed of signs only a few can decipher. It is true that the wealth of literary, musical, and pictorial references confers a rather particular depth and profundity of expression unto the nucleus of the events he narrates. In fact, Visconti’s films are open to various levels of interpretation—all of which are effective. I mean, his stories have a life of their own; they are strong and powerful, narrated with a confident and personal style, and so are meaningful also for those who do not grasp the multitude of references they contain. But those who share his vocabulary are able to immediately make out the many signs scattered throughout the story, and therefore to share in a more complete way the author’s emotions. That is why analyzing Visconti’s relationships with the visual arts is rather complex, fruitful undertaking.

In his scholarly essay, Ivo Blom carefully investigates the visual sources of Visconti’s films, painstakingly pin-pointing an impressive quantity of influences the are explicit to varying degrees. Far from being a tedious list, his essay allows us to discover the original dimension of Visconti’s choices, revealing, at times, unexpected ties. His detailed and intelligent contribution, teeming with new insights, invites readers to continue exploring.

Caterina D’Amico
“While some may feel that film does not belong to the history of art, the fact is that filmmakers often use paintings to shape or enrich the meanings of their works. Thus the history of art is in film, even though, by evoking high art and creativity, rather than technology and mass culture, painting for cinema constitutes a forbidden object of desire.”

Angela Dalle Vacche, Cinema and Painting

The year 2006 is not only the Mozart year and the Rembrandt year. This year we also commemorate the centenary of the birth of film, stage, and opera director Luchino Visconti, and his death, thirty years ago. Starting with Ossessione (1942–43), Visconti has written history with such films as La terra trema (1948), Rocco e i suoi fratelli (Rocco and his Brothers, 1960), Il Gattopardo (The Leopard, 1963), Morte a Venezia (Death in Venice, 1971), and Ludwig (1972). Moreover, Visconti was one of Italy’s most important post-war stage innovators, introducing plays by Jean Cocteau, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller to Italian audiences, and he supposedly was the man who taught the famous opera singer Maria Callas how to act. Much has been written on theatrical and melodramatic influences in Visconti’s films, as well as literary influences — even if the concept of influence has been contested ever since Michael Baxandall in his groundbreaking study Patterns of Intention (1985).¹ On the pictorial side of Visconti’s film work, much less is known. Visconti appropriates visual art both in direct and indirect ways, thereby using various cinematic means in grandiose style. The film spectator thus has the sensation of walking through one big moving picture. Many film scholars have pointed this out, though few analyzed this further. Can we speak of a shifting paradigm, however, since the 1990s? Think of the several studies on cinema and art in Italy and elsewhere. Consider also the Gattopardo exhibition at Palazzo Chigi in Ariccia in 2001 and the opening up of the Fondo Visconti at the Istituto Gramsci in Rome. Is it a coincidence that ever since the last decade various theses on Visconti and painting have been written by students from the universities of Milan, Naples, Turin (even two), and Cagliari, and others have been produced on costume and scenography in Visconti’s films, while this hardly happened before? The time is ready for a conference on Visconti and visual arts.

First, however, we need to set the framework for such a conference. Within the contemporary academic world, much discussed is the concept of intermediality. In 1967, Julia Kristeva launched the term intertextuality in *La révolution du language poétique*, presented as a cross media term, but in fact interpreted as interliterary relationships. The launching of the separate term intermediality thus was necessary. In 1997, the field created a separate organization, based in Canada and directed by Silvestra Mariniello: the CRI (Centre de Recherche pour l’Intermédialité). In 1999, the CRI organized its first conference, “La nouvelle sphere intermédiatique,” the papers whereof were published in 2000 in the special issue of Cinémas. Jürgen Müller published here his groundbreaking text *L’intermédialité, une nouvelle approche interdisciplinaire: perspectives théoriques et pratiques à l’exemple de vision de la télévision*. Just like men of letters or art historians, film historians such as myself no longer focus exclusively on film itself. Instead, we focus on relations with other forms of art and media, on the migration of images from one medium to another, from one art to another. Differences between so-called high and low art are less urgent to make. More interesting is how certain images can be transformed into icons by reproduction, quotation, parody, plagiarism, etc. If the migration, appropriation, and so on occurs within the same medium, we tend to call this intertextuality; if images travel across media, it is called intermediality. Of course today we have different meanings of the concept of intermediality among the different academic fields. One might even consider cinema as an intermedial medium per se because of its combinations of words or sounds and images.

Nowadays, intermedial research within cinema studies is slightly easier than a few decennia ago. Cinema studies, which took form as an academic discipline in the 1950s–1960s and in some countries even later, is no longer solely directed towards the proper medium. Cross-media or cross-arts relationships are researched more and more. In the recent past, this has often happened in the field of early cinema studies and has even led to new insights in art history, in the sense of considering more and more a history of visual culture and diffusing borders between high and low art. The emancipation of cinema studies has lessened the original focus on editing (what happens between the subsequent film images). This was the element in the film grammar, which in particular in the pre-war period, but also in the post-war years, was seen as the criterion, as the indicator for the specific cinematic, the unique filmic quality; a vision grown out of the filmic avant-garde, which was opposed to the visible ties of early cinema with vaudeville and stage productions. Even voices in the desert such as those of the French critic André Bazin in the 1950s, defending a serious approach between cinema and the stage, could not prevent that research on cinema’s ties with theatre remain taboo for a long time.

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3. See www.ditl.info/arttest/art14847.php
Today, this attitude has changed quite a bit, so that mise-en-scène — what happens within the image — receives more attention. One may think of performance, lighting, setting, and costumes. It includes such elements as deep staging, unrealistic performances, the choice of colors in sets and costumes, echoes of the film frame in the set, playing with a kind of interior editing through mirrors, and special effects. Within this attitude, a serious comparison between cinema and visual arts is easier made, not only in the direct sense, but also in the indirect sense. Not only via quotations, either serious or in the form of parody or pastiche, but also by means of the historical and artistic inspiration for the sets and costumes, through such props as paintings or photographs within the sets, via poses and gestures drawn from painting or the stage, or via theatrical lighting comparable to the theatrical painting of the baroque.

I would like to point out, however, that in Italy we do recognize a tradition of a synthetic vision of the medium of cinema, ever since the beginning — from Ricciotto Canudo’s Gesamtkunstwerk-like Manifest of the 7th Art in the 1910s, via the studies of S.A. Luciani and Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti in the immediate post-war years to the more recent works by Antonio Costa and Leonardo De Franceschi. Still, there is a kind of watershift. While Luciani and Ragghianti represented the generation tied to the avant-garde idea, inspired by the Italian translation of Arnheim’s Film as Art, and raised with both the formalist cinema and the art documentary — which consequently brought about also the studies by Mario Verdone on costume and setting — in later decennia, literature on film and the arts was much scarcer. A possible explanation may be the international filmtheoretical field. Post-war film theory limited itself for a long time on the intermedial level to the comparison between film and literature. Moreover, literature studies were seen as a criterion for the semiotic and structuralist approaches within cinema studies. Afterwards, film theorists searched for their own models on visual and filmic grammar, which was conceived not from the textual, but the visual. The relationship with the visual arts, with theatre and painting, however, remained rather taboo.

Raffaele Monti’s attempt to unite the painting of the 19th century and cinema (Les Macchiaioli et le cinéma italien, 1972) posed interesting ideas, but lacked archival research; it came too early in a way, as the Fondo Visconti did not yet exist. Literature on cinema and visual arts, which was never absent in Italy, has been remarkably affluent in Italy since the 1990s, in contrast to other European countries or the United States. Just to name a few: Antonio Costa’s Cinema e pittura (1991), Roberto Campari’s Il fantasma del bello (1994), Sergio Micheli’s Lo sguardo oltre la norma (2000), and Costa’s Il cinema e le arti visive (2001), along with special issues such as those of Art Dossier (1987) and Cinema & cinema (1989), plus the Domitor 2000 conference on Cinema and Other Arts (published in 2001). France, too, contributed with Jacques Aumont’s groundbreaking study, L’oeil interminable (1989), which stimulated Italian research on cinema and visual arts considerably, and with articles by Aumont, Bellour, and others in the journal Cinématheque in the 1990s. They were also the bases for the recent MA theses on Visconti and painting. All these studies created valuable and


fascinating theoretical insights. What to my mind is still lacking is solid archival research, opening up all kinds of evidence (including oral history), especially on the production side, necessary to sustain the arguments raised.

In more recent years, the tide has changed, not only in Italy, but elsewhere, too. The rise of intermediality as a field of studies is one reason; Antonio Costa is, for instance, a noteworthy Italian representative of it. Another is an impulse from film history within cinema studies. An indicator of this changing landscape is Theatre to Cinema (1997), in which the authors Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs indicated how, with the introduction of the feature film in around 1910–11, silent cinema focused on the legitimate stage instead of the music-hall. Cinema thus was very receptive for the metaphor of the stage picture, very relevant to the 19th-century popular stage, in which plays were conceived as series of tableaux vivants, as pictorially presented moments. We are concerned therefore more with situations, with tableaux, than with exposition or action. Studies such as Theatre to Cinema and Cinema e pittura resulted in a less burdened relationship between cinema on the one side and theatre and painting on the other. Intervisual research, images from one medium compared to images from other media, has become a fertile and popular field of academic research, as can be seen in the Bolter and Grusin study Remediation (2000), in which intervisuality is analyzed from the point of view of new media. How are older media re-mediated due to their appropriation in new media? This enlargement of the purely pictorial, or the purely filmic, towards a more dynamic field of visual culture is very pertinent, not only in the modern production of art and film, but also in modern art and media theory; in the late 1990s, even a new territory called Visual Culture Studies came into being.

If, for instance, we research Luchino Visconti’s film oeuvre in a cultural-historical way, we should not stop at only stating formal resemblances. We need to research the historical trajectories between the quoted painting and its quotation, for example. How is it possible that certain images are favored over others, migrate over time and space, and reappear, but in transformed and appropriated ways in other media? How has the original meaning of the original image changed? What has remained? Does the altered meaning of the quotation also change our notion of the original and its original meaning? To turn back to Baxandall’s resistance to the classic concept of influence, is it not perhaps the quotation that alters our concept of the painting — so not X influencing Y, but the other way around? Just to mention an example, what has happened between the historical moment of the first appearance of Francesco Hayez’s painting Il Bacio in 1859 and the other historical moment of the quotation of the pose of the protagonists in Visconti’s film Senso in 1954? A painting which originally represented a political meaning — an allegory, via a romantic scene, a message of sacrifice for a good cause, of hope and of noble attitudes — keeps its romantic and sensual vision, but at the same time expresses a false dream in hindsight, because the cause is betrayed by the protagonists. Livia pays

10. See the studies of Nicholas Mirzoeff (Introduction to Visual Culture, 1999; Visual Culture Reader, 2002) and Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (Practices of Looking, 2001); see also journals such as “Journal for Visual Culture”. Partly “Visual Culture Studies” harks back to old “Cultural Studies” (Stuart Hall etc.).
her lover Franz with the money of the revolutionaries and he betrays her, pretending to love her in order to get her money to desert from the war. There is also the age difference; she is much older. The man is a coward instead of a hero, and she acts like a melodramatic opera singer, while the whole setting and her costume with her enormous embroidered sleeves are clearly operatic and overdone. In short, the quotation is a kind of parody of the original meaning. But the romantic message, the idyll, remains, just as it has remained nowadays in every kind of souvenir in Verona, where Il Bacio itself has become the substitute image for the Romeo and Juliet story on postcards and puzzles. The pose from Hayez’s painting has by now also become an icon for the romantic embrace par excellence — from the couple on the Baci chocolates, designed by Seneca in the 1920s, to several filmic quotations (Visconti’s own Ludwig to Star Wars 3). These quotations, however, need an explanation if we want to make sense of them, and this leads to many possibilities.

Let’s consider the quotation in Senso. The possibilities then lead to the reputation of Hayez and of Il Bacio over time, especially in the 1950s. Emilio Cecchi has been paramount in this, both in Hayez’s reputation in general — which was quite negative in the 1950s, even if Il Bacio was an exception — and in the individual bond of Visconti to Hayez and Italian 19th-century painting in general. We need to know about books, articles, catalogues, exhibitions, and so on. But we also need to know about the reputation of Hayez and Il Bacio with the main audience, and not only their reputation within the art critic circuit — they might be opposed to each other. How far was a painting such as Il Bacio part of the common knowledge via adaptations and iconization? Then even chocolate boxes can become important. If you quote, you want your audience to know. Well, if you see the moment in the film, it is clear the film slows down and the actors really move themselves in the right position. Visconti truly adheres to the tradition of the so-called Living Picture from the earliest days of cinema, where the French, German, or British companies re-enacted academic paintings by Jean-Léon Gérôme and others by building up a short story, created by a kind of tableau vivant of a famous painting, often freezing or at least slowing down the action in order to enable the recognition of the quotation. Publicity around the quotation helps, and yes, at the release of Senso, film journals mentioned the quotation and placed illustrations of the painting next to the respective film still. In short, we need to fill an intermedial gap in order to see what happens when paintings are removed from their original context. According to Mieke Bal, the French post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida stated that the trajectory and the quotation is even more interesting than the original meaning: “Whereas for Bakhtin the word never forgets where it has been before it was quoted, for Derrida it never returns there without the burden of the excursion through the quotation.” I would not go as far as that, but I do agree with Bal and Derrida in that merely placing images that contain formal resemblances next to each other does not explain and leaves us unsatisfied.
Visconti and Painting: Cousins, not Brothers

Through the 1990s, the “classical” author Luchino Visconti received much attention from researchers, especially in Italy and France. Just glance at the vast number of publications on his work. While Italian cinema slowly rose from the impasse of the 1980s, it still lacked new “authors” and trust in young talent. Consequently, researchers invested energy in articles, monographs, biographies, catalogue texts, and volumes on famous directors of the previous age. Film archivists, especially in Rome, restored films by the masters. One of those masters was Visconti, whose filmic work was mainly restored, surely not by coincidence, by the Roman film archives in the same era.

Most of the studies on Visconti’s work are directed towards his use of history and literature, his relationship with neorealism and decadence, his eclectic style, and the exchange between film, stage, and opera — which, as Visconti himself stated, was quite the same as far as direction was concerned. Less discussed, however, is his relationship with the visual arts, such as painting and photography. When this topic was discussed, it was done rather often in a speculative way, thus revealing more of the critic than of the films, the filmmaker, or his crew members. It is also a delicate topic, because apart from the very few direct relationships, such as the quotation from Il Bacio in Senso, the relationship between painting and Visconti’s cinema is not as explicit as his ties with other arts, such as literature or theatre are. A complicating matter is that Visconti himself always denied these ties in interviews, or played them down; on the other hand, he did not talk very often on the rather indirect ways the pictorial shows up in his work.

In talking about the relationship between cinema and painting, one thinks mainly of literal quotations of paintings within filmic images, therefore tableaux vivants of famous — or once famous — masterpieces. This happened with Visconti only in two cases: one is that of Hayez’s Il Bacio in Senso. The other is again in Senso, were Telemaco Signorini’s La toletta del mattino is visually re-enacted. These are exceptions within Visconti’s oeuvre. With Visconti’s work, film and painting are cousins, not brothers. A comparison with Pier Paolo Pasolini is revealing: he quoted from painting much more often and in a much more direct way. Pasolini had studied with art historian Roberto Longhi. From him he received his “fulgor-azione pittorica,” his great attention for the painters of the Renaissance and mannerism. In Pasolini’s films, Renaissance art has a clear function, namely supporting a quest for the original, the archaic, the untouched, or a critique on modern Western society. The frontal and static images of Pasolini, which enable the recognition of direct references to art, do not occur very often in Visconti’s cinema. In contrast to Pasolini, Visconti attached great importance to the dynamic of his films — hence the fluttering curtains in scenes where the actors hardly move or are simply absent, as in the beginning of Il Gattopardo — and to a stage-like unity of time, space, and action. Scripts in the Visconti archive at the Istituto Gramsci show that Visconti and his collaborators often experimented with flashbacks and flashforwards.
in the script phase, but threw them out at later stages. Hence the quite linear narratives in films such as Senso, which did not have these in the first scripts. Hence also the cutting of the prologue from Thomas Mann’s novel in Death in Venice, or of the last two chapters of Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel in Il Gattopardo, by which there is a unity of time and space in these two films. Not even the short flashbacks in these two films change that impression.\textsuperscript{15} Technically, Visconti obtained this unity also in the cinematography by shooting with three cameras at the same time, from Rocco and his brothers on. This is a rather well-known fact by now. One camera would make the master shot in which all characters were visible and, simultaneously, two other cameras would take closer filmed shots. Actors could move more freely over the set, though this did not mean less takes. In fact, there are many anecdotes on actors who would forget their lines and subsequent outbursts by the director.

Getting back to Visconti and painting, Senso contains the only two actual pictorial quotations in his oeuvre. In addition to Hayez’s Il Bacio, there is the scene in which Livia visits Franz in his rented rooms in Venice. She is visibly overdressed for the Austrian soldiers, who receive her half naked and are not embarrassed in the least. The painting La toletta del mattino (1898) by Telemaco Signorini served as the basis for the composition. The perspective of the room is the same, a diagonal from the right forefront to the left behind. Visconti also uses the same structure of the beams in the ceiling and the pattern on the floor. The disposition of the characters is also the same: in the middle, people are seated at a table, in the back one person lies on a couch. Even the window with the overhanging awning has been copied. La toletta del mattino represents a typical morning in a Florentine bordello at the end of the 19th century, painted in a harsh, naturalistic style. According to critic Vittorio Pica, it is connected to the literature of the naturalistic writer Giovanni Verga, whose I Malavoglia Visconti freely adapted for his film La terra trema. In 1930, La toletta del mattino came into the possession of the famous director and composer Arturo Toscanini, whom Visconti knew ever since his childhood. In Milan, Palazzo Visconti is just behind Toscanini’s mansion, and Visconti was well befriended with Toscanini’s daughters, Wanda and Wally. Visconti knew the painting well. During the preparation of Senso, he drove his collaborators to Milan to show them the painting at the Toscanini residence.

Probably, Visconti was not only interested in copying the composition of the painting, but also wanted to make a statement with it, indicating the vulgarity of the situation. Just like the men in Signorini’s painting, Livia is also a kind of client who tries to buy love from Franz. That is also why Franz reproaches her at the end of the film, exposing himself and herself, verbally and visually, by tearing her heavy veil from her hat. The space in the rented rooms is clearly below Livia’s standard. The officers mock her and make clear what a womanizer Franz really is. The two quotations of Il Bacio and La toletta del mattino, actually, could be conceived as opposites. While Hayez represents noble Lombardo-Venetian romance — Livia’s dream is sweet, maybe even too sweet — Signorini’s work stands for betrayal, humiliation, and the sacrifice of ideals and more to love, sex, and money — Livia’s reality.
Senso may be considered Visconti’s most pictorial film. There is more painting worked into the film apart from the above-mentioned quotations, but in a less direct way. Take for instance the work of Giovanni Fattori. Visconti’s collaborators and critics have mentioned him again and again as the inspirational source for the sequence of the battle of Custoza. In 1880, Fattori painted The Battle of Custoza, but several other war scenes within his oeuvre draw attention — not only epic tableaux à la Meissonier such as Il campo italiano dopo la battaglia di Magenta (1862), of which the Fondo Visconti holds a photo used for documentation, but also small paintings such as Accampamento (c. 1860), which in its abstraction and lack of contours seems very modern and therefore pleasing to art critics, such as Cecchi, in the early 20th century. The painting, with its sharp contrasts of white tents represented as colorful patches, looks similar to images of camps in Senso, though one should not overrate these formal resemblances too much. One recognizes the same colorful contrast, the same high horizon, and the reduction of the tents to patches, but Visconti’s composition is much less elementary and much more dynamic. All the battle scene shots are visually and narratively not separate instances, but are linearly and elegantly interconnected by the trip of Roberto Ussoni, Livia’s cousin and revolutionary, who crosses right through the battle lines with a horse and cart.

More important than the direct comparisons is the general atmosphere which Visconti created in Senso. Within this framework, Visconti’s outdoor scenes around the battle of Custoza greatly remind us of Fattori because of the selection and contrasts of color and light and of the detailed scene composition. In interviews, Visconti himself stated that resemblances to Fattori were pure coincidence, since Fattori had represented a reality that he wanted to represent, too. It is known, however, that during the preparation of the film, Visconti and his collaborators visited exhibitions on Fattori and the Macchiaioli. Visconti was also well acquainted with Emilio Cecchi, trailblazer for Fattori and the Macchiaioli within and outside of Italy. Cecchi, art historian and art critic, but also literary historian, film producer, and film critic, already wrote in 1920 his first piece on Fattori; his book Pittura italiana dell’Ottocento (1926) became a classic on 19th-century Italian painting. Visconti owned a copy, which is still at the Visconti archive. It is also known that Visconti had several conversations with Cecchi during the preparation of Senso. Cecchi’s daughter, Suso Cecchi D’Amico, met Visconti in 1945 for the first time and became his regular scriptwriter from 1951 on. Visconti often stayed at the Cecchi villa in Castiglioncello in order to write his scripts. And it was in Castiglioncello that during the 1860s a part of the Macchiaioli, the so-called School of Castiglioncello, had been active.
Visconti generally did not quote painting very much. He actually was not an art historian, but a man surrounded by art as a kind of “natural humus.” Let’s not forget that Visconti was born into the wealthy aristocratic family Visconti di Modrone, which belonged to the Milanese _beau monde_ at the fin-de-siècle, and he was a descendant of the dukes Visconti who once ruled the entire Lombardy region. His mother Carla Erba was the non-aristocratic heir of Italy’s then biggest pharmaceutical industry; she stimulated him to set himself to work and not take things for granted. Thus class, reputation, and money were there from the beginning, whether he liked it or not. Visconti was a big _amateur_ and _connaisseur_ of art, as well as an avid collector of 18th- and 19th-century art and _objets d’art_ such as early modern art, especially art nouveau. Already in the days of his youth he was surrounded by paintings and by painted walls and ceilings. Take for instance the Palazzo Visconti in Milan, an early 18th-century structure built for the Spanish ambassador Bolagnos. In 1908, Visconti’s father Giuseppe (1879–1941) refurbished it together with the architect Alfredo Campanini (1873–1926), who in spite of being mostly considered an art nouveau architect, redecorated Palazzo Visconti in a neorococo style. As Ornella Selvafolta has indicated, this style, however, was not that distant from art nouveau: “In both cases, they tend to soft and fluid harmony, to the nobility of the framework, to asymmetrical development and dynamic lines, to the multiple transitions between materials and forms.”

Adorning the central _salone_ or ballroom are four wall paintings by the Bolognese painter Nicola Bertuzzi (aka l’Anconitano), dating c. 1760 and representing biblical scenes; these works recall those by Tiepolo and Veronese. They were taken from a palace near Bologna by Giuseppe Visconti. The paintings are crowned by a neorococo ceiling, painted by Gersam Turri (1879–1949), glorifying the House of Visconti and showing the names of Giuseppe’s children, including Luchino, on banderolles. One is immediately reminded of scenes in Visconti’s film _Il Gattopardo_.

This kind of composite interiors, combining antique art with contemporary, but historicizing, art, can also be seen at the other two Visconti dwellings. First, the Villa Erba at Cernobbio, built right on Lake Como between 1898 and 1901 by Angelo Savoldi and Gian Battista Borsani as the residence for the in-laws of Giuseppe Visconti, Luigi Erba and Anna Brivio. Giuseppe Visconti himself acted as advisor for the decoration of this neo-mannerist villa. As with Palazzo Visconti, he combined art and furniture from previous ages, such as 17th-century choir stalls in the former library, the 18th-century statues by Mazzucchelli found outside, and the ancient leather of Cordoba wall covers with new wall and ceiling decorations in historicized style. Many decorations are by Angelo Lorenzoli, who took care of the concept and the elaboration of all the painted friezes, stucco, gold ornaments, floors in colored ceramics, precious woodwork; the arranging
of the furniture within the modern architecture; and the re-use of antique objects in the decoration of walls and ceilings, such as an 18th-century tondo of a Madonna. Consider also the neo-Renaissance ceilings downstairs (beams painted with the coat-of-arms of the Dukes of Visconti). Some figurative frescoes are by Ernesto Fontana (1837–1918), who had been employed in 1883 for the redecoration of the nearby Villa Olmo, residence of Luchino Visconti’s grandfather, Duke Guido Visconti di Modrone. According to Saur’s *Allgemeines Künstlerslexikon*, Fontana was a pupil of Giuseppe Bertini at the Accademia di Brera in Milan and befriended with Mosé Bianchi and the Induno brothers. He had a reputation for history and genre painting, focusing, beginning in 1873, on anecdotal, sometimes ambiguous and pleasing genre scenes with coquette, malicious female figures. In the late 19th century, he made frescoed decorations inspired by Tiepolo and the baroque for churches and palazzi in Lombardy. One of Fontana’s most famous examples was his work at the Villa Olmo, where he designed an allegorical Fortune scene for the bedroom of the Duke and a ceiling decoration with a goddess surrounded by angels making music, for the specially built private theatre at the villa. The private theatre became a family obsession, as the Duke’s son Giuseppe had Campanini build a private theatre at the Palazzo Visconti in Milan, too.

Besides Lorenzoli’s decorations, we can still admire at Villa Erba the decorations by Angiolo d’Andrea (1880–1942), a Friulian portrait and landscape painter of the Milanese Belle Époque. In the Sala dei Marmi of Villa Erba, he painted the ceiling in the early 1910s, clearly inspired by the Venetian style of former centuries. Villa Erba was often one of the two summer residences of Giuseppe Visconti and his wife and children; earlier, in 1900, he had married Carla Erba here. In 1922, when both her parents had died, Carla Erba inherited the villa and after her separation from Giuseppe Visconti in 1924 she stayed here very often, also modifying the residence (the rather religious ambiance in her own apartments), thus contributing to the already very eclectic style of the villa. Most paintings from here have by now disappeared, but two larger than life portraits of Luigi and Anna Erba, painted by Cesare Tallone, the most famous Milanese portrait painter around 1900 and renowned for his portraits of Queen Margherita and — after 1900 — the royalty of the stage, too, such as Lina Cavalieri and Lyda Borelli, are still visible. Giuseppe Visconti was presumably a pupil of his.

In addition to Villa Erba and Palazzo Visconti, Giuseppe Visconti also transformed Castello Grazzano, a ruinous castle from around 1400, once built for Beatrice, daughter of the famous Duke Gian Galeazzo Visconti, and her husband Giovanni Anguissola. The Visconti family inherited the castle in the 19th century from the Anguissola family. Count Visconti changed it in around 1905–1908 into a residence of a rather fantastical neo-Gothic style, influenced by the neo-medieval in opera, stage, and painting.
Visconti also transformed the surrounding houses into a medieval-style village, which not only served as a nice setting for the castle, but also offered an arts and crafts school, enabling young inhabitants the possibility to work in woodcarving and ironworking ateliers. Though helped by architect Alfredo Campanini, Visconti senior played a major role in planning and decorating the castle and village. He even painted all the decorations in a neo-Gothic little church (1905–1910) in the center of the village. In 1937, he painted a fresco with himself and his siblings offering the school and the borgo to the Madonna (because of the separation, his ex-wife is conspicuously missing from the fresco).

Luchino Visconti inherited his father’s eclectic style in both a literal and figurative way. Giuseppe Visconti, who was also responsible in the 1930s for transformations at the Royal Villa in the park of Villa Ada in Rome, such as adding a private theatre for the tableaux vivants of Queen Elena and adorning her private apartments, built his own villa in neo-Renaissance and neo-Venetian style, near to the Royal Villa, on the Via Salaria, in the same period. When his father died in 1941, Luchino Visconti inherited this house and mixed its interior with his own collections. As Visconti changed his furnishings frequently, it is very hard to define how his own collection looked like. But walls covered with paintings were a constant, in which old and new were combined. Tables and corners could be crammed with objets d’art Visconti collected in series, such as bronze obelisks, terracotta dog statues, or brass footstoves, changing every year to a new favorite serialized object. An article by Hélène Demoriane in Connaissance des Arts (1961) gives a clear overview of the state of his Roman house around that time. In that year, the walls of his living-room and library were filled with antique paintings and antique wallpaper from mostly the 17th and 18th century. In all its eclecticism, it is not so unlike the interior found in the episode Il lavoro in the film Boccaccio ‘70 (1961). After Visconti stated to her that he liked disorder and mixing what appeals to him in order to enliven a house — Persian rugs, antique furniture, modern paintings — Demoriane comments that the disorder is very well-organized and seemingly casual: “Le bric-à-brac n’est jamais si bien organisé que par ceux qui en connaissent les vertus.” Visconti’s astute eye for matching colors and forms of different pieces of furniture and art as well as his mastery for creating vistas and three-dimensionality by arranging 18th-century wooden statues — just as he uses flowers and plants as depth cues in his films — is very clear from the photos in the French article.

During and after the war, Visconti bought art from befriended modern artists such as Renato Guttuso and Lorenzo Vespignani (for instance, a series of four Sicilian fishermen scenes painted by Guttuso at the time Visconti directed his film La terra trema) partly to support them. In 1945, Guttuso designed the sets for Visconti’s play The Fifth Column by Hemingway, and Vespignani was set and costume designer for Visconti’s ballet Maratona di danza (1957). Visconti knew personally painters such as Salvador Dalí, Giacomo Manzù, and Pablo Picasso. At Via Salaria, he had an entire wall with showcases filled with
ceramics by Picasso. “Dalí designed the set for Visconti’s version of As You Like It (1948), the basis for Dalí’s three versions of Madonna of Port Lligat (1949, 1950 and 1950). In 1948, Dali asked the Italian painter Fabrizio Clerici to help him with the architectural composition of the painted backdrop; a request done right at the sacristy of the Chiesa della Salute in Venice, which basement is decorated with the same architectural tiles.”

During the making of Il Gattopardo (1963) and Vaghe stelle dell’Orsa (Sandra, 1965), Visconti bought houses — one outside of Palermo and another near Volterra. He stuffed them with art and antiques from the region, but hardly lived there. During his research on regions and periods, he became fascinated by everything produced in that region and collected it. Thus much art and many antiques were brought back to Italy from Germany and Austria in the lorries for the set pieces for Ludwig. Visconti became bewitched by art nouveau and fin-de-siècle art, at a time when it was still considered kitsch. He cramped his summer residence Villa La Colombaia at Ischia — rented in 1949 and later bought — with it: Charles X-style furniture; vases by Gallé, Lalique, Joseph Hoffman, and Hugo Leven; voluptuous angels by Polowny of the Wiener Werkstatte; watercolors by Klimt; and above all the oil and tempera paintings by Galileo Chini (1873–1956), who started out as a divisionist and symbolist and of whom Visconti possessed an enormous quantity of paintings. Visconti owned five panels of Chini’s Klimt-like 18-piece Primavera decoration for the salone centrale at the 1914 Venice Biennale. The panels were also exhibited in Visconti’s summer residence, La Colombaia in Ischia. Visconti also owned at least five large tempera paintings of soldiers and courtiers of the Royal Court of Bangkok (1912–13), which Chini had made during his stay in Siam, when he had been commissioned to decorate the throne room of King Rama V. Finally, Visconti owned some ten landscapes by Chini, a female nude (Nudo di schiena, 1930), and a later version (1947) of Chini’s famous Icaro cadente of 1907, a painting Visconti took with him to his last home on Via Fleming. The 1947 Icarus is clearly visible in photos and a filmed interview with Visconti at his Via Fleming home. The majority of Chini landscapes Visconti owned represent the Versilian coast, where Chini had his summerhouse. Visconti might have been attracted to the garden and beach scenes because of his own memories as a child of holidays spent at Forte dei Marmi nearby. Instead, the paintings of the Siamese courtiers and soldiers contain a kind of painted textile sample, which greatly attracted the costume-obsessed Visconti. Visconti’s interest in art was vast, though generally concentrated on pre-war art.
regularly visited exhibitions and museums when shooting on location in Italy and abroad. It would be fascinating, therefore, to discover to what extent his visits to museums and exhibitions affected his films. Without doubt, his visit to the Netherlands in 1955, on the occasion of the premiere of Franco Zeffirelli’s opera *L’italiana in Algeri* during the Holland Festival, must have influenced his film and theatre productions. A large stack of postcards from the Rijksmuseum and the Frans Halsmuseum in the Fondo Visconti prove Visconti’s predilection for *17th-century* Dutch painters such as Vermeer, De Hooch, Rembrandt, Hals, Steen, and Saenredam, and this can be seen in the sets of his films (I will come back to this).

Visconti regularly used objects, including paintings, from his own collection or those of friends when they matched what he was looking for. Thus art and antiques from Princess Laudomia Hercolani were used for *Il Gattopardo* and *Vaghe stelle dell’Orsa*. Unfortunately, little of Visconti’s collection has been left. After a severe stroke in 1972, which half paralyzed him, he did not want to return to his house at Villa Salaria, but wished to move to an art nouveau villa in Castelgandolfo. While the villa was being refurbished and his possessions moved, he stayed in a rented apartment in the north of Rome, one block from where his sister lived, on Via Fleming. Because of his illness, he never moved from there. Most of his entire household furniture was sent to Castelgandolfo, but many objects were stolen during the transport and at Castelgandolfo. After his death, the remaining objects were divided among his relatives. However, it must be noted that Visconti also sold objects regularly when he became tired with them, or gave them away to his collaborators and friends as gifts or rewards.

The thefts, gifts, and regularly changing tastes make a reconstruction of his collection an almost impossible enterprise. His private life, however, mingled regularly with his films. He not only often used costumes and props from his own belongings or those of friends for his films, but also used his own recollections of his parents and his relatives for the creation of his characters. Silvana Mangano’s character in *Death in Venice* was strongly inspired by Visconti’s mother. Visconti gave one particular colored photo of his mother to Piero Tosi for inspiration: we see her next to a well with the Visconti coat-of-arms. She is dressed in a so-called *droit-devant*, a heavily embroidered blue gown and draped in transparent gauze, wearing many meters of pearl necklace and holding pink tuberoses. The photo is very pictorial because of the autochrome procédé, which the Lumière brothers introduced in 1907. Autochrome, however, was mostly a process used by amateurs in those days, so Giuseppe Visconti might well have been the photographer (and not the professional photographer Emilio Sommariva, as Laurence Schifano has suggested). Tosi afterwards complained that when Caterina D’Amico started to organize Visconti exhibitions, many more photos of Visconti’s parents came out, while he had just one for *Death in Venice*. Many of these were published in *Album Visconti* (1978).
For every film, particularly historical films, Visconti’s set and costume designers meticulously prepared themselves on the period and the place where the film was to unfold. The documentation for this consisted of photos in the first place, but also illustrations of paintings, drawings, prints, etc. That is, as much as was available at the time. Tosi protests that nowadays the availability of visual sources is much greater than when he was a costume designer. When interpreting Visconti’s films with regards to visual arts, this limitation needs to be kept in mind, just as well as the knowledge of critics recognizing visual sources in the films.

The visual documentation served for a historically accurate design, but besides this historically correct interpretation, it also was used for artistic inspiration. One tried to make his/her own the art of a time in order to create an original design; reinventare, Visconti’s collaborators called it, to re-invent. Thus a banal and too literal and slavish quotation of paintings or prints was prevented. A set or costume designer created a new costume instead of copying one. This is a tradition in, for instance, costume design for cinema which was introduced in Italy in the 1930s by set and costume designer Gino Sensani. The costumes needed to be the expression of a time and a society, but also of the psychology of the characters in the film. Sensani’s pupil was Maria De Matteis, who was responsible for the costumes of Visconti’s debut, Ossessione. Her assistant was Piero Tosi, who designed the costumes for almost all of Visconti’s films, from Bellissima (1951) on. Tosi went even further than Sensani by paying more attention to the shape of the body, insisting for instance on corsets used in around 1860 (Il Gattopardo) or 1890 (L’innocente). It is clear that a body moves very differently when restricted by a corset creating a tiny waist.

Nineteenth-century naturalist painting was preferred as an inspirational source by Tosi, as one can clearly see how a dress stands or plies, what light effects it can create, what kind of fabrics are used and how they look, which colors or color combinations are used, and what kind of accessories belong to the costume. All these matters are poorly visible or invisible on encyclopaedic fashion prints or old magazine illustrations, which often represent costumes in flat and schematic ways. For the costumes of Senso, Tosi thus observed images of paintings by Alfred Stevens, Anselm Feuerbach, and Carolus-Duran. For the aristocrat Livia, he wanted to inspire himself from the official painting of the period in which the film is set: the 1860s.
Alfred Stevens (1823–1906), called “maître de la vie amoureuse,” was beloved in his own time as the painter of the mundane Paris of the 1860s and 1870s. He introduced, in the 1860s, the sub-theme in genre painting of the sentimental life of young bourgeoisie. Amongst others, he painted a genre portrait, which was published as inspirational source for the costumes, in a special issue of the journal Cinema on Senso at the release of the film. The painting, called La lettre de faire-part, aka La rentrée (before 1863), was supposedly used for the costume of Livia when she visits her lover in Verona. This is a bit difficult to establish nowadays. Tosi told me in 2004 that the mantle worn by actress Alida Valli in this scene was based more on the burnous-like cloak of the famous Countess of Castiglione, as photographed by French photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson in the early 1860s. The only object of Stevens’ painting that reminds us of Valli’s costume is the hat with the veil. The large cashmere shawl the lady in La lettre de faire-part wears recalles a previous scene in Senso when Livia walks around her villa, while the battle of Custoza is going on elsewhere. Actually, these kinds of cashmere shawls were very fashionable in 1856 and can be seen in other paintings by Stevens.

Within film criticism in 1954, but also afterwards, the pictorial relationship with Stevens was not given much attention; critics focused mainly on the relationship between the Macchiaioli and Senso. This is only partly correct. It can be explained by aesthetic appreciation. In the decades that Visconti realized his historical films, from the 1950s to the 1970s, a parallel historiographic process went on which was paramount for the historical and aesthetic inspiration of Visconti and his crew as well as for the contemporary reception of his films. While French and Italian critics relate in particular Visconti’s aesthetics to the avant-garde of the 19th century, interviews with Visconti’s collaborators indicate that they, pushed by the maestro himself, inspired themselves just as much or even more from the painting and photography of the elite which, in the 19th century, was not always the avant-garde, but rather the arrière-garde of the state portrait or Baudelairian art of the il faut être de son temps (and thus modern without being in the avant-garde). I am thinking of artists such as Franz-Xaver Winterhalter, Alfred Stevens, and Carolus-Duran, who were inspirational sources for costumes. But these academic and genre painters were hardly bon-ton in the Western world of the 1950s and 1960s, but internationally renowned and beloved during their own times.

For Senso, Visconti and his costume designers Marcel Escoffier and Piero Tosi must have closely observed the portraits by Winterhalter, in particular his portrait of the Austrian empress Elisabeth (Sissi), formerly at the Hofburg and today at the

avec fidélité les modes féminines, les intérieurs de son temps, les détails de la vie quotidienne, mais, alors que les naturalistes se piquèrent d’observer scientifiquement, impassiblement la réalité, Stevens n’a jamais caché sa curiosité ou sa sympathie pour ses modèles, cessé d’exprimer leurs tristesses ou leurs joies, parfois même de suggérer un petit roman.” Hautecoeur (1945), 128.

37. Interview with Piero Tosi, 2004. See also Pierre Apraxine, Xavier Demange, La Divine Comtesse Photographs of the Countess de Castiglione (New Haven/London: Yale University Press and New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 84–85. Here the inspiration is confirmed and a sketch by Tosi on p. 84 proves the resemblance. The photo entitled Funeral is depicted on p. 132, cat. 49. Tosi also drew inspiration from Pierson’s Fright, a paper print with gouache representing Castiglione in a majestic white satin gown, for the costume of the countess and avid collector of anything to do with her, thus creating a Proustian trajectory from the photo to Tosi’s inspiration.


Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna. In the opening scene of Senso, at the Teatro La Fenice, Livia wears the same stars in her hair and the same large transparent gauze shawl. Piero Tosi: “Of course in those days there were no stars or actresses dictating fashion; the queens did. They were the first stars.” In contrast to Winterhalter’s portrait, Livia wears a black robe, which contrasts with the white of the shoulders and the décolleté, adorned with spangles, little bows, and fake plies. All in all, it is a style which reminds one not only of the mid-19th century, but also of the mid-20th century: just like the creations of Dior, Balmain, Balenciaga, and Worth, so to say. Around 1950, Balenciaga designed ball gowns with enormous bows and ribbons, just like the one Alida Valli wears in Senso. Though the designers watched elite art for the elite in the film, critics were right in asserting that the Macchiaioli, exactly because theirs was a middle-class kind of painting, were used as sources, in addition to countless daguerrotypes, for the costumes of civilians and Livia’s staff.


42. I am not entirely sure about this and would like to consult a theatre historian to know (to what extent acclaimed lyrical and theatrical artists were fashion role models as well).

By the lighting and use of color, composition, and camera movement, but also simply by the choice and framing of certain locations, Visconti adapted nature to the predominating emotions of certain moments in his films. Nature adapting to human passions or being the expression of it is a typical 19th-century concept. Typical for the so-called Seelenlandschaften — landscapes of the soul — of the Romantics, but also recurring in decadent art. 44 Oscar Wilde wrote in his Intentions: “Not nature teaches art, but art teaches nature.” The landscape is a state of mind, and artists point out to audiences in which ways to conceive nature, which elements to pick out and which to ignore. Things only exist because we see them. Everything we see and our ways of seeing depend on the arts that have taught us and influenced us. 45

Visconti’s films always have something half-real, half-theatrical. The realism in his films must certainly not be confused with the naturalism of the paintings of Courbet or the novels of Zola and Verga. Just like the realism of 17th-century Dutch painting, Visconti’s realism is constructed; it deals with explicit framing, perspectives, and light. It only has an apparent naturalness, and contains a heavy load of metaphorical meaning. 46 Chance does not exist in a Visconti film. This is very true for Visconti’s sets. Objects are carriers of meaning, and indicate the atmosphere of the scene, of the emotions of the protagonists. Surroundings are the expression of man, even in the most realistic films of Visconti, Ossessione and La terra trema. The vast Po-delta in Ossessione expresses the sadness and imprisonment of the two protagonists, while the road expresses hope. But also the interiors are presented as metaphorical sets, not unlike the genre paintings of De Hooch. A good example in Ossessione is the moment when Giovanna, after the murder on her husband, throws a large party to forget the past and get rich, while her lover Gino repents, wants to leave, and even quarrels and fights with his former travel companion. After the party: the hangover, the fatigue, and the introspection, comparable to the end of the ball in Il Gattopardo or the end of the SA party, before the SS arrives, in The Damned. Visconti explicitly shows us the timeless and barren setting of the inn, where Giovanna enters a kitchen, crammed with dirty plates, glasses, and bottles. Amidst this ravage, she eats two spoonfuls of soup, tries to read, and falls asleep. The camera tracks back and we see her amidst the enormous washing-up. A perfect Seelenlandschaft.

45. Wilde is quoted in Luciani (1942), 13–14, and in Claudio Varese, Cinema, arte e cultura (Padua: Marsilio, 1963), 16.
In Visconti’s historical films, painting is also visible in a literal way in the interiors of the sets, sometimes simply because rich families would cover their walls with paintings or ornate them with frescoes, like the ones at the Villa Godi-Malinverni, Palladio’s first villa, where Senso was partly shot. In short, as part of an image of a time, of a certain taste and household. Quite often, however, they reach beyond that. The paintings within the sets of Visconti’s films often have a narrative or a metaphorical meaning. In Senso, the trompe-l’oeil painted characters in the frescoes of Villa Godi are used as comments on the characters of the film. Thus we see in the Sala di Venere of Villa Godi an old man holding a curtain up for a younger one, painted by Gianbattista Zelotti, and shot by Visconti’s crew next to Franz when he arrives at Livia’s villa, thus adding to the voyeur and secrecy effect.

Also in Il Gattopardo, painting performs an important part in the sets of the film. A famous example is the painting don Fabrizio sees when entering a library during the ball in order to escape the crowd, a painting which reminds him of his own nearing death. A memento mori, so to say. The painting is a copy of Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s moralistic and sentimental work Le mauvais fils puni (1778), today one of the masterpieces of the Louvre; a prodigal son returns too late, his father has died. The painting had a pendant, preceding this scene, La malediction paternelle (1777), in which the father curses his debauched son. At the Salon of 1765, where sketches for both paintings were shown, Diderot raved about Le mauvais fils puni: “Beau, très beau, sublime; tout, tout.” Strangely enough, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, who already mentions the painting in his novel Il Gattopardo, presents it as La morte del giusto, thus shifting the attention from the prodigal son to the pious father dying. Strange, too, is Lampedusa’s choice for this painting. Greuze’s reputation declined towards the end of his life and through the early part of the 19th century, but was revived after 1850, when 18th-century painting returned to favor, by critics such as Théophile Thoré, Arsène Houssaye, and, most notably, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt in their book L’Art du dix-huitième siècle. By the end of the 19th century some of Greuze’s paintings fetched record prices, and his Broken Pitcher (Paris, Louvre) was one of the most popular works in the Louvre. The advent of modernism in the early 20th century, however, totally obliterated Greuze’s reputation. It was only in the 1970s that it started to regain some position, so well after the book and film Il Gattopardo were released.

Note also in Il Gattopardo the decaying old paintings in the attics of the palace, which Tancredi and Angelica see. They are not only indicators of the location, but also comment on the protagonists. Angelica’s old rose dress, though a bit old-fashioned for the period, stands out against the faded enormous battle scene she
sees. Lampedusa already indicates it in the novel as *Arturo Corbera at the Battle of Antioch*, a battle scene between Crusaders and Muslims, but the painting in the film — an imitation made by Mario Brondi — is clearly a variation on Rubens’ *Battle of the Amazons*. The painting is emblematical of the situation. Old glories of the aristocracy fade away, and the freshness and sensuality of Angelica is what counts.

What strikes us, too, in the scene in the attic is the enormous spatial effect of vistas, comparable to the perspectives of Dutch *see-through* in the 17th-century paintings of Vermeer and De Hooch. Behind the first visible space, we see another space where the action takes place, which might be emphasized by light falling in from the side. Our sense of three-dimensionality is thus strongly evoked. Through dialogue and music, Visconti knows how to tie these different spaces together in a way that strikes us as natural. The showing of different rooms one after another is a recurrent theme in Visconti’s films, for instance by not opening one door, but at least four or five in a row. Music in crescendo often reinforces the drama of these doors opening in succession. Take the scene in *Il Gattopardo*, when the servant Mimi opens a series of doors when Tancredi returns to the palace of Donnafugata. Think also of the moment in *Senso* in which Livia goes into a fit of hysterics out of fear that Franz might be killed in action. She decides to give him the money of the revolutionaries. The music of Bruckner reaches a climax right when she opens the row of doors. In the mentioned scene in *Senso*, mark Livia’s costume, the white blouse with the black, tightly-tied ribbon, which seems to express complete self-control, while she herself goes berserk. Mark also the setting where she delivers the money. Under a 16th-century fresco of exalted Olympian gods, painted by Zelotti, she performs such a prosaic act as a money transaction and moreover one of a dubious kind. The whole interior is a mix of styles and periods: 16th-century mannerist frescoes, an 18th-century *bureau*, saffron seats and a saffron poof in Empire style, neo-Gothic yellow curtains, and, on top of the bureau, a 19th-century little vase with flowers. Visconti loved these kinds of contrasts — as his own interiors show, too. But in this scene, they also express the psychology of the action and of the characters; in fact, Visconti had a serious argument with set dresser Gino Brogio, who had picked some roses from the garden of the villa. Visconti didn’t think they were romantic, explicit enough. No, the bouquet had to be romantic, shamelessly romantic, contrasting with the elegance of the Veronese-like frescoes. Again an opera-like enlargement of reality, one might say.

Just as with his affluent use of *tracking shots/travellings* — or the *zooms* in his later films, fast and aggressive in *The Damned*, slow and exploratory in *Death in Venice* — this expresses the scale and the depth of Visconti’s enormous sets. It also proves Visconti’s love for spatial and three-dimensional effects. He is truly heir and equal of the directors of the silent cinema of the 1910s and the 1920s. But this

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50. One might also think of *pictorialism* in Italian photography, such as the re-enactments of the work of Vermeer and De Hooch by Guido Rey, a Turin-born photographer who made *tableaux vivants*-like photos in the 1910s, thus preceding what is now known as staged photography. At the time, Rey was held in high esteem by Alfred Stieglitz’s journal “Camera Work”. Guido Rey, *fotografo pittorialista* (Milan/Biella: Nepente/ Fondazione Sella, 2004).


is an extension of a research on three-dimensional illusionism that started in painting centuries before and which was further developed in cinema, namely the illusion of three-dimensional space seen through a two-dimensional surface, whether it be a canvas or the silver screen. As Maximilian Le Cain wrote in *Senses of Cinema*: “His use of space and architecture is every bit as masterful as Antonioni’s, yet executed to achieve opposite results: Antonioni uses space and architecture to abstract his characters and stories from the very concrete reality of today, while Visconti uses space and architecture to make concrete his no longer existent and thus initially abstract reality.”53
Visconti and his set decorators regularly used objects or sets to create extra space, just as he did in the interior of his own villa. One has the impression of being in gigantic surroundings. He knows how to increase that effect not only with his extraordinary tracking shots through various rooms, as in the attic scene and the ball scene in *Il Gattopardo*, or with panning and zooming, as in the lobby scene in *Death in Venice*. He also does it with mirrors. With the help of mirrors, Visconti establishes a kind of interior montage and shows the space behind the camera, the “fourth wall” of the stage. We see this effect also in painting, where mirrors have been used over and again to create depth, space, and the space behind the paintbrush. Think of the *Arnolfini* portrait by Jan van Eyck54 or *Las Meninas* by Velázquez, where a confrontation with the “not-portrayed” is created, whether it be the painter or the patrons. There is a difference, however, as in cinema we do not see the director or the film crew. The diegesis of the film remains intact. What we do see are characters off-screen. Thus, at countless moments in Visconti’s films characters become visible to the characters on-screen and to us by the use of mirrors. On-screen and off-screen characters converse with each other, without intercutting from one to the other — a technique we know from silent cinema (for instance in the films of the Russian tsarist director Yevgenii Bauer, such as *The King of Paris,* but also in Italian films such as *Ma l’amor mio non muore.*55

In *Senso,* in Livia’s villa, Franz appears as an almost demonic ghost in a mirror next to Livia, who is sitting at her dressing table. He is a kind of evil spirit from her past whom she had hoped to forget. One may even see some reminiscence in this of the old superstition that mirrors could be used to summon evil spirits — a superstition that inspired many a painter in the past, as Hartlaub indicated in his *Zauber des Spiegels.*56 In *L’innocente,* just before the killing of the baby, Tullio sees his reflection frozen in the half-opened door of a mirror-fronted wardrobe. In the background of the reflection, he is combined with the baby’s cradle and a Guido Reni-like portrait between the baby and himself, symbolizing the religion that stands between himself and the bastard child. Tullio’s wife Giuliana did not want an abortion because of her beliefs, while atheist and *Übermensch* Tullio is not hindered in his murderous thoughts by any religious scruples. Mirrors in avant-garde cinema are often the passageways to other worlds; think of Jean Cocteau’s *Le sang d’un poète* (1930) and *Orphée* (1950). With Visconti, the real passage does not occur — he does not make fantastical cinema, but desires are nevertheless expressed by reflections in water. Men, who cannot reach their objects of desire in the ordinary world, are ephemerally united with their beloved ones in water reflections, as in *Vaghe stelle dell’Orsa* and *Death in Venice.*

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54. Mentioned in Hautcoeur’s study *Les peintres de la vie familiale.*


Visconti also used mirrors to confront persons with themselves in ways we know from early cinema (think of Lydia Borelli mirroring herself at the end of *Rapsodia satanica* by Nino Oxilia), but for ages it has been a recurrent theme in painting, too, not only including famous examples such as the *Rokeby-Venus* by Velázquez, but also many examples in 19th-century works (for instance within the oeuvre of Alfred Stevens).\(^{57}\) In *L’innocente*, Giuliana comes home, lifts her veil(!), and guiltily watches her reflection in the mirror. She is ashamed of herself because of her adultery. Note the painting in the background in the reflection: an antique portrait of a young child. The same painting recurs in other moments of the film and thus works as an *omen*. Giuliana’s extramarital child is thus announced before it is even born. The veil, by the way, plays an important part.

When Giuliana veils herself in the presence of her husband Tullio before taking off for her lover, the veil is tight around her face, accentuating her jawbones. On the set, Visconti referred to the sculptor Medardo Rosso, whose *Donna velata, impressione al boulevard* (1893) must have been the inspiration.\(^{58}\) Giuliana, literally and figuratively speaking, becomes intangible for Tullio. Later on, he will lift another veil of hers, and she is deeply ashamed. She knows he is going to kiss her even if she is pregnant by another man. She is no longer intangible, she cannot run away, and must accept the confrontation. We often see in Visconti’s films such a use of veiling and unveiling — think of the cruel unveiling of Livia at the end of *Senso*, or the intangible and ethereal beauty of the heavily veiled mother in *Death in Venice*, inspired by Visconti’s own recollections and photos of his mother. It always hints at a metaphorical level. This play with space, by which the dynamics of the films often evolve within and not between the images, reinforces the idea of one big moving picture. In particular in *Senso*, film therefore seems more space than time, more situational and *tableaux* style, to speak in the terms of Brewster and Jacobs. Or one should at least think of a conscious attempt to freeze time in spite of history, almost a Proustian time, if you like.\(^{59}\) As if Franz and Livia are aware of the brevity of their romance. The aristocracy at the ball of *Il Gattopardo*, Gianni in *Vaghe stelle dell’Orsa*, Ludwig, the professor of *Conversation Piece* they all try to freeze time and history, but in vain.\(^{60}\)

\(^{57}\) Consider Stevens’ *La Parigienne japonaise*/*La robe japonaise* (1872), *Une fille devant le miroir* (1875?), and *Lady in front of a Mirror* (c. 1873-76).

\(^{58}\) The sculpture is now at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome. See also Giovanni Lista, *Medardo Rosso* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2004) and the 2004 exhibition catalogue by Richter Verlag.


\(^{60}\) Angela Dalle Vacche states that Jean-Luc Godard provocatively concluded on Visconti’s strong ties in *Senso* between figures and their background that “his characters were unable to break away from the past because their bodies cannot be severed from their contexts.” In that sense, Godard seems to link *Senso* more to the earlier films of Visconti. Dalle Vacche (1996), 116.
It is the opposite of the pessimistic determinism of the French poetic realism of the 1930s and Visconti’s first films, where people try to change their lives or those of others, but don’t manage. Maximilian Le Cain considers Visconti’s films as existing in space as well as, if not more, in time: “It is an intensely visual style of filmmaking, which involves immersing the audience in the atmosphere of each scene and gradually overwhelming them with it as opposed to rushing from one scene to the next in pursuit of narrative tension. Of all the directors who, each in their own very unique way, practice a similar approach — Dreyer, Antonioni, Tarkovsky, Jancso, Angelopoulos, Tarr, certain films by Kubrick and Wenders — Visconti is the most subtle, consciously or unconsciously cloaking his radicalism in the ‘respectability’ of the period genre. I would argue that this radicalism was achieved through constant striving to tell his stories more vividly rather than by making use of any preconceived aesthetic program. In this way, Visconti can be perceived as the transitional figure in European cinema between classicism and modernism.”  

61. Le Cain, op. cit.
One of the most important elements in Visconti’s films is his use of color. Visconti not only used color in its historical context, but, like Sergei Eisenstein and Vincent van Gogh, to express human passions, too. In *Senso*, the symbolic use of color has been used in the most far-reaching way. Ochre, brown, and red symbolize hope, love, and joy, while green expresses cowardice, revenge, grief, and torment. Thus the grain in the granary, where Livia hides Franz, is colored red. Director of Photography Giuseppe Rotunno confirmed the rumor that the grain was specially colored red in order to reach the exact hue.

In later films, too, Visconti used color in symbolic ways, as in *The Damned*, where an exact copy of an expressionist painting, *Mädchen mit Pfingstrosen* by Alexej von Jawlensky, in the room of the social-democrat of the family seems to have been the starting point for the make-up of Sophie von Essenbeck after she was raped by her own son and became a morphine addict. Thus her downfall and the loss of her cold and ruthless behavior are indicated. Earlier on, in the drag performance of the son Martin, doing a sinister persiflage of Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*, Visconti wanted an expressionistic way of illuminating the stage. Director of Photography Armando Nannuzzi, not being a big art expert, was greatly puzzled by the request, but still created a memorably colored scene.

Color is also striking in the scene in *Senso* when Franz secretly visits Livia at her villa in the countryside. During the night in the villa, the image of the bedroom is separated in an ochre and a bluish-green tone. At dawn, an oil lamp slowly expires, spreading a yellowish light. The first bluish sunbeams shine through the window, filtered by softly fluttering curtains. The fluttering curtains, or even the shadow of them, are a *topos* in Visconti’s films. Consider in particular the opening images of *Il Gattopardo*. Consider also the patches of light created on the floor by the fluttering curtains in the kiss scene in *Senso*. This clearly has to do with the creation of the illusion that the world does not stop at the edge of the frame. Visconti, in other words, creates space in a way not unlike what Vermeer did in his paintings. Moreover, he does not merely show light, but light in motion, kinetic sculpture. Film can do without color, music, dialogue, sets, or costumes. But without light there would be no film. Nothing would happen. The art of painting has been fascinated by light for centuries. By natural light, as with sunny outdoor scenes of the impressionists, the clouded skies of 17th-century Dutch landscape painting or the incidence of light through the windows in Vermeer’s work. But also by theatrical light, as with Caravaggio, Rembrandt, La Tour, and Joseph Wright. It is not surprising, therefore, that, in talking about the relationship between cinema and painting, one often refers to artists who treat light in a special way. Visconti’s subtle use of light can be compared to this pictorial tradition.
VISCONTI AND THE VISUAL ARTS

CONCLUSION

Much more can be said about sets, costumes, and cinematography, color and black-and-white, composition and poses in every Visconti film regarding the visual arts. Consider the framing and the classical poses in La terra trema, the Caravaggio-like chiaroscuro in Le notti bianche, Rocco and his Brothers, and Vaghe stelle dell’Orsa; the images of Venice in the fog or at night in Death in Venice, which instantly recall the works of Turner, Whistler, Sickert, or Sargent; the stiff and prim conversation pieces, mostly copied from Mario Praz’s own landmark study on the genre: Conversation Pieces, contrasting with the aggressive and loose Roman nouveau riche family in Conversation Piece; finally L’innocente, the dark red and blacks of the Roman — but also quite Proustian — interiors in the first half of the film contrasting with the sunny and bright scenes in and around the villa in the countryside in the second part — a contrast of the cold wealth of a certain kind of academic painting with the warm tones of the impressionists and some of the Macchiaioli.

Visual art performs all kinds of roles in Visconti’s work, sometimes in the form of literal quotations, but more often in a rather indirect way through an illusionism appropriated from painting, photography, and other visual media, which we can trace in costume and set design and cinematography. This complex and multilayered way of appropriating other media in cinema is exactly what contributes to discovering new aspects in Visconti’s films every time we see them, and thus enjoy them over and again.

Ivo Blom