



CHASING THE REAL: ITALIAN NEOREALISM

Ossessione

Ossessione

Director: Luchino Visconti
Production Company: I.C.I. – Iniziative Cinematografiche Internazionale
Production Supervisor: Camillo Pagani
Assistant Directors: Giuseppe De Santis, Antonio Pietrangeli
Screenplay and Dialogue: Luchino Visconti, Mario Alicata, Giuseppe De Santis, Gianni Puccini
Directors of Photography: Aldo Tonti, Domenico Scala
Editor: Mario Serandrei
Art Director/Set Decorator: Gino Franzì
Costume Designer: Maria De Matteis
Music: Giuseppe Rosati
Music Performed by:
Orchestra Sinfonica dell'Eiar
Orchestra Conductor: Fernando Previtali
Sound: Usigli, Barberini
uncredited
Production Manager: Libero Solaroli
Screenplay: Rosario Assunto, Sergio Grieco
Based on the novel: The Postman Always Rings Twice by: James M. Cain
Camera Operator: Gianni Di Venanzo
Assistant Operator: Carlo Di Palma
Stills: Osvaldo Civirani
Art Director: Cesare Pavani
Assistant Art Director: Francesco Contardi
Make-up: Alberto De Rossi
Cast:
Clara Calamai (*Giovanna Bragana*)
Massimo Girotti (*Gino Costa*)
Dhia Cristiani (*Lucia*)
Elio Marcuzzo (*Giuseppe Tavalato, 'The Spaniard'*)
Vittorio Duse (*plainclothesman*)
Michele Riccardini (*Don Remigio*)
Juan De Landa (*Giuseppe Bragana*)
uncredited
Michele Sakara (*the child*)
Italy 1942
141 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)

Restored in 4K by Cinecittà, CSC – Cineteca Nazionale and VIGGO. Courtesy of Cinecittà.

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SPOILER WARNING

 The following notes give away some of the plot.

While Rossellini and De Sica were concerned explicitly with chronicling the hardships of wartime and the post-war era, Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* – for many the very first neorealist film – drew on typically American genres (in particular the American *noir* and western) as well as Italian *cronaca nera*. Together with a group of young anti-fascist critics (Mario Alicata, Gianni Puccini, Giuseppe De Santis), the well-travelled aristocrat transposed James M. Cain's 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to the sweltering flatlands of the Po delta.

Visconti had spent several years in France in the 1930s, where mutual friend Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel had introduced him to Jean Renoir. Informally, Visconti joined Renoir's troupe as they moved from film to film, culminating in the unfinished short *Partie de campagne* (1936). A short time later, Renoir was invited to Italy to lecture at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, but the outbreak of World War II forced him to abandon Europe for the US. He left behind a treatment he had written of Cain's novel and this was the basis of what later became *Ossessione*. In the film, wandering hobo Gino (Massimo Girotti) arrives at a roadside trattoria owned by the harmlessly garrulous Bragana (Juan De Landa). Having set his sights on Bragana's downtrodden wife Giovanna (Clara Calamai), Gino offers his services as a mechanic in exchange for room and board. Gino and Giovanna soon become lovers and hatch a plan to murder Bragana but, in typically *noir* fashion, things do not go to plan.

As with Rossellini's *Rome Open City*, Visconti cast two well-known Italian stars in the film's main roles. Massimo Girotti had made his international breakthrough as a 21-year-old in Alessandro Blasetti's historical epic *The Iron Crown* (1939), and went on to star in Rossellini's *A Pilot Returns* (1942). For the role of Giovanna, the director was so determined to cast Anna Magnani that even when the actress told him she was pregnant, he wasn't deterred. However, production of the film was delayed, meaning that Magnani had to eventually abandon the project. The role went to Clara Calamai, a prominent Italian star of the so-called 'white telephones' films of the 1930s and early 1940s. Under Visconti's remorseless direction, she was completely transformed from glamorous diva to slouched, worn-out adulteress.

From opening scene to pitch-black finale, *Ossessione* presents a sweat-drenched, earthy alternative to the polish of fascist-approved cinema. Most satisfyingly for the film's makers, when *Ossessione* was first shown in September 1943 an outraged Vittorio Mussolini stormed out of the screening, proclaiming 'This is not Italy!' Visconti would go on to make a further two features in the neorealist style, finally getting to work with Anna Magnani on 1951's *Bellissima*.

Pasquale Iannone, *Sight and Sound*, May 2013

Ossessione, made in 1942, when Italy was under Fascist rule, is based on the James Cain novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. It is a stunning evocation of sexual passion, far more powerful than either of the American versions of the same story. The first time we see the tramp Gino's face is the moment he sets

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Ossessione

Sat 4 May 20:15; Sun 12 May 17:50

Paisà

Mon 6 May 15:20; Fri 10 May 20:30; Sun 19 May 15:30; Mon 20 May 12:00; Wed 29 May 12:00

Journey through Italian Neorealism

Tue 7 May 18:10

Four Steps in the Clouds Quattro passi fra le nuvole

Tue 7 May 20:30 (+ intro by season curator Giulia Saccogna); Mon 13 May 18:20

The Children Are Watching Us I bambini ci guardano

Wed 8 May 20:45; Thu 16 May 18:20

Shoeshine

Tue 14 May 18:10 (+ intro by season curator Giulia Saccogna); Tue 21 May 20:45

A Tragic Hunt (aka The Tragic Pursuit) Caccia tragica

Wed 15 May 21:00; Sat 25 May 15:40

The Mill on the Po Il mulino del Po

Thu 16 May 20:40; Sat 25 May 18:20

The Bandit Il bandito

Fri 17 May 20:50; Sun 26 May 18:30

Germany, Year Zero Germania anno zero (aka Deutschland im Jahre Null)

Sun 19 May 18:20; Wed 22 May 12:30; Mon 27 May 15:00; Wed 29 May 20:40

Bicycle Thieves Ladri di biciclette

Sun 19 May 20:20; Mon 27 May 18:00

Bitter Rice Riso amaro

Wed 22 May 20:40; Thu 30 May 18:15

La terra trema

Sun 26 May 15:00; Fri 31 May 20:00

Course: City Lit at the BFI Italian Neorealism – The Cinema of Everyday Life

Wed 8 May – Wed 12 Jun 18:30-20:30

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eyes on the bar owner's beautiful young wife, Giovanna. From this meeting, the film, directed by an aristocrat-turned-communist, is near perfect.

The story is told in a brilliantly handled series of triangles. Gino and Giovanna become lovers, with her husband forever between them. Gino attempts to escape once, in a gay partnership with a fellow wanderer. He attempts to escape a second time, after the murder, with a young prostitute. But love closes in around them. As Gino says to Giovanna, 'Once the world seemed a very big place; now there is only your house.'

'I am interested in extreme situations,' Visconti wrote. 'The instants when abnormal tension reveals the truth about human beings.' Watching *Ossessione*, I can never get over how quickly we in the audience also come to want Giovanna's fool of a husband out of the way, how seductive the idea of killing him becomes. And how oppressive the aftermath is, suffocating with guilt and paranoia. The truths of *Ossessione* are relentlessly hard. Even death, when it comes, contains a cruel trap.

The film itself was made in an extreme situation – cast and crew were grilled by the police, and one of its screenwriters was sent to prison. Despite this, Visconti worked at a pace unimaginable in our commercial cinema, rarely completing more than three shots in a day. Mussolini's Minister of Culture said it was a film 'that stinks of latrines'. Thus did the film which launched Neo-Realism begin its 'tortured existence'. In one town after another it was screened for a night or two before being banned – in one case, the cinema was then exorcised. 'What would they think,' wondered Visconti, 'if they knew this was a film I sold my mother's jewellery to make?'

Frank Deasy, *Sight and Sound*, May 1995

A contemporary review

At first glance it is a little remarkable that the best film version of a very well known American novel should have been made in Italy; but only at first glance. For the America of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is not that of Mr Marquand's Boston or Mr Runyon's New York or even Mr Chandler's Pacific Coast. Mr Cain's story is one of which the purely physical aspects of lovemaking, eating and drinking, of which the primitive emotions of lust and jealousy or brutality and murderousness are the very stuff. I don't wish to malign my beloved Mediterranean countries, but I think that that is why a Latin version was bound to be so good. For good it was, and make no mistake. Visconti's first film is one of the cinema's great pieces of work, to which the nearest parallel is probably Feyder's *Thérèse Raquin* or Pabst's *Loves of Jeanne Ney*.

Visconti has placed his characters, all of whom are superbly realised in the round, in a setting of the most admirably convincing and suitable reality. Realism may not be by any means an essential artistic virtue, but in this type of film it is a *sine qua non*, and if it is lacking everything falls to the ground. But the trattoria itself, the surrounding country, the railway trains, the fair at Ancona, the daylong *fiesta* at the *trattoria* one holiday, the host of minor characters, the crowds, are all superlatively real. You can almost smell the garlic and the sweat, taste the harsh red wine and the bowls of minestrone, feel the hot sun on your face and the gritty road underneath your feet. If I were an Italian from Emilia and saw this film abroad, I should break down and cry with sheer homesickness, so real and immediate is the impact.

Vernon Jarratt, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1948