



## CHASING THE REAL: ITALIAN NEOREALISM

# La terra trema

### La terra trema

**Director:** Luchino Visconti  
**Production Company:** Universalisa  
**Producer:** Salvo D'Angelo  
**Production Managers:** Anna Davini, Renato Silvestri  
**Unit Production Manager:** Claudio Forges Davanzati  
**Assistant Directors:** Francesco Rosi, Franco Zeffirelli  
**Screenplay and Dialogue:** Luchino Visconti, Gianni Di Venanzo  
**Story:** Luchino Visconti  
**Based on** *I Malavoglia* **by:** Giovanni Verga  
**Director of Photography:** G.R. Aldo  
**Camera Operator:** Gianni Di Venanzo  
**Assistant Camera Operator:** Aiace Parolin  
**Key Grip:** Nello Nutarelli  
**Gaffer:** Bruno Pasqualini  
**Stills Photography:** Paul Ronald  
**Editor:** Mario Serandrei  
**Music Co-ordinated by:** Luchino Visconti  
**Music Co-ordinated and Directed by:** Willy Ferrero  
**Musical Consultant:** Edoardo Micucci  
**Sound Recording:** Mario Ronchetti  
**Sound:** Vittorio Trentino, Ovidio Del Grande  
**Cast:**  
Maria Micale (*mother of the Vicari family*)  
Sebastiano Valastro (*father of the Vicari family*)  
Antonino Micale (*Vanni*)  
Nelluccia Giammona (*Mara*)  
Agnese Giammona (*Lucia*)  
Salvatore Vicari (*Alfio*)  
Giuseppe Vicari (*Piccola*)  
Antonio Arcidiacono (*'Ntoni*)  
Giuseppe Arcidiacono (*Cola*)  
Maria Vicari (*the blonde woman*)  
Antonio Valastro (*Pandolla*)  
Santo Valastro (*Santo*)  
Lorenzo Valastro (*Lorenzo*)  
Alfio Valastro (*Bandiera*)  
Raimondo Valastro (*Raimondo*)  
Rosario Galvagno (*Don Salvatore, the police marshal*)  
Nicola Castorino (*Nicola*)  
Rosa Costanzo (*Nedda*)  
Rosa Catalano (*Rosa*)  
Ignazio Maccarone (*Maccarone*)  
Pasquale Pellegrino (*fisherman*)  
Alfio Fichera (*Michele*)  
Angelo Morabito (*customer in the bar*)  
Venera Bonaccorso (*the laughing old lady*)  
Francesco Valastro (*Afro*)  
Salvatore Valastro (*the pawnbroker*)  
Carmela Fichera (*the baroness*)  
Giovanni Maiorana (*child*)  
Giovanni Greco  
Concettina Mirabella  
Italy 1948  
160 mins  
Digital

Courtesy of Cinecittà

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With *La terra trema*, Visconti developed the neorealist approach to a dramatic subject in its most extreme form: the players, the lines they speak, the places they live in, the whole social background and motivation, depart hardly at all from reality.

Visconti originally went to Sicily for a few weeks with the idea of filming a short documentary; later, probably through his discovery of the problems of the island, and the imaginative response they aroused in him, his original project was transformed into an adventure not unlike that of Eisenstein in Mexico. The film he then proposed was to be in three parts dealing with the struggles of the fishermen, the peasants and the miners to achieve freedom from economic exploitation. These three episodes, three stories following roughly parallel lines, would have made up a single work. Sicily gave Visconti a particular setting; and above all it presented a special kind of social problem: the condition of the workers and peasants in a society still to some extent feudal. It was these conditions that aroused the polemicist in Visconti, giving him the opportunity to put forward a solution in line with his general left-wing position. But *La terra trema*, because it ends on an apparent defeat, was not unanimously approved by Italian left-wing critics.

Visconti experienced all kinds of difficulties, and was able to complete only the first of his three episodes – that of the sea – which he expanded into a whole film. This was shot entirely on location, in the little fishing village of Aci Trezza, from the beginning of November 1947 to the end of May 1948.

The basis of the story is Giovanni Verga's novel *I Malavoglia* – and Visconti's film remains surprisingly true to the letter of this original, however far it departs from it in spirit.

*I Malavoglia* is a detailed and sombre study of the ruin of a family of fishermen, the disasters brought about by their own maladroit attempts to better their condition. 'This sincere and dispassionate study', as Verga described it in his preface, seems to have been an end in itself for the novelist. He gives the reader a picture of a certain kind of life, but he is not concerned with suggesting solutions to the problems he raises. Many of the characters and situations of the film, as well as some of the dialogue and some passages in the Italian commentary, come directly from the novel, whose action is also set in the village of Trezza. But in Visconti's film all these elements serve another purpose. The artist is no longer content with the role of the objective, dispassionate observer: rather, he organises the facts of the situation for his own purpose, giving them their central place in his thesis.

Three quarters of a century separate the characters of *I Malavoglia* from the Valastro family of Visconti's film, and the two works in themselves sum up a period of historical change. Fatalism has given way to a struggle whose end and means can now be clearly defined.

The clearest example of this passage of time, from naturalism to neo-realism, can be found in the shift in the central character (in the novel it is the father, in the film the young nephew) and in the very different attitude he takes. Where Verga's novel is fatalistic, the film shows the working of the economic machine, the techniques of exploitation. The dealers, the middle-men, as a result play a more sizeable part in Visconti's film than in the novel. All the factors of the drama are immediately crystallised in this economic problem, which becomes the axis on which the whole film turns.

Visconti here developed neo-realist methods to their extreme limits. The same characteristic appears in the actual technique of the film, at least in the particular rhythm he has given it. This extreme slowness is not simply something designed to give the picture its special grandeur, its almost majestic pace. It may in the end achieve this effect, but its primary purpose is uncompromisingly to re-create the movement of life itself, to give to even the slightest gesture its proper duration and so its due significance and meaning. It should not be deduced from this, however, that the style of the film is a documentary one. *La terra trema* is not simply a fictionalised documentary on the lives of Sicilian fishermen. Its slow pacing, which permits it to explore situations so thoroughly, also serves a dramatic demand. This is most apparent in the second half of the film, when the sombre rhythms seem to suggest the whole weight of time, the oppressive burden of despair. Particularly notable is the long and admirable scene, cut from the Italian version, of the conversation between the two brothers before Cola's departure. Visconti, obviously enough, is not concerned only with the daily life of the village but with the moral and social

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### La terra trema

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

### The Bandit Il bandito

Sun 26 May 18:30

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

Mon 27 May 15:00; Wed 29 May 20:40

### Bicycle Thieves

 Ladri di biciclette

Mon 27 May 18:00

### Paisà

Wed 29 May 12:00

### Bitter Rice

 Riso amaro

Thu 30 May 18:15

### Lights of Variety

 Luci del varietà

Sat 1 Jun 13:15; Mon 10 Jun 20:45; Thu

13 Jun 18:00; Thu 20 Jun 18:20

### Stromboli

 Stromboli, terra di Dio

Sun 2 Jun 18:15; Mon 3 Jun 12:00; Wed

12 Jun 20:40; Sat 22 Jun 15:30

### Rome 11:00 (aka Rome 11 O'Clock)

Roma ore 11

Tue 4 Jun 14:50; Fri 7 Jun 18:10; Sun 16

Jun 14:00; Mon 24 Jun 20:50

### The Women of Italian Neorealism

Tue 4 Jun 18:10

### Bellissima

Tue 4 Jun 20:35; Mon 10 Jun 18:10

### Umberto D.

Wed 5 Jun 20:40; Sat 8 Jun 18:00; Wed 19

Jun 20:40; Sat 29 Jun 13:10

### Journey to Italy

 Viaggio in Italia

Thu 6 Jun 12:15; Sun 9 Jun 13:00; Tue 11

Jun 11:30; Fri 21 Jun 20:50; Tue 25 Jun

18:15

### The Machine That Kills Bad People

 La

macchina ammazzacattivi

Tue 11 Jun 18:10; Sat 15 Jun 13:40; Wed

19 Jun 12:20; Thu 27 Jun 20:55

### Miracle in Milan

 Miracolo a Milano

Thu 13 Jun 20:40; Sun 30 Jun 12:10

### With thanks to

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## CINECITTÀ

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

situation of the people of Trezza. The actual work of fishing, for instance, is only suggested; the return of the men, coming back exhausted to their homes or going to the fish market to see what becomes of the fruits of their labour, is described at length. Similarly, when the Valastros and their friends salt their own fish for the first time, the emphasis is on their delight and triumph rather than the work itself.

This method of allowing actions to develop at their natural pace, rather than breaking them up for reconstruction in the cutting room, also indicates the director's steady control over the feelings he wants to express. He never allows emotion to take a free hand; he rejects the tactics by which the cinema habitually magnifies emotion, the underlining through a sharp editing technique. Sentimentality is rigorously excluded, and the film consistently addresses itself to the mind rather than the heart. (This, incidentally, is particularly noticeable in the treatment of the dealers, the exploiters, where the characterisation is wholly free from hatred.) Visconti is not here presenting an impassioned anecdote: he is painting a social fresco on a grand scale. The passion is there, certainly, but it is in the idea rather than its expression, and if the film seems detached it is simply because Visconti has taken that step backwards which enables the artist to see his subject in a true perspective. Detachment, in effect, amounts here to mastery of the material: the 'real' scene has been interpreted in order to give us its essence. And the fact that almost every shot has been planned as an aesthetic composition does not mean that the emphasis is negatively picturesque. Rather, it establishes for us the quality of the setting and the people. We feel the presence of man in every shot – even in those few from which, literally speaking, he is absent.

It is difficult to write about *La terra trema* without mentioning G. R. Aldo's part in its achievement. Aldo, whose first film this was, had previously worked in the theatre as a still photographer. Although this detail is significant, it would be a mistake to assume from it that the camerawork is over-indulged, allowed to become an end in itself. Without insisting on the technical skill needed to achieve such depth of focus within the confining walls of the little houses, or the takes lasting several minutes with complex camera movements in three directions, it is important to note that every shot is so designed as to extract the maximum value from its subject. Through this precise, direct composition, the whole setting comes to life for us. This impression is further strengthened by the composition of the sound track, the use of natural sounds and voices and the striking use of background sound to give an additional impression of depth to the images. The whole film vibrates with life, and in this sense Visconti makes positive his own statement: 'The cinema that interests me is the anthropomorphic cinema'.

Finally, the problem of the playing is posed and resolved in the same line. Visconti did not want merely to use non-professional players: he wanted his film to be acted by the fishermen of Trezza themselves. The distinction is between the usual method of using amateurs, mainly with the object of 'deglamourising' the actor, and a method closer to that of documentary. Here again, though, the handling of the actors falls into line with the whole approach of the film: the transition is from pure realism to the most conscious stylistic refinement. While the performances remain extraordinary, they clearly stem from the players' own experience and understanding of life. Helping to write their own dialogue, in the rough but melodious Sicilian dialect, they have also found in it an authentic poetry.

*La terra trema's* claim to greatness finally lies in its wonderful integration of form and content. Its theme, the lesson that experience teaches 'Ntoni, is grafted on to reality, and finds in reality its actual and historical justification. The form of the film is wholly directed towards the exaltation of man, of his pride and courage. The faces and everyday objects, for which Visconti finds so exact a place in the structure of his scenes, are there because of the value he attaches to them. The emotion that he so carefully restrains runs strongly beneath the surface of the action: it is only on leaving the cinema that we realise how deeply we have been moved. And the marvellous face of 'Ntoni reflects the desire to live, and to live justly, that is the essential spirit of the film. He is one of those characters who illuminate the history of the cinema.

With *Ossessione*, Visconti had shattered the traditions and customs of the Italian cinema, given it the violent jolt that turned it towards neo-realism. With *La terra trema* he gave the neo-realist cinema its most finished and one of its most influential works.

Alain Tanner, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1957