



CHASING THE REAL: ITALIAN NEOREALISM

Bellissima

Bellissima

Director: Luchino Visconti

Production Company: Film Bellissima

Producer: Salvo D'Angelo

Production Supervisor: Orlando Orsini

Production Managers: Paolo Moffa,

Vittorio Musy Glori

Production Secretary: Spartaco Conversi

Assistant Directors: Francesco Rosi,

Franco Zeffirelli

Script Supervisor: Rinaldo Ricci

Screenplay: Suso Cecchi D'Amico,

Francesco Rosi, Luchino Visconti

Story by: Cesare Zavattini

Director of Photography: Piero Portalupi

Camera Operators: Oberdan Trojani,

Idelmo Simonelli

Stills Photography: Paul Ronald

Editor: Mario Serandrei

Assistant Editor: Liliana Mancini

Art Director: Gianni Polidori

Costumes: Piero Tosi

Make-up: Alberto De Rossi

Music Composed and Conducted by:

Franco Mannino

Music based on theme 'L'elisir d'amore' by:

Gaetano Donizetti

Sound: Ovidio Del Grande

Cast:

Anna Magnani (*Maddalena Cecconi*)

Walter Chiari (*Alberto Annovazzi*)

Tina Apicella (*Maria Cecconi*)

Gastone Renzelli (*Spartaco Cecconi*)

Alessandro Blasetti (*himself, film director*)

Tecla Scarano (*the acting teacher*)

Lola Braccini (*the photographer's wife*)

Arturo Bragaglia (*the photographer*)

Nora Ricci (*the ironing lady*)

Gisella Monaldi (*the porter*)

Linda Sini (*Mimmetta*)

Liliana Mancini (*Iris*)

Teresa Battaggi (*the snobbish mother*)

Pietro Fumelli

Sonia Marinelli

Anna Nighel

Guido Martufi

Michele Di Giulio

Lina Rossoni

Lilly Marchi

Luciano Caruso

Vittorio Musy Glori, Mario Chiari, George Taparelli,

Luigi Filippo D'Amico, Corrado Mantoni *themselves*)

Italy 1951

114 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

Restored in 4K in 2023 by CSC – Cineteca

Nazionale in collaboration with Compass Film at the

Studio Cine S.r.l. laboratory

It is unfortunate that *Bellissima* is not better known outside Italy, as it is a film which, in addition to its merits as an antidote to *La terra trema*, confounds a number of stereotypes that have been built up round Visconti's work and artistic personality. It is, in a vulgar sense, the most obviously 'Italian' of all his films, with extremely rapid dialogues which are difficult to translate and a *fortiori* almost impossible to subtitle without totally losing the flavour of the original. But it is the most subtle and elusive thing of all, the element of self-criticism and irony at the expense of its own 'Italian' quality, which has most effectively prevented it from being assimilated and appreciated by foreign audiences. For at its highest level it is a denial of all stereotypes, about Visconti, about Italian films in general, about neo-realism, and even about that sacred monster, Anna Magnani, who is the star of the film.

Bellissima opens with a piece of apparently gratuitous bravura – a radio concert performance of a Donizetti opera. The camera prowls among the sopranos of the chorus, middle-aged dowdy maidens and matrons grotesquely miming the mood of an unseen romantic action. This suggestive reverie is brusquely interrupted by the intercutting of the brash voice of a radio announcer, giving details of a competition for 'la più bella bambina di Roma' – 'the prettiest little girl in Rome' – wanted for a star part in a new film. Given Visconti's well-known love of opera and the subsequent development of the satire on the world of Cinecittà, the contrast is clearly double-edged but on balance favourable to the old-fashioned world of the opera. As the unprepossessing ladies of the chorus mouth the word 'bel-lis-si-ma' the image evoked is one of a misty ideal beauty, transcending the banal physical circumstances in which the image is produced – a sharp contrast between the product and the means of production which Visconti maintains in relation to the cinema throughout the film. Even the idea, however, of the 'prettiest little girl in Rome' exists only on the level of the most extreme vulgarity.

Much of the significance of this opening credits sequence is, however, only latent. Its immediate function is simply to establish a tone of gentle asperity, which is maintained, more or less evenly, throughout the film. The aspirant Shirley Temples and their mums swarm into the studios, with Anna Magnani, struggling wildly in the middle, looking frantically for her mislaid daughter. The errant infant is discovered playing quite happily by itself near an ornamental pool in the studio grounds, and when her mother approaches her and begins to fuss over her and scold her, there starts up a mad operatic duet between a screaming and shouting Magnani and a tearful, bawling child who does not understand in the least what any of the fuss is all about. Most of the humour of the film is centred round the themes announced in this episode, the different and conflicting forms of irrationality and non-rationality in the behaviour of the monstrous gaggle of middle-class mums, of Magnani herself, and of the little girl, Maria.

Unlike the other mothers, Anna Magnani is a 'donna del popolo' – a 'woman of the people'. This 'people' is not actually an invention of neo-realism as malicious critics have suggested. As a class, or non-class, comprehending broad strata of the population, it does exist, though more in literature than in real life. Broadly speaking, it designates everyone who is not rich, bourgeois or

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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

Relaxed Screening:

The Machine That Kills Bad People

La macchina ammazzacattivi + intro and discussion
Mon 24 Jun 18:35

With thanks to

Camilla Cormanni, Paola Ruggiero,
Germana Ruscio, Marco Cicala at Cinecittà
Carmen Accaputo at
Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna

CINECITTÀ



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upper class, whether shopkeepers, manual or white-collar workers, or nothing in particular. Some elements of a partly fictitious class stereotype, probably due to Zavattini, who wrote the script, have crept into the figuration of the character played by Magnani in *Bellissima*, but basically, largely because of Visconti's attention to untypical detail, the representation is autonomous and real and points a vivid but not implausible contrast between Magnani's character and that of the world to which the others belong.

Her husband is an amiable, commonsensical man, with a steady but ill-paid job and not many ambitions, least of all the extravagant wish that his child should become a national figure. Ambition, coupled with a slight naïve snobbery, becomes her province, and it is channelled through the child. With no particular illusions about her competence she calls herself a nurse, which means that she picks up money going round giving injections to hypochondriacs, of whom she knows a good many. Her vision of the world is dominated by the movies and by the ambitions she has for Maria. The role of the movies in this vision is providential, almost supernatural. They are not only a passion but a hope for miraculous advancement, either through fortune (like the lottery in Naples) or skill (like football in Rio). Magnani's slavery to the cinema dream and her superstitious hope have a background in popular life and help yet again to mark her off from the other mothers whose attitudes display a calculating bourgeois rationality. Times are changing, and what they have done is to transfer their ambitions from the middle-class world of theatre and ballet, to which they belong, on to a world which has the simple advantage of being quantitatively more lucrative, and which they mistakenly assume to be a part of their birthright.

In general, the more a character emerges as an individual, the more sympathy is accorded them. Even the episodic figures like the absurd, parasitic, out-of-work actress who batters on Magnani and persuades her to let her give Maria some lessons in acting are not seen as entirely grotesque. Comic hostility is reserved for the undifferentiated herd, particularly the mums. Real hostility, and not even comic, occurs only in the scenes involving the tycoons and parasites of the industry. It is here that a latent sense of violence and cruelty in Visconti's approach comes, rather uneasily, to light, together with a curious attitude to laughter as a manifestation, not of amusement, but of aggressive isolation.

Bernard Shaw once made an observation to the effect that extreme happiness produces tears, and extreme unhappiness laughter. With Visconti, tears are the product of extreme human emotion, and often, specifically, of deeply felt solidarity with someone else or of pity. Laughter, which occurs frequently in his films (the most quoted example is the laughter of Tancredi and Angelica at the dinner-table in *The Leopard*), is by contrast aggressive, always an expression of isolation, often of fear or hate. In *Bellissima* the laughter is pure cruelty. It has nothing to do with the gentle art of comedy, nor even with bitter sarcasm. It is the only moment in the film in which brutality breaks through to the surface.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti* (third edition, BFI Publishing, 2003)