



**LUCHINO VISCONTI: DECADENCE & DECAY**

# Death in Venice (Morte a Venezia)

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## Death in Venice (Morte a Venezia)

**Director:** Luchino Visconti  
**Production Company:** Alfa Cinematografica  
**Production Company:** P.E.C.F. (Paris) \*  
**Executive Producer:** Mario Gallo  
**Associate Executive Producer:**  
Robert Gordon Edwards  
**Producer:** Luchino Visconti  
**Unit Production Managers:** Umberto Sambuco,  
Bruno Sassaroli, Alfredo Di Santo  
**Production Manager:** Anna Davini  
**Production Supervisor:** Egidio Quarantotto  
**Production Accountant:** Paolo Rampazzo  
**Production Secretaries:** Dino Di Dionisio,  
Annie Rozier  
**Assistant Director:** Albino Cocco  
**2nd Assistant Director:** Paolo Pietrangeli  
**Script Supervisor:** Rometta Pietrostefani  
**Screenplay:** Luchino Visconti, Nicola Badalucco  
**Based on the novel by:** Thomas Mann  
**Director of Photography:** Pasqualino De Santis  
**Camera Operators:** Mario Cimini, Michele Cristiani  
**Gaffers:** Luciano Leoni, Gastoni Colantoni  
**Key Grip:** Aldo Colanzi  
**Stills Photography:** Mario Tursi  
**Editor:** Ruggero Mastroianni  
**Assistant Editors:** Lea Mazzocchi,  
Loredana Cruciani, Mario D'Ambrosio  
**Art Director:** Ferdinando Scarfiotti  
**Set Decorator:** Nedo Azzini  
**Assistant Set Decorators:** Osvaldo Desideri,  
Gianfranco De Dominicis  
**Costumes:** Piero Tosi  
**Assistant Costumes:** Gabriella Pescucci  
**Costumes Executed by:** Tirelli  
**Wardrobe:** Maria Fanetti, Sara Santarelli,  
Paolo Luciani  
**Make-up:** Mario Di Salvio, Mauro Gavazzi  
**Miss Silvana Mangano's Make-up:**  
Goffredo Rocchetti  
**Hairstyles:** Luciano Vito, Gilda De Guilmi  
**Miss Silvana Mangano's Hairstyles:**  
Maria Teresa Corridori  
**Music:** Gustav Mahler  
**Music Played by:**  
Orchestra dell'Accademia di Santa Cecilia  
**Conducted by:** Franco Mannino  
**Sound Recording:** Renato Caducri  
**Sound:** Vittorio Trentino, Giuseppe Muratori  
**Studio:** Cinecittà  
**Cast:**  
Dirk Bogarde (*Gustav von Aschenbach*)  
Romolo Valli (*hotel manager*)  
Mark Burns (*Alfried*)  
Nora Ricci (*governess*)  
Marisa Berenson (*Frau von Aschenbach*)  
Carole André (*Esmeralda*)  
Björn Andresen (*Tadzio*)  
Silvana Mangano (*Tadzio's mother*)  
Leslie French (*travel agent*)  
Franco Fabrizi (*barber*)  
Antonio Apicella (*wandrer*)  
Sergio Garfagnoli (*Jaschu*)  
Ciro Cristofaletti (*hotel employee*)  
Luigi Battaglia (*man on boat*)  
Dominique Darel (*English tourist*)  
Masha Predit (*Russian tourist*)

In this classic depiction of queer desire and mortality, adapted from the novel by Thomas Mann, Visconti captures the aesthetic pleasures and exquisite longing of an ageing intellectual following the sighting of a beautiful youth on a beach. Featuring an unforgettably bleak performance from Dirk Bogarde and set against the dilapidation of Venetian wealth, this is one of Visconti's finest dramas.

[bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

## A contemporary review

When Thomas Mann created Gustav Aschenbach he compiled a conscious summary of the twentieth century's first decade. Mahler's death in 1911 was the cue to which he was responding, but as was demonstrated by his translation of the central character in his story from composer to writer, Mann recognised not only the autobiographical link between Mahler's work and his own but also the more widely familiar influences upon the times of other German commentators. Aschenbach, like Mahler, has forsaken earlier passions for the serenity of perfect art, but he is equally the offspring of Mann's encounters with Schopenhauer (for whom death was the real aim of life), with Nietzsche (whose concern was with the need for victory over oneself), and with Wagner, in whom Mann found both the association of love and art with death and the *Werkinstinkt*, the will to toil and endure. The slender narrative of *Death in Venice*, with its joyful celebration of classical triumph and simultaneous confession of social defeat, stands midway between *Buddenbrooks* and *The Magic Mountain* – between, in fact, the theme of the individual tortured by his sense of isolation and that of the individual's acceptance of his social context. It is a story in which the crisis of one generation is handed lovingly to the next in the expectation that once again it will be transcended.

With Visconti's version, *Death in Venice* reverts to an account of Mahler's philosophy: Aschenbach is now a composer, whose symphonies, like Mahler's, are received with storms of abuse, whose background, like Mahler's, is one of tragic deprivation (Mann had disposed of Aschenbach's family in eight lines), and whose contention, like Mahler's, is that beauty is the product of conscious effort rather than of instinct and accident. Visconti draws the resemblance even closer by the addition of arguments taken from Mahler's correspondence with Schonberg, now taking the form of passionate confrontations around the grand piano. Although Schonberg's quite sensible points are finally proven for him by Aschenbach's Venetian experience, he is however presented as something of a bully, exulting at the apparent collapse of Aschenbach's career with the delighted observation that man and artist are at last in perfect balance – they've reached bottom at the same moment. Not surprisingly, the director of *The Damned* retains an affection for the Wagnerian concepts which bring him back to Mann's conclusion: that perfection of knowledge and of beauty can be equally dangerous, but that the latter danger is preferable. Visconti's command of both has customarily displayed a similar bias.

uncredited

Bruno Boschetti (*railway station clerk*)

Mirella Pamphili (*hotel guest*)

Nicoletta Elmi (*little girl at table*)

Marco Tulli (*man who faints at the station*)

Marcello Bonini Olas (*nobleman at the hotel party*)

Bill Vanders

Contessa Veronica (*English woman*)

Italy 1971

130 mins

The screening on Sat 11 Jan 14:30 will be screened in 35mm. All other screenings will be Digital 4K

## **LUCHINO VISCONTI: DECADENCE & DECAY**

### **Ossessione**

Wed 1 Jan 12:00; Thu 9 Jan 20:15

### **Bellissima**

Wed 1 Jan 18:30; Mon 27 Jan 20:45

### **The Leopard II gattopardo**

Sat 4 Jan 12:30; Fri 10 Jan 18:50 + intro by Adrian

Wootton, Chief Executive, Film London and British

Film Commission; Sun 26 Jan 17:30

### **La terra trema**

Sat 4 Jan 16:20; Thu 16 Jan 17:50

### **Senso**

Tue 7 Jan 18:00; Wed 15 Jan 20:20 + intro by  
season curator and film critic Christina Newland

### **White Nights** Le notti bianche

Tue 7 Jan 20:40; Sat 25 Jan 12:00

### **Visconti and his Cinema: Decadence & Decay**

#### **Season Launch**

Thu 9 Jan 18:10

#### **25&Under: Introduction to Luchino Visconti**

Sat 11 Jan 13:00

#### **Death in Venice** Morte a Venezia

Sat 11 Jan 14:30; Sat 25 Jan 17:25; Tue 28 Jan

20:30; Wed 29 Jan 20:20

#### **The Damned** La caduta degli dei

Sun 12 Jan 15:45; Sat 25 Jan 20:05

#### **Ludwig**

Sun 12 Jan 16:10; Tue 21 Jan 18:10

#### **Conversation Piece** Gruppo di famiglia in un

interno

Mon 13 Jan 18:00; Wed 22 Jan 20:30 + intro by film  
critic Phuong Le

#### **The Innocent** L'innocente

Tue 14 Jan 20:35; Sun 26 Jan 12:00

Course: **City Lit at the BFI: Luchino Visconti –**

#### **Noble Realist**

Tue 14 Jan – Thu 6 Feb 18:30-20:25

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The reconstruction of turn-of-the-century Venice, then, could scarcely have been in more appropriate hands, and Visconti has done full justice to his task. The Hotel des Bains, a hothouse of enormous feathered hats and only slightly larger satin lampshades, is rich with movement and display, its cosmopolitan chatter perpetually reinforced by a small orchestra's unending repertoire of popular classics, its choreography firmly but discreetly guided by a regiment of porters, pageboys and waiters. Aschenbach's first glimpses of Tadzio, the Polish youth who is to dominate his last days, occur during a series of lavish camera movements around the hotel lounge, which convey superbly both the oppressiveness and the stimulation of the setting in which he finds himself.

Even taking into full account the costumed set-pieces of *Senso* and *The Leopard*, Visconti and Piero Tosi have excelled themselves in these scenes with the immaculate assistance of Ferdinanda Scarfiotti's backgrounds, all brocades, flower-vases and immense sprouting ferns. On the beach outside, the sense of period is equally breathtakingly maintained, with Mann's delicately observed incongruities scrupulously reproduced – even to the dead-ripe strawberries, the unlikely turreted sandcastle, and the abandoned camera on its tripod. As a cloud of white figures bearing parasols drifts along the edge of the barely moving sea, and multilingual snatches of conversation whisper across the sand, it's almost possible to believe, with Aschenbach, that we have entered an enchanted, timeless world.

Almost, but not quite, and not for long. Visconti's preoccupation with the processes of decay and disintegration has found in *Death in Venice* its most hallucinatory illustration. The beach scenes are largely filmed in a diffused, chilly light, a morning haze in which shadows are a watery grey and abrupt breezes snap at the awnings of the bathing-huts; only during the final visit of Aschenbach to the beach does the sun beat down, crushing him into the vast arena of sand (filmed in a burningly static longshot) and melting his pathetic façade of youthfulness. Venice itself is photographed by De Santis in muted colours, increasingly darkened by the smoke of plague-fires; the city is a hostile warren of cloistered streets and tiny bridges dwarfed by high peeling walls, among which Aschenbach pursues his wandering love with a choking desperation. The pursuit of an elusive ideal that pauses only long enough to check that it is still being followed, smiles a hint of encouragement, and then moves on again, served Mann completely as a method of presenting the malaise that was to culminate in the First World War.

In Visconti's eyes, the vision again becomes disturbingly contemporary, for all that Don Fabrizio in *The Leopard* or Simone in *Rocco* have trodden similar landscapes. The old world is crumbling and no amount of elegance, violence or face-lifting will bring it back. And so Gustav Aschenbach, played by Dirk Bogarde with whole-hearted dedication, collapses among the garbage, laughs weakly at the corruption of his vanities, and accepts Schonberg's parting shot that no impurity is so impure as old age. Visconti's achievement – and it is doubtful whether any other director could have managed it – has been to balance this acceptance with hope, beauty and a kind of contentment. Mahler would surely have approved.

Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1971