



LUCHINO VISCONTI: DECADENCE & DECAY

Ludwig

Ludwig

Director: Luchino Visconti
©/Production Company: Mega Film
Production Companies: Cinétel, Dieter Geissler Filmproduktion, Divina Film
Executive Producer: Robert Gordon Edwards
Producer: Ugo Santalucia *
Production Manager: Lucio Trentini
Unit Managers: Giorgio Russo, Federico Tocchi, Klaus Zeissler, Albino Morandin
Production Administrator/Cashier: Angelo Saraco
Production Secretary: Federico Starage
Assistant Director: Albino Cocco
2nd Assistant Directors: Giorgio Ferrara, Fanny Wessling, Luchino Gastel, Louise Vincent
Script Girl: Renata Franceschi
Story and Screenplay by: Luchino Visconti, Enrico Medioli
Script Collaborator: Suso Cecchi D'Amico
Director of Photography: Armando Nannuzzi
Camera Operators: Nino Cristiani, Giuseppe Berardini, Federico Del Zoppo
Key Grip: Umberto Torriero
Stills Photography: Mario Tursi
Special Effects: E. Baciucchi, G. Baciucchi
Editor: Ruggero Mastroianni
Editorial Assistants: Lea Mazzocchi, Stefano Patrizi
Art Director: Mario Chiari
Associate Art Director: Mario Scisci
Set Decorator: Vincenzo Eusepi
Costume Designer: Piero Tosi
Assistant Costumer: Gabriella Pescucci
Costumes: Tirelli
Wardrobe Mistress: Maria Fanetti
Supervising Make-up: Alberto De Rossi
Miss Mangano's Make-up: Goffredo Rocchetti
Make-up: Eligio Trani
Hairdresser: Grazia De Rossi
Miss Mangano's Hairdresser: Maria Teresa Corridoni
Music: Robert Schumann, Richard Wagner, Jacques Offenbach
Piano Solos Played by: Franco Mannino
Music Performed by: Orchestra Dell'Accademia di Santa Cecilia
Orchestral Music Conducted by: Franco Mannino
Sound: Vittorio Trentino
Boom Operator: Giuseppe Muratori
Dialogue Director: Mario Maldesi
Dialogue Coach: Louise Vincent *
English Translation: William Weaver
Cast:
Helmut Berger (*Ludwig II*)
Trevor Howard (*Richard Wagner*)
Silvana Mangano (*Cosima von Bülow*)
Gert Fröbe (*Father Hoffman*)
Helmut Griem (*Colonel Durckheim*)
Isabella Telezyska (*Queen Mother*)
Umberto Orsini (*Count von Hohnstein*)
John Moulder-Brown (*Prince Otto*)
Sonia Petrova (*Sophie*)
Folker Bohnet (*Joseph Kainz*)
Heinz Moog (*Professor von Gudden*)
Adriana Asti (*Lila von Buliowski*)
Marc Porel (*Richard Hornig*)
Nora Ricci (*Countess Ida Ferenczy*)
Mark Burns (*Hans von Bülow*)
Maurizio Bonuglia (*Mayr*)
Romy Schneider (*Elizabeth of Austria*)
Alexander Allerson
Bert Bloch (*Weber*)
Manfred Fürst

Shown at the sweeping, epic length Visconti initially intended, and not without some vague parallels to his own life, this stately biopic focuses on the life of wildly eccentric, closeted gay royal Ludwig II. Known for constructing mad fairytale castles dotted across the Bavarian landscape, the king eschewed political power in exchange for his love of art, Wagner and architecture, only to find his idealism wrecked and his mental state edging towards insanity.

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Ludwig belongs to the group of Visconti's films which I call dynastic. These are films which trace the vicissitudes of a named family – the Valastro in *La terra trema*, the 'casa Salina' in *The Leopard*, the Essenbecks in *The Damned*, etc. – culminating usually in the family's dissolution. Visconti applied this narrative model across the entire social spectrum, though its classical place of application, as in the nineteenth-century novels which he loved so much, is families with property and a reputation to defend. Here in *Ludwig* he moves away from the world of peasants, proletarians, bourgeoisie or provincial aristocracy to tackle a grander dynastic theme, the collapse of a royal house. And the flawed individual who is at the centre of the film is not someone with the usual blend of strengths and weaknesses such as one might find sitting next to one on the bus, but a king, the bearer of a unique calling, brought up from infancy to believe that he occupies a place apart.

The obvious model for Visconti to have had in mind for *Ludwig* is Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Although this is not a play he ever staged, it is one he almost certainly knew and he probably also knew Marlowe's *Edward II*, which treats a similar theme and has a strong homosexual motif. Like *Ludwig*, Shakespeare's *Richard* starts as a legitimate monarch and remains painfully conscious of this fact even as he becomes aware of the way power is being stripped from him. Like *Ludwig*, too, *Richard* is an aesthete, who enjoys the notion of kingship in a self-regarding way but neglects the ordinary responsibilities of political life. Finally, both *Richard* and *Edward* are depicted, with varying degrees of explicitness, as neglectful of their conjugal duty and the protection of their line.

What is suggestive here is not the narrative coincidences, which on closer inspection are not all that great, but the assumption shared between Visconti and Shakespeare that legitimacy is important but can also be a burden. Everything about *Ludwig* is different because he is a king. He is not just a temperamental loner whose tastes get in the way of his doing his job. Furthermore the burden that is thrust on him is intrinsically conflictual. If on the one hand it allows him the freedom to patronise Wagner, on the other hand it makes his sexual desires all the more unlawful.

Whatever Visconti's debt to Shakespeare, however, their political and historical contexts are very different. Shakespeare was a sixteenth-century royalist and apologist of the Tudor monarchy. Visconti was a twentieth-century Marxist and republican. The story of *Ludwig II*, last King of Bavaria, appealed to him against the grain of his political convictions. As so often in Visconti, there seem to be two stories going on. One is the story of an impersonal social and political process whereby an outdated institution is cast aside in favour of less arbitrary forms of rule. And the other is a more elegiac tale of individuals threatened with

Kurt Grosskurt
Anna Maria Hanschke (*Ludovica*)
G rard Herter
Jan Linhart (*Massimiliano*)
Carla Mancini
Gernot M hner (*Hesselschwerd*)
Clara Moustawcesky (*Helene*)
Alain Naya
Alessandro Perrella
Karl-Heinz Peters (*Washinton*)
Wolfram Schaerf (*Crailsheim*)
Henning Schl ter
Helmut Stern (*Osterholzer*)
Eva Tavazzi (*Maria*)
Louise Vincent
Gunnar Warner (*Carlo Teodoro*)
Karl Heinz Windhorst (*Dr M ller*)
Rayka Yurit (*Matilde*)
Clara Colosimo (*sister*)*
Hans Elwenspoek (*Dr Rumppler*)*
Berno von Cramm (*Torring*)*
Alberto Plebani *
Italy/France/German Federal Republic 1972
237min + interval
35mm

* Uncredited

35mm courtesy of Cinecitt 

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 loss of the lifeworld which sustains them. In earlier films such as *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) or *The Leopard* (1963) the two stories are kept in balance. Although the films end badly (*Rocco*) or ambiguously (*The Leopard*) for the protagonists, the process of which they are victims is at least some kind of progress. Already in *The Damned* (1969), however, what replaces the old patriarchal world of the Essenbecks is not progress at all but the cataclysmic disaster of Nazism. And here in *Ludwig* there is no sense that the world inaugurated by the ministers with their black umbrellas, top hats and frock-coats is in any way preferable to the colourful world of courts and dynasts that it replaces.

Ludwig is a vast film. Not only is it very long, but it is visually and aurally rich, and covers a range of themes. Like the great nineteenth-century novels which provide its narrative models, it is open to a variety of readings, depending on which theme is chosen as the central one. One such theme, for many spectators, is the 'coming out' motif and the story of Ludwig's largely ineffective attempts to come to terms with his sexuality. Another is the historical, the lament for the passing of the old political order. But the film only works as well as it does by allowing its various themes a certain free rein while at the same time holding them together. In my reading of the film, what holds the whole thing together – the dominant, as Eisenstein would have put it – is kingship and the destructive pairing of this with Ludwig's homosexuality. Each in a sense makes him a man apart and each would be bearable without the other. But, in an order which is, literally, patriarchal, Ludwig's position as failed dynast is untenable and a tragic ending is the only one possible.

The other things that make the film work well are properties of the *mise en sc ne*. In the majority of his films (*White Nights* and *Conversation Piece* are conspicuous exceptions), Visconti shows a rigorous dedication to the principle and practice of location filming. Locations may be dressed in various ways, but Visconti's starting-point is a place where the action would, or could, have taken place. As in *Death in Venice*, Visconti and his team have used the locations to create an atmosphere that breathes authenticity and where nothing looks studio because nothing is studio. This insistence on authenticity is a characteristic Visconti trademark but it works differently in different films.

In general the earlier (and black and white) films are sparser than the later (colour) ones. This is partly a function of context, as Visconti moves his attention up the social scale from the proletarian environments of *Ossessione*, *La terra trema* and *Bellissima* to the faded *haut-bourgeois* and aristocratic opulence of *Senso* and *The Leopard*. But there is also, in the later films, an interest in the decorative in its own right and in the potential of colour film to render visual surfaces in different ways. In *Ludwig*, unlike *Death in Venice*, the colour is mostly naturalistic. Insofar as the film attempts to draw the audience into a strange world, this strangeness is objective. It reflects what Ludwig is, rather than, as in *Death in Venice*, what Aschenbach feels. If *Death in Venice* is all about illusion, *Ludwig*, even at its most extravagant, is about reality. While in *Death in Venice* we are led into Aschenbach's illusions and watch them crumble with him, in *Ludwig* the view is unsparing, inviting pity and terror nonetheless.

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

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