

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Modernity and consumer culture in Visconti's early films

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### Abstract

Luchino Visconti is widely recognised as a high-culture director. However, in his films of the period 1943–63 there was a firm engagement with consumer culture and modernity in terms of themes, characters and references. This article explores this often overlooked dimension in Visconti's films by analysing a number of key sequences and moments that relate directly to consumption, consumer culture, leisure, modernity, Americanisation and youth culture. The analysis shows how these representations related to the ongoing changes in Italian postwar society and to incoming Americanisation in particular. My research is informed by the work of Gary Cross, Victoria De Grazia and Emanuela Scarpellini on consumer culture and contextualises how Visconti's referencing of consumer culture and modernity was received by the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano or Italian Communist Party).

**Keywords:** Luchino Visconti; Americanisation; PCI; social history; postwar cinema; consumer culture

### Introduction

Most scholars of Luchino Visconti (Nowell-Smith 2003; Rondolino 2003; Bacon 1998; Blom 2017) take the view that he was a high-culture director – his aesthetics were drawn from those of culturally sophisticated tastes and education. However, in his films of the period 1943–63 there was a firm engagement with consumer culture and modernity in terms of themes, characters and references. This article explores this often overlooked dimension in Visconti's films by analysing a number of key sequences and moments that relate directly to consumption, consumer culture, leisure, modernity, Americanisation and youth culture.

Visconti was a committed Marxist who had significant friends and collaborators in the senior ranks of the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano or Italian Communist Party), and his films of this period touch on some of the main issues of the time that the party and Italian society as a whole were dealing with, including the boom in commodity culture, the substantial increase in the accessibility of American products such as film, music and dance, and the problem of the underdevelopment of southern Italy. Visconti's earlier films have often been seen as an expression of the politics of the PCI, which condemned Americanisation and consumer culture and the individualism they propagated, believing

that they would undermine the working class. The literature has essentially focused on how nostalgia for the past prevails over progress in the director's work.

I claim that this can be challenged: even in his most outwardly Marxist film, *La terra trema*, with its emphasis on collective action, Visconti complicates the narrative by including attractive representations of modern culture, even when a character or situation is formally condemned, usually as part of the film's political message. Consumer culture and modernity appear in the films in nuanced and sometimes contradictory modes. My general contention is that, while Visconti's films highlight how the individualism of consumption can lead in antisocial directions – deterioration of family ties, breakdown of collective participation, abandonment of the collective good – there is also a sense of the empowerment that consumerism can offer in areas such as personal aspiration, the sense of self and social integration. These different facets have been explored by the historian Paul Ginsborg (2003, 89), who argues that 'at the heart of modern consumption ... lay the enhancement of life through a greatly increased wealth of experience and personal choice, both in the realm of goods and that of services'. In relation to film, most consideration of the theme has been advanced in relation to popular cinema (see Fullwood 2015). In my article, I examine several examples where Visconti's films engage with consumer culture and modernity, and show how these introduce complexities into their political messages. I draw primarily on the work of Gary Cross, Victoria De Grazia and Emanuela Scarpellini on consumer culture and Americanisation.

This article refers to sequences from *La terra trema*, *Bellissima*, *Le notti bianche* and *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. The first section examines a couple of sequences from *La terra trema* in which Visconti introduces material objects into the narrative. The second section looks at the treatment of cinema in *Bellissima*, in particular how Visconti gave space to the way in which cinema captured the audience's desires and aspirations and showed them new realities. The third section examines how Visconti gave generous space in *Le notti bianche* to scenes showing a more modern youth and its practices. Section four focuses on *Rocco* and how Visconti redefines the treatment of the southern question by introducing themes of temptation and attraction into his portrayal of integration into a modern industrial society and by examining how these relate to changing patterns of consumption.

### Moments of modernity through objects in *La terra trema*

Filmed in the immediate postwar period (released in 1948) and initially conceived as a propaganda documentary financed by the PCI, *La terra trema* is based on Verga's novel *I Malavoglia* and is located in the pre-industrial reality of Acitrezza, a poor Sicilian fishing village in the province of Catania.<sup>1</sup> Acitrezza is a bleak reality: there is little in terms of material goods or property in the village, basic stone houses are crowded with multiple generations of the same family, clothes are threadbare and children walk without shoes. Even accounting for the fact that a war had just ended and much of the country was struggling, *La terra trema* represents a community where there are barely any elements of modern life, a community that stands as a metaphor for the broken economy of the entire South of Italy. So those moments in the film when expensive items or references to modernity appear are notable and symbolic. The first significant occasion happens when the younger, pretty daughter Lucia is being inappropriately courted by Don Salvatore, the head of the local police services. In one scene he presents himself at the open window of her house and, after paying several compliments to Lucia, he pulls out a silk scarf that he has bought for her from the city (see Figure 1). It falls easily out of its wrapping, and he lets it drop through the window for Lucia to see and feel. This shop-bought, colourful scarf stands in contrast to the surrounding local, handmade artefacts and the



**Figure 1.** Don Salvatore offers a scarf as a gift to Lucia in *La terra trema*.

sequence captures well the impact on Lucia of experiencing a modern product that her family would not have access to.

Mixed up with all this are sentiments of aspiration for betterment within the character of Lucia. While the scarf is ‘a type of sexual object’ – Don Salvatore implicitly expects sexual favours in return for this gift – it is also a tangible visual embodiment of the ‘desire for class ascension’ (McElhaney 2021, 26). After Lucia has refused the scarf offered by Don

Salvatore and we see him leave, Visconti gives us a beautiful scene in which we see Lucia drift over to her bed, to lean back and spend a few moments daydreaming under the close look of the camera, reflecting on how beautiful the scarf was and how *unfair* it is that she should not be allowed to possess such an item: 'I love silk scarves, earrings, necklaces ... that silk scarf was really beautiful,' she sighs to herself in dialect.<sup>2</sup> Later in the film, after the boat has been wrecked and the family is under financial pressure, we are shown that Lucia does eventually accept a gift from Don Salvatore – a necklace that she covets in private. That evening, Lucia has a heated argument with her older sister, Mara, who is furious that Lucia has entered into an intimate relationship with Don Salvatore and she will no longer be considered a potential wife by any of the men of Acitrezza.

But Lucia is not interested in traditional values, and Visconti imbues her with a sensuality and interest in glamour that suggest she is a modern, transgressive figure. When she hears Don Salvatore whistling outside to make himself known before he appears at the window, Lucia rushes to the mirror to untie her hair and pretty herself up. When Don Salvatore flatters her that she is better than Acitrezza, telling her that she is made for beautiful things, that she is a beautiful *city* girl, even suggesting that she should marry someone from the city, Lucia makes a show of laughing off his compliments as she playfully bites on her hair tie, conscious of his intentions. Her body language is energetic and sensual throughout the scene, contrasting with the serious manners of her older, plainer sister Mara. As Mauro Giori has pointed out, in Visconti's films, 'sexuality is used as a privileged means of exploring and understanding modernity' (Giori 2011, 212, see also Giori 2018). Lucia's transgression becomes clearer when we compare it to the traditional and ideal model of the submissive and humble woman that was promoted by Fascism and was still prevalent in the postwar period. The Fascists rejected female sex appeal and glamour. They argued that Hollywood stars used makeup and fashionable clothes because they had no natural beauty and they criticised their slim bodies (see De Grazia 1993). The regime had strengthened its ties with the church and promoted a demographic campaign that favoured a different image of women: 'a curvaceous body who was loyal to traditional aesthetic standards, was modest and graceful, and was capable of producing numerous children' (Gori 2004, 169).<sup>3</sup>

Another example from *La terra trema* that contains a direct reference to a modern product occurs after the family's boat is ruined and the brothers are all out looking for work. Cola, the second-oldest brother, dreams of better worlds away from Acitrezza, frustrated that the family should be going through such bad times. He has been offered a job across the channel on the mainland (probably in Naples), by a well-dressed stranger we have seen in an earlier scene on the beach, whose job it is to recruit men from the villages. Back at the family home, Cola stands inside the front doorway contemplating his plan to leave, and Visconti uses the sequence to give us a sense of the emotions and thoughts that Cola is struggling with, again using a luxury object to serve as a symbol of ambition and of other possibilities: a brand-new packet of Lucky Strike cigarettes that he was given by the stranger. The choice of the cigarettes and the brand is very significant. Cigarettes were scarce during the war, and they were rationed and still not affordable for many in the postwar period. In addition, the American brands were particularly desirable products for Italians: they were more expensive than the Italian brands and they were associated with the masculinity of the Hollywood stars of the 1930s and with transgressive dance styles such as boogie and swing. The regime had strongly discouraged American cigarette brands; however, Carl Ipsen (2016) claims that Italians never really lost their love of American cigarettes, the so-called 'American Blondes', especially Lucky Strikes. The Americans, for their part, were aware of the lifestyle associated with American-brand cigarettes, which they were happy to distribute to the populations of liberated cities. Returning to the sequence, Visconti makes a point of showing the Lucky Strike brand,



**Figure 2.** Cola unwraps a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes in *La terra trema*.

with the white, shiny pack sitting perfectly in the centre of the frame, directing the light onto it (see [Figure 2](#)). Cola slowly tears off the plastic wrapping and turns the box adoringly in his hand, just like in an advertisement, before popping the box back into his shirt pocket with a gesture as if to say, ‘Why shouldn’t I?’, indicating that he is going to decide to leave the family home. Such a blatant display might be taken as an example of product placement, but in fact this practice was illegal in Italy at the time (and would remain so until 2004). Rather, it can be seen as an example of ‘organic inclusion’ – that is, of a product being used to achieve ‘verisimilitude’ at a key point in the film (Newell, Salmon and Chang 2006, 581–582). Ntoni arrives home; he has heard that Cola is planning to leave and does his best to dissuade him. But Cola’s mind has been made up and a few scenes later, early the next day, we see Cola sneak out of the house alone to meet up with the stranger and head off for the city.

In both these instances, Visconti uses the power of attraction of industrially produced material objects and the allure of the city as negative symbols within the narrative, making a link between the desire to pursue pleasures or ambitions for one’s own individual benefit and the deterioration of the prospects of the Valastro family and abandonment of the collective good. Visconti has the narrator say it unambiguously with the phrase ‘we must stay here to fight’, which is voiced over the Cola scene, and ‘the branches on the tree begin to fall’ during the scene when Lucia argues with her sister and walks off wearing the necklace given to her by Don Salvatore. But at the same time Visconti dedicates delicate, intimate moments in the film to highlighting the dreams and desires of Lucia and Cola, allowing us some empathy with their situation. With medium shots, close-ups and the use of mirrors, Visconti communicates, suggests and reveals inner feelings – desires to escape from deprived economic social conditions to find a better existence.<sup>4</sup> Visconti’s strategic use of attractive, industrially produced objects, often shown in contrast to handmade artefacts, offers a new sensory experience that is exciting for the characters. In this way, he captures the sense of possibility referred to by Ginsborg and others.

The modern products represent an escape from the everyday world and become symbols of ambition and other possibilities.

### Cinema and aspirations in *Bellissima*

This tendency of Visconti to delve into the inner feelings of his characters in ways that work against the overall collective message of the film was a source of frustration for the PCI. Visconti had been on the receiving end of criticism from the Marxist critics in the party specifically on this point. Pio Baldelli picked out the character of Lucia in *La terra trema*, saying that, by representing her in a way that overemphasised her psychological traits (Baldelli 1964, 142–150), Visconti had undermined her impact as a symbol of the exploitation of the working classes; instead, she had become only a vain, self-centred young girl who does not give proper attention to family values. Umberto Barbaro (1962, 300) and Luigi Chiarini (1954, 130–131) both complained that the film did not put sufficient emphasis on the collective.

Neorealism had brought with it an optimism on the left that cinema could be used as propaganda to send the correct messages to the public, to reinforce the political and moral values of justice and social advancement for the working classes that they saw rooted in the Resistance. The party was keen to understand how best to achieve a cinema that could contribute to the ‘emancipation of the masses’ and many debates occurred. Director and film theorist Vsevolod Pudovkin was invited to a conference organised by Marxist film critics in Perugia in 1949, where he presented his theories on the importance of the positive hero. Overall, there had been general agreement that films should use clear and understandable forms of expression and should portray characters who communicated positive messages. This, however, is not to say that the party embraced neorealist films without reservation. According to Stephen Gundle, the relationship between the PCI and neorealism was ‘fraught and often problematic’ (2014, 77). Indeed, the initial affection for Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica waned over time, to the point where PCI critics reproached them in the 1950s for accepting Hollywood financing and for moving away from the original neorealist sweep of their earlier films. Generally, the party backed those films whose content could be most easily associated with Communist propaganda and would refer to these in their internal documents as ‘*film democratici*’ (democratic films). Gianluca Fantoni (2021, 21) explains that this is an expression that Communist officials used in their internal documents to label those Italian films whose content could easily be associated with Communist propaganda.

Visconti’s films of the period often use a character who speaks of the need to provide collective answers to problems of economic and social injustices, particularly as a counterpoint to the individualistic choices expressed by other characters in the film. The presence of these positive heroes in Visconti’s films is discussed by Renzo Renzi (1997, 231–240), who notes that their impact is usually weak in one way or another, that there is often something about them that renders them ineffective. In the case of Ntoni, there was criticism from the party that his character focuses more on the story of defeat than on the possibilities of organising the working classes better in the future. Likewise, Lo Spagnolo (the Spaniard) in *Ossessione*, Ussoni in *Senso* and Ciro in *Rocco* were supposed to be characters charged with a sense of social justice and brotherhood, but they end up playing only a peripheral role alongside the main protagonists of the dramas.

The party strongly opposed individualism; they considered it to be the main paradigm of modern capitalist commercial culture and the bourgeoisie. They believed it hindered social solidarity and threatened to break the unity of the working classes. Communists advocated a vision of modernisation based on the Soviet example and the democratic-

participatory ideal associated with the Resistance (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 269). The family, of course, was the most natural collective unit in society – ‘the first centre of solidarity’, in the words of Palmiro Togliatti (Bellassai 2000, 147) – and the party was concerned that family ties and community values were eroding. Italy had already undergone processes of modernisation under the Fascists, but the 1950s saw a significant increase in the availability of consumer goods and lifestyles from America, which many across the political spectrum saw as an unhealthy distraction for the country’s youth. The Second World War grounded American cultural dominance not just in Italy but throughout Europe, and European elites and political groups turned against America out of fear of losing their traditional hold over the masses (Ellwood 2012; Gundle 2000). There were real concerns about the influence of consumerism and Americanisation and the challenges they posed to the ideals that these groups held.<sup>5</sup>

The Communists were generally suspicious of all modern media – radio, film and television – but cinema was considered to be the prime medium through which the new cultural models and lifestyles were presented to the population (whether these were imported from the USA or were simply emerging through the processes of modernisation taking place in Italy). Everyone agreed that cinema exerted a strong influence on customs, mentality and worldview (Ellwood and Brunetta 1991). Marxist critics started to attack fiercely any references to imported culture in films. A notable example is the film *Riso amaro*, released in 1949; Communist filmmaker Giuseppe De Santis was accused by many fellow comrades and Marxist film critics of being too indulgent towards American culture and products. The film showed too much influence from American film genres such as the western and the musical and, on top of this, De Santis had made the main character of the film, an Italian rice-weeder, a keen consumer of American music. Generally, there was a worry about the influence of superficial ‘escapist’ films coming out of Hollywood. Marxist critics dismissed them at best as mere distractions or, at worst, as agents of American imperialism. So-called Italian ‘pink neorealist’ comedies were also criticised for propounding an identity linked to the new dynamics of consumerism and individualism (Parigi 2014, 243–255). The power of cinema as a tool for communicating to the masses was well understood by the Communists and they used cinema in their political propaganda, but their obsession with negative individualism meant that they failed to understand its role as entertainment and as propagator of modern desires. In 1994, this blind spot still persisted and emerged clearly in the debate that Ginsborg engaged in that year with the leading former Communist Massimo D’Alema over the political legacy of Enrico Berlinguer (Battini 1994).

Scholars such as Alberto Abruzzese (1992) and Edgar Morin (2005) have written on the connection between film, modernity, entertainment and cinema’s ability to create a collective imagery. For Abruzzese, cinema helped the transition from a society founded on bourgeois culture to forms of contemporary industrial civilisation based on the participation of the masses. In this sense, the medium satisfies the need that ‘a great industrial civilisation has of a great spectacular dimension’ (Abruzzese 1992, 90). Morin explores the link between cinema and the imagination: cinema enabled modern men to connect with the mythical universe of gods and spirits that was typical of archaic societies, and it nurtured dreams, desires and aspirations, often expressed through film stars (see Morin 2005, 13–35). Film historian Miriam Hansen has written about how cinema created a horizon of experience for industrial mass society. Hollywood cinema could be seen as ‘an industrially-produced, mass-based, vernacular modernism’ that articulated cultural discourses of modernity and modernisation through a new sensorium (Hansen 1999, 65). Cinema embodied the promise of mass consumption and the dreams of mass culture. Hollywood and American mass culture functioned as a ‘powerful matrix for the liberating impulses of modernity’, which included the possibility of new social identities and new subjectivities as well as the prospect of formal and gender equality (Hansen 1999, 69).

*Bellissima* is Visconti's film about cinema in which we are offered, through the main character, a glimpse of cinema as a carrier of dreams and desires in the context of the prospect of formal gender equality discussed by Hansen. *Bellissima* focuses on the aspirations of the working classes and how cinema was exposing people to alternative realities that they could emulate or dream about. The film condemns cinema for its false promises of celebrity – for the soundtrack, Visconti uses music from *L'elisir d'amore*, the opera by Gaetano Donizetti which speaks of enchantment – but we are given ways to empathise with the desires and aspirations of Maddalena (played by Anna Magnani), a working-class Roman mother who does everything she can to help her young daughter win the 'Bellissima' talent contest that is announced over the radio in the opening scenes.

For Maddalena, like many of the other mothers who rush through the doors of Cinecittà in the opening scenes, the 'Bellissima' talent contest within the film is not just an opportunity to earn a decent payoff but the gateway to the glamorous lifestyle of a screen star. Ambition for a better life is the force that keeps Maddalena investing in her daughter as they progress through the auditions. 'I want my daughter to become someone ... Isn't that my right? ... I'll make sure that she never has to depend on anyone ... [not like I had to].' These desires for individual self-affirmation and ambition come to the fore in another sequence. Reflecting on the exciting prospects after her daughter Maria has got through the first audition, Maddalena brushes her hair in front of the mirror as she explains that 'Cinema is something I could have done, if I had wanted to' – much like the American dream that anyone can achieve if they really try. Maddalena's dreams of a better life are also expressed in the scene in which she and her husband Spartaco watch some sequences of *Red River*, the epic 1948 western by Howard Hawks, from the courtyard of their flat, which is right next to the grounds of a communal outdoor cinema (see [Figure 3](#)). Maddalena comments on the actor Montgomery Clift's good looks and the extraordinary scenes of the cattle crossing the Rio Grande, only to contrast the adventurous lives of the stars with their hardscrabble existence in this periphery of Rome and their poor surroundings ('*guarda dove stiamo noi*' – 'look at where we live'). Spartaco, however, is portrayed in the film as sceptical: 'Forget the cinema ... it's all fairy tales,' he says, and throughout the film he does his best to curb her enthusiasm for the talent contest.

The ending, however, is bittersweet. Maria wins the contest, but in the final stages of the process Maddalena has seen the judges making fun of her daughter's performance. The illusion has come crashing down for Maddalena and she ultimately refuses to accept the contract for Maria. Visconti's judgement on the commercial cinema industry is clearly negative. The whole collection of people around Maddalena is shown to be corrupt and superficial, in it only for themselves. But neither is Visconti suggesting that the Communists were right in the way they had wanted cinema or neorealism to be used. Scholars have declared that *Bellissima* was Visconti's clear break away from his earlier neorealist works, a clear abandonment of the view that cinema and neorealism could contribute positively to the new democratic development of Italy as an instrument of emancipation of the masses (Lino Micciché 2010, 449; Gundle 2019, 1–15). Visconti uses a real neorealist actress, Iris Mancini, to give a gloomy summary of the situation. Mancini had been a non-professional actress in a couple of neorealist films and appears towards the end of *Bellissima* as an employee working in the editing room of Cinecittà. Visconti gives her a talking part, where she explains to Maddalena that she gave up her hopes of becoming a star after only a few films because 'nobody ever called me'. Visconti's focus in the film is primarily on the motivations and hopes that drove Maddalena to her project, and there is a degree of empathy and sympathy, especially in the scenes at the end of the film when she reflects on the disappointment, shows tenderness towards her daughter and regrets what she has done to her. In the very last scenes, Visconti ironically alludes to Hollywood cinema and its magical power when





**Figure 3.** Maddalena and Spartaco watch *Red River* from their backyard in *Bellissima*.

Maddalena hears Burt Lancaster's voice in the movie arena and cannot help but comment on how beautiful he sounds.

In the reviews of the time, film critics focused almost exclusively on the pessimism that they saw in the film. Angelo Solmi described it as 'a bitter film which is dominated

by Anna Magnani's brilliant, emotional performance' (Solmi in Hochkofler 2001, 98). Alberto Moravia (1952) wrote about Maddalena as 'the mother deluded by Cinecittà'. Critics from both the Catholic and Communist flanks praised the way in which *Bellissima* exposed the false promises of success that the film industry represented and liked how the film ends with Maddalena choosing to protect her child and family rather than be tempted by celebrity (Rondi 1952; Moravia 1952). Both camps entirely overlooked or ignored the modern aspects of Magnani's character – the desire to improve one's socio-economic position and aspirations to gender equality – and instead simply interpreted Maddalena's actions as standard expressions of the traditionally family-focused, passionate and energetic working-class Italian mother.

### Youth culture and Americanisation in *Le notti bianche*

A central thesis of Gary Cross's book *An All-Consuming Century* (2000) is that consumerism – the understanding of self in society through goods – has provided, on balance, a more dynamic and popular, while less destructive, ideology of public life than most political belief systems in the twentieth century. Consumer goods provided people with the means to express themselves and establish personal identities. They provided a language that allowed a definition of the relationship between people who were entering a dynamic society and could no longer rely on the definitions and guidance provided by their closed communities. Cars, clothes and commodities of all kinds gave identity to young and old, female and male, ethnic majority and minority; they allowed people to signal their identity to others and to signal how they expected to be treated by others. Cross claims that the consumerist system created meaning for Americans far more effectively than politics and civil society. It accompanied Americans through the changes of the twentieth century when the old contexts of family and neighbourhood no longer worked; 'it reinforced democratic principles of participation and equality when new and exciting goods entered the market' (Cross 2000, 3).

This perspective contrasts starkly with the way in which the consumerist system was being demonised by the Italian political forces of the time. The cultural elite, driven by a paternalistic vision, mostly frowned on these new trends. Much of what came from the USA was being enthusiastically adopted by Italian youth and many saw this as being to blame for what they perceived as the deterioration of morality and family values. In the early 1960s, there were numerous debates in the media and among the political forces on how to best manage the growth of this youth culture coming from America. Concern about the patterns of adolescent consumption went beyond their preferences in clothing and extended to their musical tastes and leisure pursuits (Cavazza and Scarpellini 2006). The liberation had heralded an explosion of interest in American music and dancing styles – both of which had been banned during the war – but it was rock'n'roll that gave global youth their own music from the early 1950s onwards, music that they did not share with their parents and that later formed the basis of an entire youth culture (Caselli and Gilardino 2019). *Il rock* set foot on the peninsula, where there had been no musical models specifically for young people, and its diffusion via jukeboxes met no obstacles.

Quite contrary to the image of Visconti being solely concerned with high-culture arts, he was very much in touch with the new musical trends and actually became a lifelong fan of Sanremo and singing contests.<sup>6</sup> Journalist and scriptwriter Enrico Lucherini (Lucherini and Spinola 1984, 106) states that 'Visconti had a kind of obsession for Italian songs and singers'. In his 1957 film *Le notti bianche*, he built a whole sequence around a boogie-woogie performance by a group of young dancers, showing them dancing to the 1954 hit record *Thirteen Women (and Only One Man in Town)* by Bill Haley & His Comets. The whole record is played and Visconti pays full attention to this new kind of youth activity.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (2003, 99) has commented on the existence of two worlds in *Le notti bianche*: the idealised and timeless world inhabited by Natalia and the modern urban space made of neon lights, bars, jukeboxes and dancing. There is a woman smoking in the bar while reading a newspaper; there are the young women in the dance scene moving as freely and confidently as the main male dancer. As Mario waits outside near the shops to meet Natalia, an attractive young woman who is in the bar with her friends comes close to the glass doors near him and writes 'Ciao' on the window; shortly afterwards she catches his eye again as she passes Mario and Natalia. There is one brief sequence of a couple of boys on a motorbike who cause some disturbance, and a short sequence of a fight, but more than in any other film by Visconti there is a positive representation of the youth and their ways in the city.

*Le notti bianche* tells the story of Mario, Natalia and a mysterious stranger. Mario, a solitary, middle-class clerk who has just relocated and finds himself in this new city, has fallen in love with Natalia and spends the film attempting to win her over, but she is hopelessly in love with a mysterious man, a man she met when he was a lodger at her grandmother's house, and she still spends every evening waiting at an agreed spot for his return after a year away.<sup>7</sup> The dance scene occurs when Mario takes Natalia to a bar for a drink; the scene opens with young couples relaxing, some dancing close together to background music, while Mario and Natalia sit talking at a table. Then at one point the music from the jukebox starts up, playing the track by Bill Haley & His Comets, and the lead male of the group jumps onto the dance floor, to show off a few Elvis-like moves before the others join in. The pace picks up, with everyone dancing the boogie-woogie. Mario and Nadia join in too, starting out timidly, standing almost still, swinging their arms together like in a barn dance (see Figure 4).

The sequence is quite different in energy and tempo from the rest of the film and has been interpreted in various ways. In his article on *Le notti bianche*, Brendan Hennessey (2011, 176) interprets this sequence as a microcosm of the film: Mario attempts to win over Natalia, who even gives some indications that he might succeed, but there is a threat from another man, the lead dancer, who is ultimately able to captivate Natalia in a way that Mario cannot.<sup>8</sup> Nowell-Smith (2003, 99–100) suggests that the scene acts as a counterpoint to the earlier scene in which the lodger takes Natalia to the opera – a contrast between sophisticated and popular music.

What is interesting is how Visconti chose to dedicate a whole sequence to playing a modern American pop hit in its entirety, with impressive displays of energetic boogie-woogie. There is an immediate contrast between Mario and Natalia and the crowd of stylish youngsters dancing away, but it is remarkable how genuinely Natalia gets carried away by the music and the dance and how much she enjoys the experience, to the point that she forgets to go and wait in her usual spot for the lodger. Somehow, the role of American music and dance – with their references to relaxed interactions, even sexual transgression – is evaluated as containing both a transgressive and a collective potential, which, however inferior to the world of opera that Natalia and the lodger share, is still preferable to the petty bourgeois, mediocre world that is inhabited by the lonely Mario (who gets rough treatment in the film). Visconti recognises something positive in these new forms of interaction, in their potential to bring young people together. He understands the way in which they are opening up realms of choice and self-definition.

### Modernity and consumer culture in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*

After the more romantic, theatre-like work on *Le notti bianche*, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* marked Visconti's return to the aesthetics and themes of neorealism, touching on national political issues that were close to the party.<sup>9</sup> Like *La terra trema*, the film tackles the southern question, which by this time, in the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, had come to



**Figure 4.** The dance sequence in *Le notti bianche*.

incorporate the new and pressing problem of the large numbers of southern men and families who were emigrating to the industrial North in search of work. The film is set in Milan, the city that had been the target location above all for those who were looking for new economic opportunities, to escape the endemic poverty of much of the South.

The film is set in a moment when the American-style model of individualistic consumption begins to establish itself in Italy following the economic boom – the key point being that this model considers private consumption as a sign of success and social integration. In her book *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Victoria De Grazia (2005) has discussed the advancement of American consumerism and its adoption in Europe as the main feature of contemporary economic and cultural history. She describes the process of America's domination through consumerism as 'the rise of a great imperium with the outlook of a great emporium' (De Grazia 2005, 3). Like



**Figure 4.** Continued.

Cross, she sees how material culture begins to occupy an important part in the construction of new identities in the way it materialises values and behaviours and eventually becomes the preferred way to obtain social integration. This is a view that has been taken up by more recent developments in the field of the sociology of taste and in anthropological studies that focus on material culture and mass consumption – such analyses have moved away from the traditional Marxist emphasis on commodity production to focus instead on the dynamics of consumption. For Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Jukka Gronow (1997), objects are endowed with the properties of social relations and cannot be categorised as standardised commodities defined only by their exchange value. Similar points are presented in Emanuela Scarpellini's book *Material Nation: A Consumer History of Modern Italy* (2011), and in particular in her chapter on the relationship between the migration flows of the 1960s and new forms of consumption and integration.

Migration processes reveal the meanings associated with material culture. In the movement from one geographical place to another (from South to North) and from one culture to another (peasant to urban), immigrants acquire new objects that satisfy material needs but which are also symbolic elements that they use to express themselves, to give meaning to reality, to develop social relationships and communicate to others ... The house, the car, the radio and television are all guarantees of stability and grounding but they also act as status symbols, as evidence of the improvement of one's economic condition. They provide a sense of satisfaction that is based on consumption rather than work ... Through their choices in consumption, immigrants are looking to integrate within a 'modern' society.

In *Rocco*, Visconti explores the different ways in which an immigrant family can integrate – or not – into a modern society, and material goods play an important part. The film is punctuated with many observations of the activities of modern youth of the time: the brothers get involved in the local boxing club; teenagers hang out in bars where they dance to music from a jukebox; the youngest brother, Luca, chews a piece of gum given to him by Simone; Nadia dances to a hand-held radio; and Simone and Nadia go on a day trip from Milan. In reading the films, scholars have mainly focused on the different relationships of the two main characters, Rocco and Simone, to urban life and its material goods, disregarding the views of the other brothers, often referred to as 'insubstantial characters' or 'accessories' (Giori 2011, 165). Visconti, however, gives each of the brothers his own story of integration into a new Milan life, and through these different stories he gives space both to the positive connotations of how consumer culture can be used to express personal aspirations and a sense of self, communicated through the stories of Vincenzo and Ciro, and also to the negatives of how these new elements can disrupt family unity, told through the stories of Simone and Rocco.

Vincenzo is the oldest brother and was the first of the family to explore opportunities in Milan. He has already had some success in putting down roots and the film opens with the family travelling up by train to join him. On the night of their arrival, Vincenzo is celebrating his engagement to Ginetta at a party with his in-laws and family friends. Due to a confusion about the meeting arrangements at the railway station, the Parondi family make their way across town and are welcomed to the party as unexpected guests. 'Ah! They've brought oranges from our town,' exclaims one of the ladies when Rocco hands her a couple, and we understand that Ginetta's family too have immigrated to Milan, probably much earlier, and have seen good times there. The strong visual contrast between the scruffy Parondi family who have just arrived and the elegantly dressed family of Vincenzo's fiancée Ginetta and their friends reinforces this message of the possibilities for betterment that the city offers.

With Ciro also, Visconti introduces positive links towards consumer culture and modernity. In one sequence where we witness Rocco's uncomfortable discovery of Simone's theft of the brooch (Simone stole it from Rocco's female employer), all the brothers are back at the family apartment. Unshaven Simone lies on his bed smoking and over his shoulder we see the collection of magazine clippings of pin-up girls that he has stuck on the wall alongside his bed. Ciro, by contrast, is surrounded by his books. He has been studying and is making progress towards a career in one of the Milan factories. Ciro, very much like Vincenzo, represents positive integration into Milan and his success is conveyed in various ways: he starts a relationship with Franca, a Milanese girl, he completes his studies, starts working at the Alfa Romeo factory and buys himself a Vespa with his earnings. He is always shown at ease in Milan, enjoying a carnival in the streets of the city with his girlfriend and friends; he is liked by his colleagues at the factory and has an affectionate future father-in-law. The positive integration of Ciro had already been noted by some members of the Communist Party when they reviewed the first drafts of the script; they felt that he could embody the potential for alliances between the workers

of the North and the peasants of the South that Gramsci had written about (Visconti in Faldini and Fofi 1981, 29). There had been plans to have *Cirò* appear in the film as an active member of the workers' union at the factory, but Visconti made changes during the filming and he became a much more minor figure, notwithstanding that Visconti always affirmed the didactic importance of the character (Aristarco 1960, 9).

Simone is the brother who more than any of the others embodies an irresponsible desire to possess material objects and who encapsulates the negative effects of the impact with modernity.<sup>10</sup> He is the first of the brothers to comment on the brightly lit shop windows as the tram takes them across Milan on the evening they arrive. As the story progresses, his moral standing declines and he steals, gambles and racks up huge debts. Simone's story is ultimately that of a spiral downwards towards a lowlife existence, of him losing his mind in Milan. It is Simone who, throughout the plot, is most closely associated with everything negative about the new, edgy, modern American youth culture that was taking hold in Italy. The scene where Simone rushes to the bar to round up the gang



**Figure 5.** American products appearing in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*.

and head over to rape Nadia recalls something of an American youth-gone-wild movie, and the bar where the gang was hanging out, with its stools at the bar, its Coca-Cola and its jukebox playing a pop song, looks more like an American diner than a traditional Italian coffee shop (see Figure 5). While this is typical of the Hollywood boxing genre, as Hennessey (2016) points out – for Hennessey, *Rocco* features the conventional ‘story of the rise and fall of the boxer’ and the cinematic characters typical of the genre, such as the femme fatale or the corrupt manager, who are deployed to achieve certain dramatic ends – the link between crime and urban youth culture was a common concern in Italian media at the time (see Figure 6).<sup>11</sup> Scarpellini (2011) describes this phenomenon as one of ‘moral panic’ – related not to an actual increase in youth crime, but to a general concern in the nation that traditional value systems were being uprooted as the new youth subcultures established their own activities and practices.<sup>12</sup>

Visconti embellishes Simone with all these new trappings of a modern youth lifestyle but leaves plain Rocco simply feeling lost and out of place in a city he will never call home. Indeed, the kind-hearted, family-centred brother Rocco spends much of *his* story simply



**Figure 6.** Scenes of violence in the city in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*.



following behind Simone to clear up the mess – treating Simone’s ex-girlfriend better than he did, helping the boxing coach keep Simone focused on his training, becoming the boxer that Simone should have been, paying off Simone’s gambling debts and consoling him after he murders Nadia. It is only Rocco who actually verbalises a rejection of the gain of material objects: ‘I too would like to have things,’ he explains to Nadia when they meet after his year away on military service, ‘but only after everyone has first got what they need.’ This sentiment of collectivism harks back to the monologue in *La terra trema* from Ntoni, but with Rocco it is presented more as a personal reflection than a firm ideological belief. Rocco’s dominant characteristic is his nostalgia for the past, for their old life in the village when the family was firmly united, and his statement on collectivism is not developed further in the film – which is much less about a political ideology and much more a family melodrama.<sup>13</sup>

Rocco shows various complexities in its representation of modernity and consumer culture. There is a condemnation of the pursuit of individual pleasure and links are made between violence, consumer culture, urban modernity and the weakening of family ties. But while the film is clear on how this kind of individualistic consumerism can head in a dangerous antisocial direction, the film leaves space for the positive aspects of consumer culture and modernity offered by Milan through the characters of Vincenzo and Ciro. ‘I wouldn’t even think of going back south,’ says Vincenzo, and when Rocco laments that things would never have turned out so badly for Simone if they had never left the family home, Ciro’s reply of ‘Do you realise that we would still be living like animals?’ leaves no doubt that modern Milan has allowed them to establish a better life for themselves.

## Conclusion

The abundance of high-culture references embedded in Visconti’s films have meant that they are typically celebrated as instances of art rather than as references to contemporary culture. In this article I have looked instead at how the films present and articulate representations of consumer culture and modernity, using low-key elements or commercial commodities that were either already very much a part of daily life for Italians or were becoming more familiar through the growing youth culture informed by influences from US culture.

In reading the films, I have drawn on a contemporary framework: the theories of Hansen on the ways in which American mass products and media articulated modernity, including dynamics of gender equality; the theories of Cross and Scarpellini on consumption as a powerful language that allows people to define themselves and connect with others, widening the democratic principle of participation and equality; and the analysis of De Grazia on consumerism and Americanisation.

An important finding is that Visconti is impressively close to the contemporary sensibility of these theorists for whom consumer culture provided people with powerful means to express themselves and created a sense of self and social integration. Close film analysis supports the idea that Visconti was more indulgent than the PCI towards the mass media, consumer culture and American products and forms of leisure. The party demonised private consumption expressed in American products and showed no appreciable understanding of the profound attraction that modernity and consumerism exerted on Italians: the desire for glamour, the desire for class and gender advancement, and the importance of personal aspirations. They feared that consumerism could lead towards the disaggregation of the working class. In Visconti’s films, consumer goods and the allure of the city are negative symbols within the narrative and connote abandonment of the common good, but Visconti complicates the narrative in many of these

films by including positive representations of modern culture, even when a character or situation is formally condemned. It is significant that this is also true of *Ossessione*, his first film, shot in 1943, long before postwar discussions on Americanisation. We first see Giovanna's face in a medium close-up, where the strong lighting creates a gleam in her eyes and some reflections on her shiny, freshly painted nails; Visconti gave her an attractive, modern sophistication that reflects her desire for a more glamorous life. While she is ultimately condemned, Visconti makes her more attractive than Lo Spagnolo, the character to whom the overall political message of the film is entrusted.

Visconti shows an understanding of the inner feelings of the characters who interact with modern goods, modern leisure and culture, and he sympathises with their aspirations to personal betterment or their desire to integrate. Visconti's portrayal of mass products, cinema, American rock'n'roll and dance, and of the dynamics of integration of a rural family in an industrial city, is indicative less of politics and ideology than of an understanding of the way in which lifestyles were changing in Italy as the economy was remodelled and consumerism spread even to less developed areas of the country.

## Notes

1. The film was initially financed by the PCI and intended as propaganda material to be used for the general election of 1948; it became instead a fiction film based on the book by Verga *I Malavoglia*, financed by the production company Universalialia (Rondolino 2003, 197–198). Hennessey (2021) discusses *La terra trema* as an example of the way Visconti adapted literary texts, 'deviating while also honouring the literary text at the basis of the film'.
2. All translations from Italian are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.
3. Recent studies of neorealism have emphasised that postwar films, including neorealist films, should be understood not as a break with the past but in the context of the past and the difficulty of dealing with the legacy and inheritance left by Fascism in terms of historical memory and discourses on race and sexuality (Marmo 2018; Minghelli 2013; Fabri 2019).
4. For a discussion on Visconti's use of mirrors in the *mise-en-scène*, see Ivo Blom (2017, 253–292).
5. Bellassai (2000, 169) discusses how Communists believed in a *paradigma crollista*, meaning that the capitalist system would eventually capitulate because of an inability to resolve its own economic crisis.
6. 'I recall watching the Sanremo festival on television along with Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Mario Monicelli and also Luchino Visconti. All of us were sat on the floor, watching and laughing, having a lot of fun together' (Claudia Cardinale quoted in Faldini and Fofi 1979, 389).
7. The suggestion is that the lodger represents a communist utopia and is away in Russia.
8. Lora Jury (2022) has commented on Mario as a powerless, isolated and emasculated character and how this is shown in the film at the end when he returns to the petrol station where the film began. The Esso branding of the petrol station, a sign used in many films of the time to signify global and patriarchal capitalism, can be read here as a sign of defeat, as Mario has failed to win Natalia's love.
9. Visconti later published an article on the influence that Gramsci's interpretation of the southern question had had on the development of the film.
10. Visconti based his film on Testori's transgressive novel *Il ponte della Ghisolfia* (1958). See also *Luchino* by Testori and Agosti (2022).
11. The film *I Vinti* by Antonioni, released in 1953, recounts the phenomenon of the popular obsession with juvenile crime and its connection with mass culture, particularly a certain type of journalism.
12. While *Rocco* (like many other neorealist films) has many transnational aspects, the national issues remain central. For a discussion on transnational and national aspects in neorealism, see Giovacchini and Sklar's *Global Neorealism* (2012).
13. Louis Bayman (2015) discusses the connection between neorealism and melodrama and Visconti's films.

## Filmography

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*Le notti bianche*. Directed by Luchino Visconti, CIAS, 1957.

- Ossessione*. Directed by Luchino Visconti, ICI, 1943.  
*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. Directed by Luchino Visconti, Titanus, 1961.  
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### Italian summary

Luchino Visconti è ampiamente riconosciuto come regista di cultura alta. Tuttavia, i suoi film del periodo 1943–1963 mostrano un forte impegno verso la cultura del consumo e la modernità per quanto riguarda temi, personaggi e riferimenti. Il presente articolo esplora questa dimensione spesso trascurata nei film di Visconti, analizzando una serie di sequenze e momenti chiave che presentano un richiamo al consumismo, alla cultura del consumo, al tempo libero, alla modernità, all'americanizzazione e alla cultura giovanile. L'analisi mostra come queste rappresentazioni siano in relazione ai cambiamenti di costume e lifestyles nell'Italia del dopoguerra dovuti in particolare all'americanizzazione. La ricerca prende spunto dal lavoro di Gary Cross, Victoria De Grazia ed Emanuela Scarpellini sulla cultura del consumo e l'americanizzazione e contestualizza come il riferimento di Visconti alla cultura del consumo e alla modernità sia stato accolto dal PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano).