

Introduction

Literary Sources, Cinematic Frameworks



Figure I.1. Luchino Visconti's hand turning the pages of the novel being adapted in his final film, *L'innocente* (Luchino Visconti, 1976).

VISCONTI'S 1941 ESSAY "Tradition and Invention" represents his manifesto on the art of adaptation. Therein, he voiced his desire to render the "rhythm" of Giovanni Verga's 1881 novel, *The House by the Medlar Tree*:

Then I was encouraged by the thought that even a common reader, in a first trivial contact with Verga's novel, finds its power and suggestiveness to rely completely on its *intimate*

and musical rhythm; and that the key to a cinematic version of *The House by the Medlar Tree* might lie exclusively here—i.e., in the attempt to re-experience and assemble the magic of that rhythm, of that vague yearning for the unknown, of that knowledge that people are not well off, or could be better off, which makes up the poetic substance of a play of destinies, which cross without ever touching one another. (*LV*, 19–20; emphasis in original)

In foregrounding as musical and poetic a term as *rhythm* to describe the transformation from book to film, Visconti introduces a synthetic quality commonly associated with his filmmaking. Perhaps more than the films of any other Italian director of his generation, Visconti's works are consistently defined through a series of noncinematic modifiers (operatic, literary, painterly, etc.) that locate them at the juncture of the literary, visual, and dramatic arts. As we will see, this heterogenous characterization of his filmmaking creates a rather intriguing set of issues for the notion of literary adaptation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For the time being, in this intermedial landscape, literature occupies a crucial position. "He uses film," Mario Serandrei once commented, "like a writer uses ink" (Serandrei 1979, 329). In this essay, Visconti's use of the term *rhythm* to describe his intent to adapt Verga's novel to film, harmonizing cinema with one of its sister arts, harkens back to many silent-period examinations of cinema in Italy. In 1908, Ricciotto Canudo announced the birth of cinema in similarly cadenced terms, noting film's capacity to merge the pulses of the other arts: "And this expression of art will be the conciliation between the Rhythm of Space (the Plastic Arts) and the Rhythm of Time (Music and Poetry). . . . The new art form should instead be precisely a Painting and a Sculpture unfolding in time; like Music and Poetry, which have life, they rhythmically mark the air during the time of their execution" (Canudo 2017, 68).

In the subsequent "Manifesto to the Seven Arts," Canudo observed that "The forms and rhythms which are called Life gush forth from the turning crank of a projector," establishing cinema as "The Seventh Art [that] reconciles all the others. Moving Painting, Plastic Art developing according to the norms of rhythmic art" (Canudo 1975, 254). Canudo offers some early paeans to "intermediality"—a critical term for the connections between media—in which cinema was shaped by intermixing multiple artforms in a single platform. Sebastiano Arturo Luciani soon concurred with Canudo's praise for artistic blending, claiming in 1916 that

“this visual rhythm must be the rudimentary norm of the entire poetics of the new art” (Luciani 2017, 330). Canudo and Luciani’s position was most enthusiastically espoused by the Italian futurists, who employed a similarly musical terminology in championing cinema’s revolutionary potential. Futurists eagerly declared how “the *Futurist cinematographer* today creates the POLIEXPRESSIVE SYMPHONY,” which they believed extended across artistic forms, “from chromatic and plastic music to the music of objects” (Marinetti 1976, 12). To these early thinkers, art forms across the spectrum constituted the various notes and intervals synchronized to create a consonant cinematic harmony. In 1914, writer Gabriele D’Annunzio announced cinema as a *gesamtkunstwerk* (all-embracing art form), claiming how “this newest of arts sends flames through the eyes” (Brunetta 1999, 23).

Much in line with the composite cinema promoted by these figures from the silent period (and later by Italian thinkers like Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Antonio Costa, and Leonardo De Franceschi), Visconti’s postwar films have been hailed for balancing multiple forms of media, especially opera, theater, literature, and painting, in an integrated cinematic program. This polyartistic characterization stemmed first and foremost from the director’s activities outside of cinema. Born to a musical family (he trained as a cellist in his youth), Visconti harbored literary ambitions early on, writing two unfinished novels, *Angelo* and *I tre* (*The Three*); a short story “Il cappello di paglia” (“The Straw Hat”); two acts of a play; and later, a one-act theatrical production, *Il gioco della verità* (*The Game of Truth*) that he composed with Livio dell’Anna (D’Amico de Carvalho and Favino 2003b, 30). Outside of cinema, he led a veritable revolution on Italian stages from the 1940s through the 1970s, directing classic and modern theater from Italy, the United States, Europe, and Russia (Puppa 2007, 43–54). This theater work extended to the opera, where a cycle of works starring Maria Callas between 1954 and 1957 (*The Vestal Virgin*, *The Sleepwalker*, *La Traviata*, *Anna Bolena*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*) inaugurated the director’s equally profound activity in Italy’s lyric venues. Although not a painter, Visconti has been associated with various Italian pictorial traditions. Darbellay (2011) and Blom (2017a) analyze how the director made overt and allusive references to painting through a notable use of mise-en-scène, especially framing devices such as mirrors and doorways but also through costumes, photographs, and other material elements. These are part of what Ilaria Serra calls “imagistic substitutions” that are typical connections between film and the figurative arts in Italy (Serra 2011). The international character of his activities cannot be understated,

and Visconti's efforts reflect a truly transnational approach to Italian filmmaking. It is notable that his work in cinema began in France as an assistant to Jean Renoir in the 1930s, and over the course of his prolific career, he borrowed liberally from sources and traditions around the world. When asked which art form he preferred—film, opera, or theater—Visconti suggested that all dramatic forms at his disposal might fit equally beneath the same umbrella of spectacle: “I don’t know, honestly,” he claimed in “La mia carriera teatrale” (“My Career in Theater”) published in *L'Europeo* in 1966, “Cinema, theater, opera: I would say it is all the same work. Despite the enormous diversity of the means they use. The issue of bringing a spectacle to life is always equal” (*LV*, 62). This interartistic blending was not always viewed enthusiastically by critics, and although his films were periodically maligned for being too operatic or overly theatrical, his opera and theater works were likewise disparaged for their striking cinematicity (Rondolino 2003, 353).

Visconti's reliance on literary adaptation also factored into this vocabulary of totalizing artistic practice. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel was distinct from other literary genres in its ability to create a dialogic exchange of speech types, cultural forms, vernacular and literary languages. As Robert Stam observes, the cinema takes this appropriation of other forms and genres “to its paroxysm,” expanding the novel's heteroglossia by becoming “a receptacle open to all kinds of literary and pictorial symbolism, to all types of collective representation, to all ideologies, to all aesthetics, and to the infinite play of influences within cinema, within the other arts, and within culture generally” (Stam 2000, 61). Although novels were the primary texts used to root Visconti's films, secondary ones appeared as well. Through allusion, referencing, and recall, a Visconti film might signal any number of literary, political, and historical works and authors. In this framework, Viscontian adaptation might be viewed as a broad threshold opening out to an almost countless set of textual linkages, motioning toward Stam's poststructural reading of adaptation's polyphonic capacities, where the “ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts an endless process of recycling, transformation and transmutation, with no clear point of origin” (Stam 2000, 66). Visconti perceived his tendency toward intertextuality not as a goal but as a natural by-product of the artistic act:

If I wrote a book, exactly as is the case when I make a film, I would be writing on the basis of all the input I have received from my reading and from my artistic predilections. And there is little doubt that what I would then say would already have

been said by someone else. I would be at liberty not to indicate my sources. They would exist nonetheless. A man who had never read a book, never looked at a painting, never heard any music? His gaze, his sense of hearing absolutely virgin? And who would be using a camera to look at the world and translate it into images? Yes, that person could certainly practice “pure cinema.” But . . . (translated by Testa 2012, 23)

While not exactly dismissing the multiartistic input to his cinematic interface, here and elsewhere Visconti naturalized the “ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation” as a normal feature of his—and perhaps any—artistic creation. What he emphasized as fundamental to his production as a filmmaker, however, were the literary antecedents he adapted to screen. It should be noted that his use of the term *rhythm* in “Tradition and Invention” does not refer to a seemingly infinite intertextuality outlined by Stam, or the sort of interartistic cinematic field buttressed by the silent-era thinkers. Rather, the essay underscores the process of bringing one book—Verga’s *House by the Medlar Tree*—to screen. From the beginning, Visconti defended the originality of such literary adaptation, noting that relative to directing opera and theater, “one is far more an author making a film, even if it is a film derived from literature” (LV, 62). From the Greek *rythmos*, “measured flow or movement” but also “arrangement, order; form, shape,” the term *rhythm* superbly evokes the complex process of literary adaptation: a semiotic reordering in which words from literature gather new cadence in the spatial-temporal medium of cinema. Rather than being haunted by some “dead hand of literature,” Visconti mined literary texts and authors at will, breaking new ground through the conscious and unabashed manipulation of literary originals (Leitch 2008a, 65). He did so by mixing appropriation with invention: “When I choose a specific literary work, it is so that I can give it a new dimension,” he stated, “or rather, a dimension which it already possesses implicitly, but which only ‘another’ gaze is able to give it—precisely the gaze called for by the creator, a gaze that is creative in and of itself” (translated by Testa 2012, 23). By accentuating his position as creator, in touch with “a specific literary work,” Visconti suggests that the book on which he based his films has a unique status in his oeuvre, different than those other arts with which his cinema tends to echo.

Recent critical approaches have not necessarily highlighted adaptation’s individuality. As Sarah Cardwell has suggested, the emphasis on adaptation as a form of intertextuality, popular since the 1990s (Stam 2000; Stam and Raengo 2004, 2005), and an interest in adaptation as a

type of intermediality and transmediality, prominent since the early 2000s (Ellestrøm 2013), risk losing sight of what makes adaptation distinct from these broader categories (Cardwell 2018, 9). Intertextuality and intermediality, she argues, are “necessary but not sufficient condition[s] for adaptation,” with adaptation a “special case of both intertextuality and intermediality,” in which the “primary concern is to adapt” (Cardwell 2018, 12). As I demonstrate in the following pages, Visconti put his intent to adapt on full display, engineering a skeletal substrate composed of a distinctively literary substance to structure his works. Considering how complex literary frameworks interact in *Rocco and His Brothers*, Mauro Giori outlined what he calls Visconti’s “bovarism”—the way the reality of Flaubert’s title character Madame Bovary is shaped by the various fictional texts read in her past—as an essential component of his poetics of cinema evident throughout Visconti’s filmography: “The quest for drama passes through an interpretation of reality and its themes beneath the light of many accumulated readings. If everything recalls to the Flaubertian heroine (in the sentimental reality that she tries to construct around herself) some of her past readings, likewise in *Rocco* almost every sequence has a literary root, every character numerous ones, every motive recalls entire genres and traditions [*filoni*], every theme is immersed in a fictional imaginary” (Giori 2011a, 101–2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this literary origination characterized all of his adaptations, where literature was the starting point for his cinematic projects. As we will see, adaptation was not always accorded as prominent a position in the interpretations of his films as one might expect. Despite the fluctuating stress Visconti placed on the literary sources subtending his films in his public comments, his intent was always to adapt, always to “attempt to re-experience and assemble the magic of that rhythm, of that vague yearning for the unknown” (*LV*, 19). The concern to adapt was present throughout his career, literature and cinema becoming the Janus face of his idiosyncratic creative gaze.

Authors, Auteurs, Adaptation

In the same period in which D’Annunzio, the futurists, and others lauded the new art of cinema, there were literary authors who viewed this upstart form with some apprehension. In a letter to Dina di Sordevolo, dated February 20, 1912, Giovanni Verga grumbled about a film version of his *Cavalleria Rusticana*, stating that “*Cavalleria* or no *Cavalleria*, these days the cinematographer has utterly invaded the field in need of *subjects* or

themes to disfigure the public and blind the people” (Verga 1984a, 30). Verga, in a letter from April 25, 1912, pleaded with Sordevolo not to identify him with the sale of his intellectual property or reveal that he had anything to do with what he called “this culinary manipulation of my things”(Verga 1984b, 33). Other literary figures viewed the neonate cinema with a similar degree of misgiving. Some perceived the film-book pairing as a marriage in conflict, with cinema making a crass modern spouse for noble literature. Adaptation was the strange vow that united this odd couple, and aspersions against it came early and often. In a much-cited essay titled “The Cinema” from 1926, Virginia Woolf interprets cinema as a parasite, feasting on the body of a literary host. In contrast to the harmonious confluence of arts described by Canudo, Woolf found cinema’s appropriation of literature to be superficial and unsophisticated, like complex musical instruments in the hands of brutes: “It is as if the savage tribe . . . had found, scattering the seashore, fiddles, flutes, saxophones, trumpets, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein, and had begun with incredible energy, but without knowing a note of music, to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time” (Woolf 1926, 383). The juxtaposition of the savage cinematic “eye” (senses) with the sophisticated literary “brain” (reason) betrays all of the anticorporeality, iconophobia, and logophilia that plagued studies of adaptation that followed (Stam 2000, 58). To Woolf, adaptation was not to create, or to use the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition “an altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., (now *esp.*) one adapted for filming,” but to damage, ruin, mutilate (*OED* 2021). Even cinema’s most celebratory of literary works represented the discomfort inflicted by the fast-moving new medium. In Luigi Pirandello’s 1916 novel *Shoot! The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*, itself proof of the newfound fascination with all things cinematic, the protagonist grouses in irritation: “Already my eyes and my ears too, from force of habit, are beginning to see and hear everything in the guise of this rapid, quivering, ticking mechanical reproduction” (Pirandello 2005a, 8). Gone is the rapturous encomium for cinema’s melodies, replaced by the reservations of those remarking on an audiovisual assault by cinema’s maddening, disruptive cacophony.

For some critics, cinema, to become a legitimate cultural form, had to carve its own path, not retread what was already established by literature. This is the essentialism of the medium-specificity thesis, in which each art form, by virtue of its individual medium, is thought to occupy an exclusive domain. From the 1776 essay “Laocoon,” in which Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argued for the separation of art forms (poetry progresses

in time; painting endures in space), to Clement Greenberg's 1940 "Towards a New Laocoon," where he asserted that modernist paintings maintain their virtue "by acting solely in terms of their separate and irreducible selves," arguments for the purity of media have an extended and august tradition (Greenberg 1961, 139). When Visconti wrote "Tradition and Invention" in 1941, he was addressing those who viewed literary-based films in Italy as a form of miscegenation, as much culturally retrograde as they were ideologically suspect. At the time, some Italian filmmakers and film theorists regarded adaptations as being synonymous with the "calligraphist" filmmaking of fascism, with the term *calligraphism* etymologically tied to "pretty writing," indicating a group of films during late fascism that advanced cinematic form through their explicit use of its sister arts. Large-scale adaptations by directors Mario Soldati, Luigi Chiarini, Fernando Maria Poggioli, Renato Castellani, Alberto Lattuada, and Luigi Zampa foregrounded nineteenth-century literary sources from France, Russia, and Italy to develop a cinematic formalism. The calligraphic filmmakers were inspired by French poetic realism of the 1930s, the "poetic" evocative of a cinema that was somehow literary (Martini 1992). The omnipresence of literary films in this period points to literature's cultural importance under fascism, where it was still the "privileged terrain" of Italian cultural production from which filmmakers could borrow (Brunetta 2009). In the postwar period, Zavattini, Chiarini, and others panned calligraphism's emphatic literariness, bourgeois and historical settings, and melodramatic structures as the quintessence of the fascist art of illusion. Highly mediated and condemned as empty formalism, calligraphism thus appeared to conspire with fascist cultural policy of "bread and circus." In the postwar period, Italian filmmakers created neorealism, a moment in Italy's film history when directors were tasked with encapsulating the devastating present of the nation torn apart by war and exposing the real-life struggles of the Italian commoner, calligraphism became a convenient prewar foil for postwar claims to cinematic authenticity. Critic Guido Aristarco, in a review of *Obsession* published in *Il Corriere Padano* in 1943, noted how Visconti's first film offered a potential new direction for Italian cinema against the calligraphists: "Castellani, Soldati, Lattuada, Poggioli e Chiarini have fallen into grave danger: into empty formalism: or better, in an arid and frigid decorativism, devoid of spiritual research, lyrical momentum, human values" (Brunetta 2017, 209). As we will see in chapter 2, attention to *Obsession's* depictions of the Italian landscape and documentation of life in Italy's hinterlands eclipsed the film's identity as an adaptation and muted associations with literature.

Adaptation's unenviable status in the years following fascism extended outside the sphere of film criticism and into the courtroom. It is easily forgotten that Visconti's first adaptation, *Obsession*, made during the same period "Tradition and Invention" was written, also marked his first lawsuit for copyright infringement. The plaintiff was the French production company Gladiateur, who owned the rights to James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and produced its 1939 adaptation, *Le dernier tournant* (*The Last Turning*), by director Pierre Chenal (Foose 1976, 6) (see fig. I.2).



Figure I.2. Poster for the French film *Le dernier tournant* (Pierre Chenal, 1939).

The court case dragged on for over a decade and was an inaugural chapter in a developing portrayal of Visconti as a “liberal” adaptor of literary sources in film and theater whose lack of respect for literary antecedents was the source of praise and scorn. Many years later, after attending Visconti’s 1973 performance of *Old Times* in Rome, dramaturge Harold Pinter was so offended by the frank exhibition of nudity and lesbianism that he whistled his displeasure. Pinter immediately revoked Visconti’s rights to continue to direct it, noting: “I can’t be said to feel too happy about such idiocies” (Drake 1985, VI: 1, 6). Such censure aligns with a historical hostility to adaptation by the likes of Viktor Shklovsky in Russia in the 1920s or Jean Mitry in France in the 1960s, for whom adaptation was simply impossible (Testa 2008, 76–78).

Despite adaptation’s troublesome position for notions of originality and questions of authorship, much of Visconti’s aura of creative authority was built on his cinematic readings of books. In a time when many Italian literary and intellectual figures engaged in what Gian Piero Brunetta has called a “fatal attraction” with the cinema, Visconti became famous for his counterhegemonic interpretations of literature on screen. A Marxist aristocrat known as the “Red Count,” Visconti was the darling of Italy’s Communist Party. Consequently, his films were read as undermining dominant political ideologies at the time, offering transgressive, politically charged works that exemplified the militancy of communist-affiliated filmmaking in Italy. Such political engagement was inseparable from Italian neorealism. Difficult to define, neorealism is some mixture of an ideological program, a historical movement, an aesthetic sensibility, and an ethical approach to artmaking (Marcus 1986, 22). Lino Micciché famously coined neorealism’s “ethics of the aesthetic,” pointing to shared notions of reliability, accuracy, and honesty similar to the documentarian standard, where filmmakers are tasked with telling real-life stories straightforwardly. Visconti concurred, once replying to the question of “What was neorealism?” with: “It was a moral position that we took up with regards to power, with regards to the social situation in Italy, of the postwar disorder, to clarify certain issues, or at least denounce them” (Rondi 2006, 284). Neorealism’s prestige and association with antifascism protected Visconti’s later films from the French New Wave hostility to adaptation, which François Truffaut regarded as the quintessence of France’s tired *cinéma de papa* or “Daddy’s cinema.” Sheltered by his Marxist leanings and the antagonistic challenges to both fascist (prewar) and Christian Democratic (postwar) concepts of “Italian clean living” forwarded in his films, Visconti was permitted to explore

adaptation as part of his wide-ranging artistic vision. He was one of the first Italian auteurs interviewed by *Cahiers* when they began publishing dialogues with admired filmmakers such as Welles, Hitchcock, Hawks, and Rossellini between 1954 and 1957. Critics Andrew Sarris, Peter Wollen, and others followed the notion of the auteur set forth by Truffaut and the *Cahiers*, and Visconti was soon elevated to “classic” auteur status in Italy by Pio Baldelli (1965) and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in England (1967), the latter of whom argued for Visconti’s place at the center of a “structuralist-auteur” school (an association referenced approvingly in Wollen’s influential *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, first published in 1969). For Nowell-Smith, adaptation was just another means for expressing a “structural hard core of basic and often recondite motifs” that characterized a system of codes and patterns making up the auteur’s trademark aura (Nowell-Smith 1967, 10). This brand of auteurism was successfully contested by semiotic and poststructuralist theories, and by the early 1970s, the concept that film (at least of a certain scale) was a collective rather than individual endeavor became mainstream. Today, no one would deny that Visconti benefited from screenwriters Suso Cecchi d’Amico or Enrico Medioli, cinematographers G. R. Aldo or Giuseppe Rotunno, Mario Garbuglia’s set designs, Piero Tosi’s costuming, and Mario Serandrei’s editing, for example. The role of “star” producers like Franco Cristaldi, Goffredo Lombardo, and Dino de Laurentiis—once called the *politiques des producteurs*—also subverts ideas on the director as a film’s lynchpin in favor of a notion of creative collaboration (Micciché 1975, 41–57; Small 2016, 109).

The legacy of auteur structuralism endures today, especially with regard to Visconti’s adaptations. Interpretations of these films continue to focus on a sui generis artist, influenced by select authors whose ideas were seen to structure his textual borrowings. Above all others, critics have identified two individuals—Antonio Gramsci and Marcel Proust—as Visconti’s most important reference points. Their significance was reasserted by scholars across the decades, helping determine ideas on Visconti’s methods of adaptation. Carlo Testa, for example, once bifurcated all Italian literary adaptations into two camps, placing Visconti as co-figurehead of one: “Verily there seem to be two separate and largely non-communicating film-and-literature traditions: the one that developed within the Gramscian-Viscontian context, and the one that didn’t” (Testa 2002a, 8). Ideologically, the ruminations on Italian politics, art, and history published in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* were seen to affect many of Visconti’s films, especially those in the early phases. Although

the Gramscian intertext behind historical films *Senso* and *The Leopard* is indeed noteworthy, I argue that Gramsci's connection to films like *The Earth Trembles* and *Rocco and His Brothers* overshadowed questions of adaptation in negative ways. Aesthetically, Visconti declared time and again his allegiance to Proust, a writer he adored (Mann, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Shakespeare also deserve mention). He shared various biographical elements with Proust, such as an aristocratic background, an adulation for his mother, and his identification as homosexual. Yet his long-planned adaptation of Proust's magnum opus, *In Search of Lost Time*, was ultimately abandoned, and he never projected a Proust work on film. Although Visconti did borrow characters and even sequences (as in *The Leopard*) from Proust's writing, I argue that Proust was just one of many literary figures whose textual production Visconti liberally resourced. "Proustian" themes of memory, nostalgia, and aestheticism, I contend, represent as much of a shared artistic mien between writer and filmmaker as they do a direct influence.

While acknowledging the influence of Gramsci and Proust, *Luchino Visconti and The Alchemy of Adaptation* trains its focus on some specific literary sources directly involved in the screenwriting process, exploring how individual texts helped shape the films they became. More important, this book examines the cinematic end product that results from the art of adaptation. Viewing adaptations as films in and of themselves unearths both the literary and cinematic substrates (a combination that will be called "cine-literary") that buttressed these films. To date, Visconti has rightly been tied to forms of melodrama, what Christine Gledhill deciphers as a composite form of its own or a "modality" but, as I will demonstrate, there are other genres and modalities at play as well (Bayman 2014; Gledhill 2000). Either explicitly or implicitly, his films toured modern Italian and international film conventions and forms, high-to-low: noir (*Obsession*) and documentary (*Giorni di Gloria*, *Appunti su un fatto di cronaca*, *The Earth Trembles*, *Alla ricerca di Tadzio*); historical costume dramas set in Italy (*Senso*, *The Intruder*) and Germany (*The Damned*, *Ludwig*); chamber films (*White Nights*, *The Job*, *Conversation Piece*), the boxing film (*Rocco and His Brothers*) and diva films (*Bellissima*, *Anna Magnani*, *The Witch Burned Alive*); the gothic, together with the Italian mystery or *giallo* (*Sandra*); the Italian heritage film (*The Leopard*) and legal drama (*The Stranger*); and even adaptation itself (*Death in Venice*). Many of these categories have largely been ignored in scholarly works on Visconti, which focus more on politics (Gramsci) and high art (Proust) that would place him above and beyond such a generic purview.

This book assumes a more contemporary notion of the auteur filmmaker that was introduced in the Italian context by Mary P. Wood, who argues that “Italian *auteur* cinema is not so much a distinct entity in itself, as the intellectual and/or better funded end of national genre production,” referencing how auteur concerns operated within the same realm as genre ones (Wood 2005, 111). The connection between auteur and genre illustrates the simultaneous rise of auteurs and genre cinema in postwar Italian film, usually seen as isolated traditions. In many respects, Wood echoes the classic study on auteur-genre interaction by Robin Wood, who in 1977 argued for a more “synthetic” view of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), one that stretches past the individual auteur to consider how these directors handled the ideological and generic conventions circulating in Hollywood (Wood 1977). Including film types only expands what is already a wide-ranging understanding of Visconti’s identity as an auteur, whose “stardom,” Marcia Landy notes, “has been nourished by critics who identify his works with his aristocratic background, his involvement with La Scala Opera, his left-leaning politics, and the erudition and precision of his cinematic style” (Landy 2008, 191). Visconti’s attention to lower cultural forms has been well documented, if not usually accentuated, but as David Bordwell argued long ago, the art film is also itself a genre (Bordwell 1979). “Genre,” as Andrew Tudor (1974, 139) suggests, “is what we collectively believe it to be,” indicating a set of conventions that are recognizable to an audience or critics and adhere to or resist a set of expectations. I argue that in his consistent signaling of literary sources and resonances, in the marketing of his cinema as iterative of literary classics, and in the reception of his films by audiences primed to interpret a literary work at the movies, Visconti forwarded a set of conventions and structures that move centrifugally from literature to generic forms familiar to film spectators at the time.

Cryptographs and Code-Breakers: Tradition and Invention

Along with Visconti’s essays from the early 1940s, “Anthropomorphic Cinema” and “Cadavers,” “Tradition and Invention” is commonly understood in the antifascist context of the Italian film journal *Cinema*, where contributors argued for cinematic renewal that would only come about in the antifascist resistance poetics of neorealism. Unlike “Anthropomorphic

Cinema,” an essay allegedly ghostwritten by Gianni Puccini, Visconti probably wrote “Tradition and Invention” himself. Mino Argentieri once remarked: “Visconti never picked up a pen . . . there are articles published and signed by Visconti that weren’t written by Visconti. For declarations of his poetics and things of that sort he always found someone: as a good artist, he entrusted them to people who had their hands in things with which he was scarcely familiar. Visconti, Puccini and Peppe De Santis worked collegially together on the famous article ‘Anthropomorphic Cinema,’ then one of them was tasked with a draft, like you do with a screenplay” (Argentieri 2013, 362; translation mine). As a kind of travelogue of his trip to Sicily, “Tradition and Invention” fits in with the various written accounts in Visconti’s diary and letters of trips to France, the Greek islands, and the United States during the mid- to late 1930s (Rondolino 2003, 60–70). He begins “Tradition and Invention” by addressing the debate over adaptation that was circulating during those years before filming *Obsession*:

A recent dispute over the relationship between literature and film has found me spontaneously in the camp of those who place their faith in the richness and validity of a “literary” inspired cinema. I must confess that in the intention to begin a cinematographic activity, one of the primary difficulties that seem to impede my desire and my ambition to understand the film only as a poetic work, is the consideration of banality, forgive my use of the term, of misery that is so often at the basis of ordinary scriptwriting. (*LV*, 19)

His preference for a literary cinema echoes that of Giuseppe De Santis and Mario Alicata, who also in 1941 published two essays on the literature of Giovanni Verga as an important model for the more authentic cinema to come. (Their interventions are discussed in depth in chapter 2.) For all three, filmmakers needed not invent anything from scratch to move past conventions of fascist cinema. Visconti continues:

It will seem perhaps obvious, but I’ve asked myself more than once, why it is that while a solid literary tradition exists, in one-hundred different forms of novels and stories realized in the sincere and pure “truth” of human life, cinema, in its meaning outside this life would seem to be the documentarian, content to accustom audiences to a taste for the small

intrigue, the melodramatic rhetoric in which a mechanical coherence protects the spectator from the risk of inspiration and invention. (*LV*, 19)

The prose tradition, the director argues, featured an archive of authentic life expressed in a way that is already “poetic” or artistic. Noting the need to advance Italian cinema beyond the banal conventions that lull rather than challenge spectators, Visconti rehearses a common criticism during this era, that is, that fascist cinema was designed as a form of distraction, wrapping spectators in a prophylactic bubble that kept them out of contact with the truth. This point would be expressed more explicitly in the image of the decomposing bodies from the essay “Cadavers,” a sardonic portrayal of the world of cinema as populated by the walking dead, stumbling about “in the belief that they are alive” (*LV*, 21–22). Throughout “Tradition and Invention,” Visconti underscores the vitality of the literary artifact, an instrument for realism that fulfilled film’s capacity to respect life and “tell the stories of living men,” as famously stated in “Anthropomorphic Cinema.”

“Tradition and Invention” is also prescriptive in nature: “In such a situation it is natural for those who sincerely believe in the filmmaker, to turn their eyes with nostalgia to the great narrative constructions of the classics of the European novel and to consider them today as a source of an even truer inspiration. It is good to have the courage to say truer, even if some might accuse our affirmation of impotency or at least scarce “cinematographic” purity” (*LV*, 19). That literary-based films are somehow weakened by their essential duality—film and literature together, both or neither—references adaptation’s odd position in the history of medium-specific ideas and a preference that each art form adhere to its unique dimensions. Yet in considering the possibility that a literary-inspired cinema might actually be “truer” to human life than a documentary cinema, Visconti promotes a cinema that is not purely indexical. Turning toward an Aristotelian notion of mimesis, the director argues that cinema is not required to copy nature or an “imitation of men doing something,” but can refashion or reconfigure the “essence of reality” in narrative form (Bacon 1998, 30–31). Although today this differentiation between documentary (naturalism) and narrative film (realism) might seem self-evident, in the 1940s when “Tradition and Invention” was written, filmmakers were still examining various models of cinema in their attempt to craft a new, nonfascist cinema in Italy. As demonstrated in part I, what resulted in neorealism would not conclude

a search for “a certain cinema, in a certain direction,” to use the words of neorealism’s greatest theorist, Cesare Zavattini. Instead, it was a platform for the continued discussion of cinema, reality, and truth that continued in the decades to come.

In “Tradition and Invention,” Visconti suggests that author and auteur imbibe an artistic imaginary based on the same real geographic spaces. This is evidenced by the next section of the essay, where he declares his own presence as the primary “focalizer” (dominant origin of perspective) of the physical place of Sicily and is simultaneously a reader and interpreter of Verga’s literary works. Significantly, this interpreter is an emotional one—an observer who not only reads but “falls in love” with another author. This affective quality is decisive:

With a head full of these thoughts, walking around one day in the streets of Catania and crossing the plane of Caltagirone on a windy morning, I fell in love with Giovanni Verga. To me, a Lombard reader, accustomed by traditional custom to the clear rigor of Manzonian fantasy, the primitive and gigantic world of the fishermen of Aci Trezza and the shepherds of Marineo always appeared elevated in an imaginative and violent epic: to my Lombard eyes, contented by my land’s sky “così bello quand’è bello,” Verga’s Sicily appeared truly as the island of Ulysses, an island of adventures and lively passions, located immobile and proud against the Ionian breakers. (*LV*, 19)

This image of Sicily is unquestionably that of an actual geographic place (the streets of Catania; the Caltagirone highland). But it is also from Verga’s Sicily and the fishermen of Acitrezza who populated *The House by the Medlar Tree*, then his film *The Earth Trembles* (fig. I.3).

Most important, Sicily is that which is perceived by the artist, just one link in an ancient chain of interlocutors who have viewed, visualized, and represented the island. Visconti’s vision and imagination are interconnected with that of Homer and his *Odyssey*, where Sicily was the mythical home of the Laestrygonians and the Cyclops. Together, these multiple interpreters link their representations of Sicily in the literary tradition in an “infinite regress of intertextual borrowings,” with Visconti furthermore identifying himself with author Alessandro Manzoni’s northern “Lombard reader,” whose rational “clear rigor” he contrasts the “primitive” and “lively passions” of the island as constructed by Verga (Marcus 1993, 26). This confession of love is followed by a series of other emotional sensations



Figure I.3. Poster for *The Earth Trembles* (Luchino Visconti, 1948).

stirred by the specific thought of *The House by the Medlar Tree* (“Thus, I thought of a film on *The House by the Medlar Tree*”), which elicits “the enthusiasm to be able to give a visual and plastic reality to those heroic figures who symbolize all of the allusive and secret power without its abstract or rigid detachment” (*LV*, 19). On this overdetermination of sound, Visconti reestablishes his creative perspective on the book and Sicily:

I would like to immediately note that if one day I have the good luck and the power to produce the film I have dreamed up on *The House by the Medlar Tree*, the most valid justification for my effort will certainly be the illusion that touched my

soul in a distant hour, convincing me that for all spectators just as for myself, the mere sounds of those names—padron ‘Ntoni Malavoglia, Bastianazzo, la Longa, Sant’Agata, “La provvidenza”—and of those places—Aci Trezza, il Capo dei Mulini, il Rotolo, la Sciara—will succeed in opening wide a fabulous and magic scenario where words and gestures cannot but have the religious elevation of the things that are essential to our human charity. (*LV*, 19–20)

That he finds a musical, auditory solution to this representational challenge is noteworthy, returning us to the beginning of this introduction, when the director underscores his desire to translate the rhythms of Verga’s text cinematically. In its polytextuality, reference to textual rhythm (like the “spirit” of a text), and palimpsestic notion of Sicily in literature (from Homer to Verga), “Tradition and Invention” anticipated twenty-first-century tendencies in the study of adaptation, where scholars have moved past text-to-screen analyses that list the various media-specific capacities of literature (telling verbally) and film (showing visually). As Thomas Leitch has argued, traditional studies inevitably beget the same conclusion, that “it wasn’t like that in the book,” perpetuating dated notions that reading and writing be privileged over filming and viewing (Leitch 2003, 154). When such “traditional” studies began is significant. While Anglo-American scholars frequently remark that George Bluestone’s 1957 book *Novel into Film* constitutes the seminal text for adaptation studies, European thinkers were already contemplating adaptation in the first years of the twentieth century. Anton Kaes observes a lively discussion about adaptation in German public debate as early as 1909 (Kaes and Levin 1987). Already in 1911, Arthur Schnitzler had prepared his novel *The Veil of Pierrette* for screen, and in 1913 he finished the script for Holger Madsen’s film version of *Liebelei* (Tinazzi 2007, 11). In France, Paul Laffitte created La Film d’Art in 1908, a company that employed members of the Comédie Française and eventually produced the *Cahiers du mois*, in which studies of adaptation appeared as early as 1925 (Bragaglia 1993, 9). The year 1908 was when an Italian production house based in Milan, Saffi-Luca Comerio, produced adaptations of Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* and Francesco Mastriani’s *Buried Alive* (Ripari 2015, 159). Beyond thinkers like Canudo, over the course of cinema’s first few decades, Italian writers from across the spectrum sought work in the “promised land” of cinema that would take Italian filmmaking through the crisis years of the 1920s and into the 1930s (Brunetta 2008, 27).

Adaptation did not lose its relevance during the transition to sound and the birth of the modern Italian film industry. With the fascist creation of the Venice Film Festival 1932 and Italy's hypermodern film studio (Cinecittà) and film academy (Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia) in 1935, Italian cinema was on course to become a global player in international film production, partially fueled by literary-based films. Luigi Pirandello, Mario Soldati, and later Cesare Zavattini and Giacomo Debenedetti all migrated toward cinema in the form of screenwriting, where they benefited from the advent of the spoken word in the age of sound. These figures created not only adaptations but also original screenplays, displaying how literary films grew from the same processes as nonliterary ones. After World War II, adaptation was folded seamlessly into neorealism's "sudden flourishing in Italy of a mass practice of storytelling," and the film-literature relationship was one of the many ways scholars and critics attempted to define what was new about neorealism (Re 1991, 37). "It was a period in which the cinema had yet to be legitimate as culture and as art," remarked Carlo Lizzani, "And so we needed this literary ancestry . . . We were like castaways. Every one of us was searching for a handhold in literature" (Lizzani 1983, 108). From a nonexhaustive list of adaptations during neorealism, Mario Guidorizzi notes that of Italian films made between 1939 and 1955, 218 of about 1,200 films were adaptations (Guidorizzi 1983, 167). Despite the stalwart positions of those who rejected a cinema based on literature (Cesare Zavattini, Carlo Bo, Luigi Chiarini), many of neorealism's most iconic films relied on literary antecedents (Marcus 1993, 4–7).

Beginning with this neorealist moment, *Luchino Visconti and the Alchemy of Adaptation* examines how Visconti's adaptations meander from their sources in unexpected ways, moving downstream through the landscape of Italian cinema that they fed and were fed by. Alchemy, the powerful transformation of one thing into another through a mysterious process, refers to that "opening wide a fabulous and magic scenario" that appears in the conclusion of "Tradition and Invention." Incorporating literature and cinema, filmmaker and film industry, individual and nation was typical of Italian cinema from the early 1940s until the mid-1970s, where an interconnected ecosystem of creative exchange developed into one of the world's leading film industries. In this way, this book seeks to subvert monolithic notions of Visconti, who has often been celebrated for an intransigent adherence to realism, Marxism, or decadence, depending on the point of view. Reflecting on cinema through literature allowed Visconti to experiment with various techniques associated with literary

authors while pressing the boundaries of cinematic representation. Rather than a means for transporting any tradition of literature to film, adaptation becomes a process by which Visconti laid cinema bare, exposing its essential features and arguing for its primacy among dramatic forms. As this book explores in all of its variety, adaptation was the central platform for the spectacle that was Visconti's art, where literary rhythms echoed through the sounds of cinema.