

# Opera, Offstage Visconti and Bertolucci Between Reflection and Performance

Giorgio Biancorosso  
University of Hong Kong

**Abstract** Italian filmmakers have long shown interest in opera as both an aspect of their cultural heritage and occasion for imaginative storytelling. Taking the trope of the soirée at the opera as my focus, I show how the cinematic representation of operatic performance has inspired the virtuosic display of cinema-specific effects and with it the acknowledgement of the film audience. Examples include Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution* (1964) and *La Luna* (1979), and Visconti's *Senso* (1954).

**Keywords** Opera Film. Visconti. Bertolucci. Performance. Script.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Script as Collective Knowledge. – 3 *La luna* (1979): *Il trovatore*, Act I, scene 2 (Teatro dell'Opera, Rome). – 4 *Prima della rivoluzione* (1964): *Macbeth* (Teatro Regio, Parma). – 5 *Senso* (1954): *Il trovatore*, Act III, Scene 2; Act IV, Scene 1 (Teatro la Fenice, Venice).

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Balázs Redux

This essay began as a survey of the use of operatic music in the cinematic oeuvre of Luchino Visconti, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Marco Bellocchio: three directors who either for geographical reasons or because of their family background – or both – claimed to have a personal relationship with opera (and particularly the work of Giuseppe Verdi). As work got under way, I soon began to narrow down the scope of my research to just a handful of examples of, in Béla Balázs's words, "reproduction[s] of an ordinary operatic performance" (1952, 276). In the event, I settled on one excerpt each from Visconti's *Senso* (1954) and Bertolucci's *Prima della Rivoluzione* (1964) and *La Luna* (1979), respectively.<sup>1</sup> Balázs distinguishes between the

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film as a historical record of past performances (“the film of an opera”) and the opera-film as an art form in its own right (“film opera”) (1952, 275). Strictly speaking, my examples are representative of neither. Like a story within a story, the operatic performances are cast in a larger filmic narrative. However, I did make strategic use of Balázs’s intuition that the stylized world of opera is fundamentally incompatible with the “unutilized, photographed ‘natural’ [sic] world of the film”, and that therefore filmmakers ought to capture opera in its original environment – the opera house – so as to offer a “faithful reproduction of a familiar reality” (276).<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Beyond Reflectionism

*Pace* Balázs, soon I also began to think of my examples as recreations rather than mere reproductions. As such, they prompted me to ask questions about performance: not just operatic performance and how it translates into film but also cinematic performance. But is the term ‘performance’, when applied to cinema, ever going to be more than just a metaphorical flourish, a nice turn of phrase? Can the term transcend its traditional association to acting? How to redefine performance with reference to a medium that would seem to resist it? These questions reflect my interest in redefining performance as ritual behaviour or a framed event that unfolds before an audience irrespective of the oft-mentioned divide – or blurred lines – between liveness and mediation (Auslander 2023). In offering what I hope is a persuasive account of cinematic performance, I also provide a rationale for the embrace of opera on the part of two filmmakers whose career is symptomatic of the attractions of cinema to opera or, to paraphrase Tom Gunning, opera as cinematic attraction (cf. Gunning 1990). I have chosen to privilege the cinematic recreation of operatic performances to counter the tendency to interpret operatic excerpts as a pool of characters and motifs that may be held up as a mirror to the subject of the film in which they are embedded. As against this *reflectionist* approach, in what follows I showcase operatic performance as a string of events – the musicians’ work, mechanics of theatrical production, and the performance of spectatorship – that inspire the performative display of cinematic storytelling.

## 2 The Script as Collective Knowledge

### 2.1 Re-Enactment

Music is the source of the ordinary or some will say primary meaning of the term ‘performance’. This meaning resonates in cinema as well. When we think of cinema and/as performance, we may be referring to the live presentation of so-called silent films, whether it involves a pianist, orchestra, live sound effects or a narrator (as in Japanese cinema during the silent era).

<sup>1</sup> As will be apparent, the analyses unfold in reverse chronological order, ending with what I see as the archetype (*Senso*) of the re-creation of opera in Visconti and Bertolucci’s films.

<sup>2</sup> A representative example of the type is Ingmar Bergman’s *The Magic Flute* (1976). On Bergman’s deliberate embrace of stylization and theatricality, see Ibáñez-García 2021.

Or we may be referring to the virtuosic display of a technical feature or element of the apparatus (be it lighting or camera movement, for example). Expanded cinema is also construable as performance: the conjuring of unique, unrepeatable situations as the result of the manipulation, in the here and now of the screening event, of the projection and playback apparatuses of a particular venue. We may also use 'performance' reflexively, finally, to indicate extreme or especially involved types of audience participation. Classic examples range from the participatory and interactive mode of spectatorship that used to be common in Indian cinemas to cult film viewership. My own definition of performance follows from anthropology and sociology rather than music or media studies, and posits that cinema's performativity lies in the play between a script and its realization. Such play takes the form of ritualized behaviour: the re-enactment of an event as informed by a protocol or set of conventions (cf. Goffman 1990; Schechner 2006). By 'script' I do not mean the screenplay of a film but rather a shared sense of how a certain incident or topical situation unfolds. This definition can be traced back to the ordinary meaning of performance in music, too: the score and in particular a known musical work is the script and the performance is its realization.<sup>3</sup> But at the same time it also differs significantly from it on account of the staggered, scattered and highly mediated nature of film at both the production and the reception ends, a dimension film shares with recorded music rather than musical performance as ordinarily understood.

## 2.2 The Role of Conventions

The relationship between a script and its realization is dynamic in that it is underpinned by evolving conditions of productions and sets of expectations. The extent to which the unfolding of a given realization conforms to a script depends on what expectations one brings to the negotiating table, which is to say that the script is not a static object authored by the filmmaking team, let alone the individual film auteur, but is a live matrix that exists in the public domain. One important implication is that genre films, adaptations and remakes are especially good candidates for the type of performance I am positing here – as are topical situations.<sup>4</sup> An even more significant point is that performance is emergent: neither the intrinsic property of the film work nor solely the quality of a spectator's experience. It emerges out of an encounter and manifests itself as a type of relation. Performance is in constant flux, unpredictable, mercurial, but also pervasive. It can be spotted in unlikely places, and argued for. It cuts across not just the dichotomy between liveness and recording but also that between immediacy and mediation.

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<sup>3</sup> For an early articulation of the relevance of the notion of 'script' in the study of musical performance, cf. Cook 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Think of how Scorsese revisits the televisual trope of the boxing match in *Raging Bull* (1980), for example, or Visconti's recreation of a seemingly routine visit to the barber in *Death in Venice* (1971).

## 2.3 Framing the Event

In the three examples that follow we shall see Bertolucci and Visconti ‘riff’ on a known script, or established trope: the soirée at the opera, trope that film has inherited not from opera but rather the nineteenth-century novel (Newark 2011). It is precisely their status as representations of performances in the ordinary sense of the word that drew my attention to them as embodiments of cinematic performances: the record of textual decisions, technical solutions and various enactments reconstituted as performance via the imaginative perception of the spectator (cf. Biancorosso 2018). Borrowing from the toolkit of opera analysis, I will interpret my examples as set pieces. I use the term to evoke a musical number that, unlike recitative, has a set tempo, meter, key and exhibits a fixed, and predictable, formal design but also in the sense of a framed event, one associated to a set firm of societal expectations and around which representational codes have gradually accrued (as they have, over decades of live television broadcasts, around a boxing match).

### 3 *La luna* (1979): *Il trovatore*, Act I, Scene 2 (Teatro dell’Opera, Rome)

#### 3.1 “Let’s Go Back to the Opera”

There is no question that filmmakers themselves have encouraged reflectionist readings. This is especially the case in Hollywood cinema. Consider the following object lesson: the performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana* that functions as the background to the ending of *The Godfather Part III* (F.F. Coppola, 1990). The film is not parasitic on prior knowledge of Mascagni’s opera. The opera’s lurid subject matter and demonstrative mise-en-scène are sufficient in making sure that anyone can grasp the echoes between the onstage action and the film. The putative reason for the inclusion of the opera, the debut of Michael’s son (Anthony) as an opera singer, is a mere *alibi*. Its true *raison d’être*, one surmises, is that *Cavalleria Rusticana* allegorizes the story of the film and in so doing brings the saga to a close in the home turf of Western Sicily (where the Corleone family come from).<sup>5</sup> But Michael is no Hamlet. The gratuitousness or, which comes to the same thing, unconcealed instrumentality of *Cavalleria Rusticana* is exposed in a memorable, and unwittingly funny, line spoken by Michael: “This Pope has powerful enemies. We may not be in time to save him. Let’s go back to the opera”.

#### 3.2 Oedipal Attachments

Something akin to the logic of the alibi also accounts for Bertolucci’s use of opera in *La luna*. The female protagonist, Catherine (Jill Clayburgh), is an American soprano travelling to Italy for work with her adolescent son Joe

<sup>5</sup> *Cavalleria Rusticana* is set in Sicily, and the performance takes place at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo.

(Matthew Barry). The film unfolds as the chronicle of the ups and downs of the quasi-incestuous son-mother relationship, and features two major operatic sequences (both of which feature Catherine as *prima donna*). The first is the end of Act I of Verdi's *Il trovatore*, set in Rome's Teatro dell'Opera.<sup>6</sup> The second interlaces the finale of *Un ballo in maschera* with the ending of the film itself: the reunion between Joe and his biological father (Tomas Milian), having his adopted father died in New York just as Catherine was about to leave for Europe. The performance of *Il trovatore* is prefaced by the scene of Joe's sexual initiation inside a movie theatre during a screening of *Niagara*, starring Marilyn Monroe, and directed by Henry Hathaway (1953). As if to colour this rite of passage with a hint of the magic, the ceiling of the theatre suddenly opens up to reveal a clear sky with a full moon. At this juncture, the boy suddenly realizes that his mother is performing *Il trovatore* that very night – a classic instance of 'post-nut' clarity. His memory lapse mirrors her own forgetting that it is his birthday. Determined to see his mother nonetheless, Joe leaves the cinema (the Teatro Adriano, in Piazza Cavour) with his female companion. An elliptical cut takes us to the other side of town, at the Teatro dell'Opera. The performance has already started. Joe stops to catch a glimpse of his mother from behind the glass panel of the foyer doors [fig. 1].



Figure 1 *La luna* (1979). Joe relishes the view of his mother impersonating Leonora in *Il trovatore*

She is performing *Tacea la notte splendida*, in splendid isolation, enveloped by a starry sky complete with a full moon. Joe eventually moves inside and sits on the floor in rapt attention (not without scolding a paying spectator for chatting during the performance). Following Michal Grover-Friedlander, one could reimagine the episode as the display of an archetypal, rather than specific, opera, and reimagine the moon as seen through the gaze of the young boy as the visual displacement of the operatic voice (cf.

<sup>6</sup> The backstage action and portions of the trio that ends the act were most likely shot in the Teatro Cinema Il Vascello in the Monteverde Vecchio neighbourhood of Rome (not far from Bertolucci's own home along the Tiber).

Grover-Friedlander 2005).<sup>7</sup> In a reflectionist reading, one encouraged by the director himself, one could view the entire episode in psychoanalytical terms (cf. Lesley Caldwell 1994). The choice of this particular excerpt from this particular opera would be accounted for by the oedipal resonances of the libretto, the uncertainty over the father that casts a shadow over the relationship between the two male leads, and of course the moon as the plenitudinous symbol of the boy's erotic attachment toward his mother (as well as his unconscious search for the biological father). Joe's oedipal attachment to the mother would also explain his apparent displeasure at seeing his tacit dialogue with her during the cantabile disrupted by her – to him premature – departure from the stage and the entrance of Conte di Luna (at which point he goes backstage to look for her).

### 3.3 A World of Plaster and Cellophane Wraps

Bertolucci's realization transcends the psychoanalytical plot that, if one is to believe the director, provided the initial impetus. The first part of the sequence, set in the stalls during the cantabile, is representative of the film as a whole. It is staid and gimmicky: the record of a stumble more than a performance. It is when Joe goes backstage that we begin to notice a director relishing the opportunity to *perform cinema*. Bertolucci is inspired by the challenge of rendering the wide-eyed innocence of Joe but also the unmasking of the opera stage as a world of plaster and cellophane wraps, people in prosaic, civilian clothes going matter-of-factly about their job, and fallible star-singers in need of the prompter at every other line. The decision to capture a performance in the making through the lenses of magical realism yields a novel reiteration of the trope of the soirée at the opera. Particularly memorable is the pun on Manrico, the tenor role, who not only sings *Deserto sulla terra* offstage, as indicated by the libretto, but also offscreen (we're initially bound to Joe's perspective, so we only see him when Joe notices him). More striking still is the dwelling on the prompter which doubles or better splits our awareness of time passing: as we mentally prepare for the next utterance we are simultaneously experiencing the current one in the here and now of the sung performance.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.4 In and Out of the Changing Room

A child-like enthusiasm for theatrical performance, and in particular the sheer madness of staging an opera, is nothing new, of course. One need only think of the backstage musical or the opera scene in Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), which is simultaneously also a celebration of the Hollywood studio as the greatest toy ever devised. *La luna* injects new life in this trope, too, via a surprising ending. Following an abrupt cut to the changing room, where the music is piped through the PA system, we realize Joe had in fact soon

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<sup>7</sup> Grover-Friedlander's understanding of the attraction of cinema to opera is guided not by a reflectionist but rather a *metamorphic* principle.

<sup>8</sup> For an interpretation of the prompter in contemporary opera, cf. Grover-Friedlander 2011.

lost interest in what was happening backstage. The camera had lingered on the performance more than he had, investing the images of the prompter, the backstage paraphernalia, and the ensuing trio with a significance they did not have. The spectacle of the supreme artificiality of opera was, as far as Joe is concerned, merely a function of his desire to be close to his mother. Catherine and Leonora are one. Once Manrico and the Conte di Luna compete for the attention of Leonora/Mother, he retreats.<sup>9</sup> When the second act begins, Joe is still in the changing room. But it is only when the camera closes in onto the PA loudspeaker that we hear the music. The sync point between the zoom and the appearance of the music is the playfully exaggerated take on Joe's ability to reshape the reality around him: his denial of the performance taking place next door.

#### 4 ***Prima della rivoluzione* (1964): *Macbeth* (Teatro Regio, Parma)**

##### 4.1 **Prodigal Boy**

Verdi's presence has long been deemed central to the definition of Bertolucci's cinema.<sup>10</sup> As is well known, Verdi is from Busseto, between Parma and Piacenza. Bertolucci himself, while born in Parma, lived at a farm outside the city proper. Inevitably, much has been made of the presumed link between them, and between them and their ancestral homes.<sup>11</sup> The story of Bertolucci's Verdi is a subset of the larger myth of his Parma, a city he nonetheless cannot have known too well by the time he left when he moved with his family to Rome at the age of thirteen. In the Rome of the economic boom, and especially the fiercely competitive film industry, the tag of 'boy from Parma' must have suited Bertolucci perfectly. It was a quick and easy identifier, and in going along with it he played the tag to splendid effect so as to shape the reception of his work.<sup>12</sup> When he returned to the city like a prodigal son to shoot *Prima della Rivoluzione*, in 1963, the city did not quite embrace him but connections both old and new proved handy. A case in point is the penultimate sequence of the film, shot in Parma's Teatro Regio, which marks the definitive end of the relationship between Fabrizio (Francesco Barilli) and his aunt Gina (Adriana Asti).

<sup>9</sup> I note in passing that in Bertolucci's staging of the scene, Manrico and the Conte di Luna wear the same clothes. The detail was most likely inspired by the production staged by Luca Ronconi in Florence in 1977 (Riccardo Muti was the conductor). Emilio Sala notes how the identical costume points to the tragic premise of the opera: Azucena's fatal and inexplicable mishap (see Sala 2024, 72). Dramaturgical implications of the costume aside, what interests me here is that injects new life into a difficult nexus of the opera narrative.

<sup>10</sup> On the use of Verdi's music in *The Spider's Strategem*, see Caldwell 1994; Crisp-Hillmann 2001.

<sup>11</sup> The most powerful statement of the myth of Verdi's ties to the Po Valley is Barilli 2000. Bruno was the great uncle of Francesco Barilli, who plays Fabrizio, Bertolucci's alter ego, in *Prima della Rivoluzione*.

<sup>12</sup> Framing Bertolucci's work through the lens of its reception outside of Italy, Caldwell considers how "specifics which [...] are cherished by Bertolucci as evocative of his personal past" are diminished by their association to clichés about Italy (Caldwell 1994, 224). One such cliché is that Italians love opera.



## 4.2 Fuzzy Dating

The sequence is at least partially the record of a production of Verdi's *Macbeth* that premiered on 10 October 1963. Or is it a reconstruction? The opening shots show the audience entering the opera house and call to mind a news bulletin (they look like archival images today). Matteo Giuggioli interprets the newsreel quality of the opening as "one of the techniques used in the film" (Giuggioli 2019, 21). I agree that the choice is in keeping with what he calls the "stylistic mobility" of *Prima della Rivoluzione* but I also wonder whether Bertolucci actually gained access to television footage of an earlier performance and spliced it with images he himself shot with film cameras at a later stage. Alessandro Marini correctly identifies a poster of *Luisa Miller* in shot #77 of the film (Marini 2012, 189).<sup>13</sup> *Luisa Miller* opened the 1962-63 season on 26 December 1962.<sup>14</sup> In the intertitles that accompany the images, Bertolucci kept the same date.<sup>15</sup> This is in keeping with the temporal setting of the film (1962). The narrow time span of the story casts into relief the urgency of the protagonist's return into the rank and file of the city's upper bourgeoisie, his repudiation of communism and his seemingly premature decision to marry a girl his age (after a long and potentially scandalous relationship with Gina). While the date remains the same, Bertolucci changed the title of the opera. Was this because he found the story of *Macbeth* a more significant parallel to that of his film, as both Giuggioli and Marini seem to believe? Or was it rather because he was shooting in Parma at the same time as the Teatro Regio scheduled the premiere of *Macbeth*? *Prima della rivoluzione* was filmed between September and November of 1963. The theatre's records tell us that the performance of a new production of *Macbeth* took place on 10 October as part of a festival meant to mark the 150th anniversary of the Verdi's birth year in 1963 (Verdi was born in 1813).<sup>16</sup> The production also stood out because it featured sets by the painter Renato Guttuso.<sup>17</sup> Guttuso was by then already a fixture of the Roman artistic scene of which Bertolucci was also part. Like Bertolucci a self-professed leftie, Guttuso wore the hat of the engag   artist much more comfortably than the young filmmaker, who was still struggling to come to terms with his bourgeois upbringing. Guttuso may have had a hand in allowing the young filmmaker to shoot on the eve of the performance.

<sup>13</sup> It goes without saying that such detailed reconstruction of the profilmic is made possible by modern playback technology.

<sup>14</sup> See "Casa della musica" here: <https://www.lacasadellamusica.it/it-IT/Archivi-1.aspx>, where, to make things more confusing, the year is incorrectly identified as "1963" when it should read "1962".

<sup>15</sup> The intertitles read: "26 Dicembre 1962 / MACBETH / Inaugurazione della stagione lirica del Teatro Regio".

<sup>16</sup> Records also indicate that there was a second performance on 13 October. The conductor was Franco Capuana and the stage director Filippo Crivelli.

<sup>17</sup> On the occasion, Guttuso also left behind a portrait of Verdi which to this day functions as the logo of the yearly Verdi Festival.



### 4.3 Regio Sacrificio

No other episode of *Prima della rivoluzione* exhibits a similar spur-of-the-moment quality nor the interlacing of drama and documentary that is so striking a feature of the episode. The Teatro Regio is the hierarchically ordered foil to the public park where Fabrizio, in the immediately preceding segment, witnesses a rally sponsored by the communist party. The opera performance, in turn, paves the way for the film's deeply ambivalent ending. The celebration of the wedding between Fabrizio and Clelia that ends the film is, at least nominally, in keeping with the genre of the comedy. Yet it comes at a high cost: the sacrifice of Fabrizio and Gina's liaison. It is in the opera house that this sacrifice is consummated. But the film goes beyond this ironic denouement. Alternating between long shots of the theatre during the performance and closer, cutaway shots of the film's protagonists Bertolucci is, on closer scrutiny, cross cutting between two different stages of the filmmaking process: the images of the December 1962 and October 1963 performances on the one hand and the subsequent film shooting done with the benefit of rehearsals and full technical support on the other. The grain of the images set in the corridors and the family box of the opera house is different: the backgrounds are more polished, the mise-en-scène more orderly and deliberate, so much so that they almost seem to have been shot in studio hence not in Parma or at any rate not during an actual performance [fig. 2].



**Figure 2** *Prima della rivoluzione* (1964). The breakup of Gina and Fabrizio during the performance of Macbeth

### 4.4 Recomposing Opera

In *Prima della rivoluzione* Bertolucci is engaging in a contest with such Nouvelle Vague directors as Jean-Luc Godard but also, and perhaps more decisively, the Truffaut of *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) or *Antoine et Colette* (1962). In the latter film, the two would-be lovers famously attend a performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. The episode features both a cut in action from one movement of the symphony to another and a to-and-fro play of pointed glances and feigned indifference between Antoine

and Colette across the fully packed hall. If we think of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* as an instance of what Goethe called referred to as 'invisible theatre' then the sequence will appear to be an irreverent realization of the drama implicit in the work's program: the unrequited love of the opiate artist. But Truffaut's images also rewrite the symphony in suggesting sync points between the music and the actors' gestures. While the music imparts its own tempo and rhythms to the onscreen action it also plays off the rhythm of the editing as well. Bertolucci recomposes the opera more radically. The whole of *Macbeth* unfolds elliptically as a montage of discrete audio fragments stitched together.<sup>18</sup> No attempt is being made to smooth over the cuts. There is a conspicuous sync point at the entrance of Gina into the house (we hear Lady Macbeth's cavatina at that point).<sup>19</sup> But in the main the elisions in the music do not synchronize with the subdivisions of the visual sequence. The artificiality and arbitrariness of the temporal compression is made palpable. Most significantly, finally, the inability to shoot any footage of the onstage action, perhaps in compliance with house rules, is repackaged by the director as the deliberate indeed striking choice to leave the performance offscreen for the entire duration of the sequence.<sup>20</sup> After all, the true theatre of the action is the area offstage.

## 5 ***Senso* (1954): *Il trovatore*, Act III, Scene 2; Act IV, Scene 1 (Teatro la Fenice, Venice)**

### 5.1 The Audience, Onstage

In recasting the stage not merely as secondary but indeed incidental, Bertolucci follows the example of a famous precedent: the performance of *Il trovatore* at La Fenice that marks the beginning of *Senso*. Visconti wastes no time in introducing the setting. As the beginning credits roll, we are inside the opera house, the scene between Leonora and Manrico that ends Act III already under way.<sup>21</sup> Manrico gets wind of Azucena's arrest and

<sup>18</sup> In a 2005 interview, Adriana Asti says that Bertolucci deviated from the script and improvised new lines or an action as a matter of course. The point must also apply to dubbing. Marini observes that Bertolucci also recomposed the dialogue as heard in the cutting copy (Marini 2012, 205). The interview and the cutting copy are featured as bonus material in the 2023, Ripley's Home DVD video of the film. The interview can also be streamed on youtube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYWRdoVVod4>.

<sup>19</sup> Giuggioli (2019, 23) also notes the sync-point, and reads it as a commentary on Gina via Verdi or better, Shakespeare. On the use of *Macbeth* as a source of allusions to the narrative of the film, see especially Kolker 1985, ch. 2. As my analysis makes, I hope, clear, I am not especially sanguine about any programmatic resonances between the music of the opera and the film's story if only because they implicitly posit that, first, the opera performance is merely a vehicle for plot lines and characterization and, second, that there is a degree of separation between the performance and the film proper (which the opera allegedly glosses from a position of epistemic distance). I rather view Stendhal's source novel, and especially his use of the opera house as a setting, as the more pertinent intertextual reference. On this, see Marini 2012, 186.

<sup>20</sup> The film only shows the singers briefly as they take the bow at what is ostensibly the end of Act I. Judging their costumes more germane to a comic/popular opera, Marini suggests that Bertolucci is using images from yet another performance. On the basis of the cutting copy, he also observes that Bertolucci omitted two shots of the performance of *Macbeth*: the witches's sabbath at the beginning of Act I and Lady Macbeth's aria in "her fifth scene" [sic, 211]. It is more likely that the latter refers to the cavatina in Act I, scene 2.

<sup>21</sup> Opening with an ending is a most effective means of beginning a story in *medias res*.

throws himself into a cabaletta ("Di quella pira..."). The film proper begins with the immediate aftermath, having the chorus brought the cabaletta to an end. Voices from the upper circle precipitate an explosion of patriotic, independentist fervour inside the theatre. The episode is not in Camillo Boito's short story which Visconti and Suso Cecchi-D'Amico used as the source for the screenplay. Nor is it reliant on recorded information. While not documented in the strict sense of the term, the episode is nevertheless verisimilar. We know from a wide range of sources that *Il trovatore*, and especially the cabaletta that ends Act III, did in fact play out as a thinly veiled call to arms during the third war of independence. Visconti himself says as much in an interview for a French television program devoted to Maria Callas.<sup>22</sup> A heart-felt homage, the interview also provides an explanation for the choice of placing Contessa Serpieri (Alida Valli) in a box to the side and slightly behind the line of the proscenium. The unusual vantage point was one Visconti knew all too well. There, on 23 February 1953, he had attended a performance of *Il trovatore* with Callas cast as Leonora. Visconti recalls how, at the beginning of Act IV, he saw Callas emerge from the backstage in profile and walk toward the proscenium against the penumbra of the silent crowd. The roles temporarily reversed, he felt as if he were onstage whereas the singer was offstage.<sup>23</sup>

## 5.2 One Hundred and Eighty Degrees

What Visconti does not address in that interview is the remarkable technical feat that underpins the credits. In one long, unedited shot, the camera advances from above the stalls toward the proscenium only to rotate almost one hundred and eighty degrees on its axis and eventually show the audience (as if the latter were its true target). The camera movement is the brilliant visual manifestation of the process of drawing an analogy between the opera stage and the area offstage. It is obvious that the cinematic recreation of an opera performance had a galvanizing effect. Visconti and his team must have been enthralled with the then recently restored Teatro La Fenice and the potential the interior offered for visual compositions of the most audacious kind [fig. 3].<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Conversations avec Maria Callas*, with Maria Callas, Pierre Desgraupes, and Luchino Visconti, ORTF (20 April 1969).

<sup>23</sup> Visconti's tale is corroborated, albeit in slightly different terms, by an anecdote told by Franco Zeffirelli (1954).

<sup>24</sup> As if to corroborate Balázs's idea of the opera film as historical record, when La Fenice burned down in 1996, the images of *Senso* were used as evidence during the restoration.



**Figure 3** *Senso* (1954). An audacious view of the Teatro la Fenice

Also compelling are the subtler signs of the impact of cinema-specific techniques in Visconti's rewriting of *Il trovatore*. For example, the framing of the transition between the tempo di mezzo and the cabaletta expedites the exit of Leonora and with it the demise of the Act III finale's romantic interest.<sup>25</sup> Most innovative, perhaps, is Visconti's choice to use opera, that most artificial and cumbersome of art forms, to establish not merely a realist but for the time shockingly quasi-documentary register. The director's interest in the reality of musical performance is most apparent at the beginning of Act IV. The aptly chosen length of the shot, nicely calibrated sound perspective, and carefully rendered impression of the hush descending upon the audience following the climax of the previous act finale draws us into the space of La Fenice with the force of an illusionist's trick. We almost hear the murmuring of the audience in the house and the rubbing of their clothes against the velvet of their seats. It's a moment of almost Bazinian adherence to the doctrine of cinema as the trace of the real. This precedent sets an impossibly high standard of realism that the film will in vain attempt to replicate in the gritty shots sets in Venice's dirty back alleys, the battle of Custoza, or the execution of Franz Mahler.<sup>26</sup>

**25** Leonora remains in fact onstage during Manrico's cabaletta but we cannot see her as she remains offscreen until, near the end of the number, an aerial shot shows the choir stepping onto the stage.

**26** On the glossiness of the battle scenes, see Rondolino 1981, 305-6. Needless to say, my reading also runs counter to a long critical consensus according to which the opening sequence imbues the remainder of *Senso* with an alleged operatic quality. After the operatic preamble, the film changes register entirely and morphs into a romantic melodrama in the Ophulsean and Sirkean tradition (as is also reflected in the use of Bruckner in the soundtrack).

### 5.3 *Coup de théâtre*

With the benefit of hindsight, we know the performance to be a set up for the riot of the patriots positioned in the upper circle. Yet this is only subtly hinted at in the course of the sequence. We, the film audience, are not in on the plot until very late. Like the cut to Joe idling about in his mother's changing room in *La luna*, the outcome of the elaborate opening of *Senso* is meant to come across as a surprise that causes an adjustment: the realization that we had been looking at the opera under one aspect, aligned with the slightly detached or worse clueless Austrian officers, perhaps, whereas a whole other section of the audience was engaging with the same performance under a different aspect. To this audience, the finale of Act III was like a stopwatch marking the time remaining before the two short speeches and the throwing of leaflets. It is a classic instance of a *reversal*, one that brings the swapping of roles between on- and offstage, respectively, to its ultimate fulfilment. But it is also a not-so-veiled address to us, the film spectators, and the role of our horizon of expectations in shaping the scripts that underpin *the performance of cinema*.

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