

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Death in Venice (1971)

By Luchino Visconti

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Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

Death in Venice

Director: Luchino Visconti

Producer: Luchino Visconti

Cinematography: Pasqualino de Santis

Music: Gustav Mahler

Screenplay: Luchino Visconti & Micola Badalucco based on the novella by Thomas Mann.

Costume Designer: Piero Tosi

Cast: Dirk Bogarde (Aschenbach), Bjørn Andresen (Tadzio); Silvana Mangano (Tadzio's mother); Marisa Berenson (Frau von Aschenbach), Mark Burns (Alfred); Romolo Valli (Hotel Manager); Carole André (Esmerelda); Sergio Garfagnoli (Jaschu, Polish youth)

Released: March 1971

Runtime: 130 minutes

.: Commentary: A. Krumm .:

Der bewegte Mann ...

German artists have always had a thing for Venice. The place just sends them. Goethe paid a visit in 1790 and penned the *Venetian Epigrams* for posterity. August von Platen stopped by in 1824 and left the world the *Sonette aus Venedig*. Wagner, on the lamb from his wife Minna and taking a break from his *Lebensabschnittsgefährtin* de jour Mathilde Wesendonck, finished the score for the second act of *Tristan und Isolde* in Venice in 1859 and many years later, having loved the place to death, experienced his final sendoff there in a coffin on a gondola. Nietzsche produced no such enduring deliverables in Venice, but he liked to hang out there and once confided to a friend that "Venice is after all the only city I love."



And the answer? Some, one, or none of the above? Well, maybe, maybe not. Interpretive polemics aside, it seems what we have is a story that is likely to last, having it as we do in double exposure, sculpted by Mann *aus der Marmorasse der Sprache* into exquisite verbal form and distilled by Visconti via striking images into a stunning visual essence. Mann's veneration for his literary ancestors rings out from his prose ("Nie hatte er die Lust des Wortes süßer empfunden, nie so gewusst, dass Eros im Worte sei ..."), and Visconti's fascination with Mann and that tradition shines out from his movie. And how they loved *die unwahrscheinlichste der Städte!*

When it comes to an ending, our auteurs man up. There is no pussyfooting around. Gustav dies... art doesn't save him, nor does philosophy, beauty or passion. He just croaks, alone on the beach, in all his finite banality, a cosmeticized corpse. So, oddly enough, inadvertently or otherwise, they infer a very biblical conclusion, submitting their Gustav to the dictates of a much older text: "It is appointed unto man once to die..."

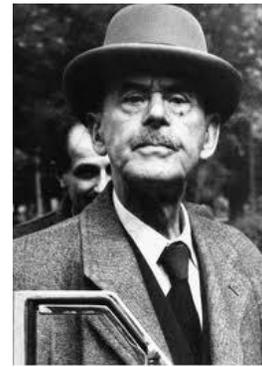
Since Gustav's appointment, the one everyone keeps sooner or later, did occur in that beautiful place called Venice, one possible means of escape from the echo chamber of interpretations would be to listen to August von Platen. Surely he must be saying what Mann and Visconti were trying to say with all those finely wrought words and all that gorgeous film footage, and what everyone else *knows* they were trying to say:

*Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen,
ist dem Tode schon anheimgegeben,
wird für keinen Dienst der Erde taugen*

The unnerving constant through all this diverting beauty is the spectacle of Aschenbach's progressive disintegration, with the apollonian Gustav holding on for dear life as the dionysian Gustav flies apart. Ethos and Logos tag team in an attempt to prevail in this deadly embrace with Eros. The script is largely silent in this regard (other than in the flashbacks where Gustav aestheticizes with his sidekick Alfred), but to concoct his audiovisual variation on Mann's ruminations, Visconti had the considerable advantages of Bogarde's evocative visual vocabulary and Bjorn Andresen's face. So the silence is amply filled with Gustav's eloquently mute, agonized passion and Tadzio's *über* nordic grecism.

It is distinctly possible that the previous paragraph is pretentious nonsense and Dirk Bogarde as Gustav Aschenbach is merely the quintessential dirty old man. (Bogarde sardonically remarked that the film "...was widely misunderstood in distribution circles... Someone in the States wanted to change the boy into a girl, in case people thought ..." Well, go figure. But we are after all dealing with a Mann story and a Visconti film, so that importunate, obnoxiously obese question keeps getting begged: what is the ultimate MEANING? Given the vast library of Death In Venice commentary, we had better leave the door open for penultimate and antepenult candidates as well.

Is Mann's novella pure philosophical fiction probing the boundaries of love, death and desire? A Declaration on the meaning of Art? (*So ist die Schönheit der Weg des Fühlenden zum Geiste...*). And if so has Visconti succeeded in rendering a pure cinematic recapitulation of that philosophy or aesthetic credo? Or has Mann written an Ur-Gay Manifesto engendered by a fleeting, inaugural peek out of the closet in 1912, with Visconti providing self referential commentary? Or is this simply a case of the medium being the message, with each artist bent on showing off his virtuosity and technical mastery?



Thomas Mann
(1875-1955)

Thomas Mann nestled snugly in this tradition, so it is not surprising, factoring in the restless reciprocity of life and art, that in the wake of a 1911 vacation in Venice and the nearly simultaneous and sudden death of the famed composer Gustav Mahler, Mann proceeded to work for over a year on a story about an artist named Gustav Aschenbach who commits *Liebestod* while on vacation in Venice.

Beauty matters, the tradition insists, so having his Gustav expire in that particular city was essentially inevitable. Isolde certainly would have approved. Mann's Gustav was a decidedly crowded personality, since he was Mann, Mahler, Nietzsche, Wagner, Goethe, von Platen, Plato, Socrates and a whole host of other folks. Reading Mann is to risk drowning by intertextuality, so one is well advised to be equipped with a powerful vertical search engine before wading into any of his works.

Luchino Visconti always had a thing for German artists and having had the *beauty matters* meme bequeathed to him by those fellows, he was compelled to add his own entry to the inventory of artistic artifacts inspired by Venice. It should not be surprising that he chose to use Mann's story; as he once mentioned in an interview: "After Goethe, I love Thomas Mann. In one way or another, all my films are dipped in Mann."

Since Mann and Visconti were both enchanted with Mahler, Visconti also dipped his film deeply in the composer, saturating the soundtrack with the Adagietto movement from the Fifth Symphony and culminating with Zarathustra's *Mitternachtslied* from the Third Symphony. Ever since his film was released in 1971 a debate has raged as to whether Visconti was properly faithful to the themes and intellectual architecture of Mann's novella. Given that Visconti was (like his mentor Jean Renoir) a filmmaker's film-

maker, it was given that his own voice and vision would resonate within the movie, despite his avowal of faithfulness to Mann's masterpiece ("...we shall shoot the book as Mann has written it...").

For his own part, Mann was faithful to his own imaginatively enhanced experience, since by his own testimony (as well as that of his somewhat irritated wife Katia), most of the episodes and scenes in his novella (minus Aschenbach's stalking of Tadzio) actually occurred. So in the midst of all this rampant fidelity, what better tribute could Visconti offer up for his beloved German Romanticism than to meld the tones of Mahler with the text of Mann.

Death In Venice was the second of three films Visconti made trying to say what he had to say about Germany. Apparently he was wondering, among other things, how the Germany of Goethe and Wagner and Nietzsche and Mann, a culture which fascinated him, a culture which exalted Venice and all things beautiful, could give birth to the Third Reich. In the course of such musing, he exudes something of an aristocratic lack of inhibition, unconcerned that anyone might snicker at his motives or his methods, willing to skirt the boundaries of propriety as well as those of melodrama.

Visconti seemed to have understood things from the inside out. Curiously, Dirk Bogarde, intending no irony, once said that as an actor he worked from the outside in. A comment made decades later by Bjørn Andresen (the fifteen years old from Stockholm who played Tadzio) offers intriguing insight. "There's a theme that goes through the making of the film. I thought maybe Dirk would feel understood by Thomas Mann. I think he might have felt invited to this story, to be this character." Visconti likely received the same RSVP.

Critics have sometimes claimed Visconti only knew how to deal with the surface of things, that his problem was that he had directed one too many operas. There may be merit in such criticisms,

but many of those surfaces seem decidedly deep and richly textured. Visconti's own biography, one of privilege and immersion from an early age in the pleasures and power of art, had made him an intimate inhabitant of a world portrayed from a mere tourist's perspective by the haute bourgeoisie Mann.

What Visconti shares in this film is anchored in the aristocratic world of his childhood, a world of la dolce vita incarnate. He retrieves a time when he had vacationed with his family amidst the sparkling silver sunlight on the beach at Lido and experienced *jenes ruhevoll innige Verhältnis zum Meere* which Gustav had come seeking. He evokes the memory of his mother through the costumes, coiffures and regal bearing of Silvana Mangano and along with generous portions of the telegenic squalor and dirt of Venice circa 1911, Visconti's sharing includes the timeless things of Venice: the stones and lapping water and crooked walkways and flapping pigeon wings and pattering footsteps in St Mark's square.

Some of the shots of cinematographer Pasqualino de Santis demand residence in a permanent exhibition: the steamship Esmerelda emerging from the sea under the early morning sky; the



elegantly cruel profile of a gondola (*und so eigentümlich schwarz, wie sonst unter allen Dingen nur Särge sind*); the depleted face of the dying man in the

train station; the sinking sun shooting its shaft of shimmering light across the water to impale the beach; the angelic countenance of the prostitute Esmerelda peaking around the piano; Tadzio and his mother praying before candles in the church; Aschenbach pausing by a column opposite the dark facade of a building, with pale light emanating from two windows, before which Tadzio pauses.