

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Luchino Visconti (1906-1976)

### LIFE

Luchino Visconti was born in an aristocratic family in Milan at the turn of the last century. His formal name was Count don Luchino Visconti di Modrone. His mother was a successful musician, and his father worked in the theatre business. As a child, he was exposed to a rich variety of the arts, studied the cello for several years and received a classical education. His association with cinema began at 29 years old, when he worked with Jean Renoir as assistant director. He moved to Rome in 1939, after his mother died, where he formed friendships at *Cinema*, the magazine that was instrumental in the emerging neo-realist movement. Visconti always had leftist political ideals and joined the Communist Party of Italy during the war, although he was close to Vittorio Mussolini, a critic and producer (as well as son of the dictator). His directorial debut (*Obsession*) in 1943 brought him instant international fame and is still regarded as a neo-realist classic. During the 1950s and 1960s, Visconti also directed many theatrical and operatic productions. He never married and was open about his gay relationships, including with long-term partner Helmut Berger, who appeared in three of his films. Most Visconti films feature luscious cinematography and deep characterisation, often examined through an historical lens. As he wrote in 1963: 'The key to the understanding of the spiritual and psychological conflict is always social, even if the conclusions I reach are always those which concern the individuals whose cases I am describing. The yeast, the blood in the veins, of history, is always thick with civic passion and social reasoning.'

### ACHIEVEMENTS

Among the director's major prizes are the Palme d'Or for *The Leopard* and a Special Prize for *Death in Venice* at Cannes. He also won an International Award for *The Earth Trembles* and a Golden Lion for *Sandra* at Venice. Inexplicably, he never won even a minor award at the Oscars.

### FILMOGRAPHY (full-length feature films as director only)

*Obsession (Obsessione)* 1943  
*The Earth Trembles (La Terra Trema)* 1948  
*Gorgeous (Bellissima)* 1951  
*The Wanton Countess (Senso)* 1954  
*White Nights (Le Notti Bianche)* 1957  
*Rocco and His Brothers (Rocco e i suoi Fratelli)* 1960  
*The Leopard (Il Gattopardo)* 1963  
*Sandra (aka Of a Thousand Delights; Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa)* 1965  
*The Stranger (Lo straniero)* 1967  
*The Damned (La Caduta delgi dei)* 1969  
*Death in Venice (Morte e Venezia)* 1971  
*Ludwig* (1973)  
*Conversation Piece (Gruppo de famiglia in un interno)* 1974  
*The Innocent (L'innocente)* 1976

### THEMES

#### SOCIETY

**Introduction** Luchino Visconti directed several films that explored Italian society, both upper and lower classes, in different historical periods. Born into a prominent family himself, Visconti was especially attuned to the flaws in upper class, even aristocratic, layers of society. Two of his most powerful films, *The Leopard* and *The Innocent*, present detailed portraits of noble and affluent figures in the later half of the nineteenth century. A third film that focuses on upper class, though in the 1970s, is *The Conversation Piece*. A similar precision is evident also in the films that feature working class characters, such as *Rocco and His Brothers* and *Obsession*.

**The Leopard** Twinned with the political theme in this film is a focus on social change. Most non-Italian viewers will struggle to follow the political complexities in the story, but their social manifestations are more evident, which is the genius of Visconti's film: it dramatises complexity through the lives of the characters. The most obvious symbol of social upheaval is the figure of Don Calogero, the mayor. When this nouveau riche figure enters the prince's villa, his hosts mock his attempt to look grand. 'Don Calogero in white tie?' the prince says, 'It's a sign of the revolution in action.' The mayor is also responsible for supervising (and rigging) the plebiscite that supports Italian unification, an exercise of power by a commoner that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier. The social change of the times is brilliantly captured in the 40-minute-long ball scene at the end. It is a lavish affair that is designed to be Angelica's entrance into high society. The guests are a mixture of old aristocracy with the rising middle-classes, a new social alliance represented by the union of Tancredi and Angelica. The new social order is even more sensationally illustrated by the centre piece of the scene: the dancing of Don Fabrizio and Angelica. As that once-disparate pair whirl around, smiling broadly to each other, fused by their mutual attraction, they become a symbol of the changing times.

**The Innocent** With an arrogant, philandering husband and a cold, vengeful mistress, there is more than one villain in this piece. There are also multiple indiscretions, cover-ups and even a murder. However, the blame for all this, the film suggests, lies not with the individuals, but with the society that has shaped them. Wealthy and hedonistic, yet controlled by conservative religious morals that do not allow them freedom and therefore denies them responsibility, the characters caught up in the tragic love triangle are specimens of their society. An explicit articulation of the social criticism in the film comes from Teresa when (as if speaking for the director) she says to Tullio, 'Contrary to popular belief, I believe truth is never said to one's face. There are too many factors which intervene in our intimacy, so we usually end up not understanding each other.' In other words, these rich socialites are so deeply enmeshed in conventions, precepts and etiquette that they do not know, or even care, if they speak and act with sincerity. This is especially true of affairs of the heart, which are already coded, secretive and dangerous. Tullio's indiscretions, Guilana's sex out of wedlock and Teresa's husband-stealing are hard to justify, but they are the product of a society with severe restrictions. Only a free society, free for women as well as for men, could have avoided the tragedy at the end. Only the newborn baby is truly innocent.

**The Innocent** The film also suggests that religion, specifically the powerful Catholic church in Italy, bears responsibility for the tragedy that envelops the characters. Tullio boasts that he is an atheist, while his wife is deeply pious. She refused to have an abortion, which meant that the child was born, creating friction between her and her husband. She even says at one point that she hates the baby. But when the child dies, she says, 'Now, for the rest of my days, I'll have to live with this mark on my soul.' In other words, although she had no part in the baby's death, the very fact of giving birth to a child unwanted by her husband put the baby's life at risk. It is also noteworthy that the killing of the child can only take place because the whole family has gone to a church service, providing Tullio with the opportunity to expose it to the cold. In addition, it can be argued that the church itself is responsible for the child's death by calling abortion a sin. If Guilana had allowed herself an abortion, no murder would have occurred. We should recall that abortion was hotly debated in Italy (and elsewhere) in the 1970s and was not legalised in that country until two years after the film was released.

**The Innocent** A third social theme in this film is gender inequality. It is clear that women were more restricted in their sexual behaviour than men and that only a widow could safely take lovers. To his credit, after Guilana takes a lover, Tullio says that she had the same sexual rights as he does, but her reply is revealing. 'It wasn't to claim a right,' she says. 'I never felt I had one.' In other words, the social definition of gender is so ingrained that a woman's self-image restricts her even when new ideas of liberation gain popularity. Also, several remarks in the film illustrate contemporaneous thinking about male and female genders. At one point, Tullio says, with typical sarcasm, 'Women have the extraordinary capacity to adapt to reality, to the romantic ideals of the worst literature.' Later, Teresa says, 'I wonder why you men raise us up with one hand, only to drag us down with the other.' Finally, the separation between the world of men and the world of women is powerfully illustrated in the opening two scenes. First, we have the loud and violent actions of men practicing their duelling inside a club. A moment later, the camera puts us inside a sedate drawing room, where a piano recital is underway, attended mostly by silent women. We are only two minutes into the story, but it is clear that the sexes occupy different social spaces.

**Conversation Piece** The primary theme of this film, on the surface level of plot, is the class divide between middle-class, left-wing intellectuals and rich, right-wing philistines. The professor, who represents the first group, has his sanctuary invaded by the rampaging horde of four, who represent the second group. The tomb-like silence of the intellectual's house is assaulted by angry words, profanities, loud music and constant telephone calls by the jet-setters. As a near-naked Lietta tells him, 'There's no sex in the grave.' And Konrad reads the professor's mind when he says 'the richer they are, the worse they are.' The cultural gap is also expressed visually, in the contrasting décor between the professor's house and the apartment redecorated by the philistines. His rooms are in mute colours, their wood-panelled walls covered with oil paintings. The apartment, by contrast, is painted mainly in minimalist white speckled with splashes of bright primary colours, with pop art posters on the walls. If the downstairs resembles a mausoleum dedicated to tradition, the upstairs is a celebration of youthful energy. The professor himself is always dressed in coat and tie, while Bianca's clothes scream vulgarity and the young ones prance around without any clothes in one scene. The social divide is reinforced by the generation gap that separates the professor from these strangers; even Bianca is considerably younger than he. While the isolated professor ruminates about his mortality, comparing himself to the tragic figure of King Lear, the others are putting on their own play, partying and having sex. Konrad functions, however briefly, as a bridge between these two utterly opposed groups: he shares with the professor a taste in classical music and knowledge of painting. Partly through the mysterious Konrad and partly through others, these two opposing camps edge toward familiarity and sustain the illusion of being 'family.'

**Conversation Piece** Another social theme in this film is the lack of communication. Let's remember that the film is called 'Conversation Piece'. That title refers to the obscure genre of eighteenth-century painting that the professor collects, while at the same time calling attention to the exchange of words between the characters. Time and time again, they speak to each other, but to what effect? As the professor says early on, 'It's as if we spoke two different languages....I must be completely out of touch.' In several other scenes, someone says, 'Do you understand?' Mostly, the answer is 'no' or 'only partially.' From the beginning, the gang of four act in a way that even viewers find puzzling: What is Bianca's motive? Why did Konrad say that? Even when they try to communicate, for example, when Lietta says she wants to learn about the professor's past life, it's not clear if any comprehension is achieved. There is a similar lack of understanding among the four strangers, too. Bianca and Konrad shout at each other, neither one interested in understanding the other's words. And it also emerges that Stefano feels that Konrad is concealing some secret. The total effect is that the dialogue between the characters in the film is as opaque as the interaction between the mute figures in the paintings. In the end, the central lack of understanding is that the professor doesn't know understand why these 'different people' have affected him so deeply. His life has been enriched by them, but he barely knows how to articulate that change.

**Rocco and His Brothers** Even in 1960, when the film was released, Italian society was undergoing fundamental change, as dramatised in the film. The moment that the Pardonis family arrives in the big city, they are perceived as outsiders, part of the great wave of migration that brought workers from the poor, agricultural south to the prosperous cities of the north, symbolised by Milan. The lure of the north is illustrated in the opening scenes, when the family ride on a bus and marvel at the lights and energy of the city. Soon, though, these immigrants are called 'Zulu', 'Africans' and 'do-nothing southerners,' while Simone is said to be 'slow,' 'lazy' and a 'sack of potatoes.' But they are an aspirational family, looking to escape from poverty and make a new life in Milan, where houses are 'going up like mushrooms.' The brothers struggle in their new world, at first finding work only when it snows. Later, Ciro gets a steady job in a factory, while both Simone and Rocco make some money as boxers. A highlight for Rosaria, their mother, is that she is called 'Madam' on the street. 'Imagine that,' she says, with pride. Still, she is shocked by the hedonism and selfishness in the big city, mostly personified in Nadia, but also in the nightclubs and bars that Simone frequents. In her eyes, the new social values have corrupted Simone, whose moral decay and villainous crime bring shame on the family. True, Vincenzo and Ciro adapt to their new environment and make a success of their lives, but Rocco, the moral centre of the family, is ruined by Simone's behaviour. At the end, in order to pay off his brother's debts, Rocco works as a boxer, in a kind of forced labour not so different to that which killed his father down south.

**Obsession** A strong social message in this film is the inevitability of retribution and the inexorable punishment that follows after a crime. The inescapable consequence of the murder is signalled more explicitly in the title of the source novel (*The Postman Always Knocks Twice*), with its suggestion that 'the cops will get you in the end.' In the film, the self-destructive love between Gino and Giovanna was

always doomed to end as tragedy. It was a curse whose predestination is dramatized in the numerous examples of repetition that occur in the story. For instance, Giovanna uses the same phrase ('It's like I don't exist') when speaking of Giuseppe's and then of Gino's indifference to her. Even more telling is the identical sentence spoken first by Giovanna and then by Anita: 'He didn't pay me.' In both cases, it is a lie, the first by Giovanna to make sure Gino doesn't leave the petrol station, and, second by Anita to ensure that he can escape from the police. And, finally, there is the repeated escape and car crash, the first planned to look like an accident, and the second a genuine accident. When Giovanna is killed and the police arrive on the scene, Gino says nothing. He is led away without a word of protest because this ending was foretold from the minute he laid lustful eyes on another man's wife. His punishment was built into the crimes of adultery and murder.

## POLITICS

**Introduction** Visconti was a long-term member of the Italian Communist Party, which partly explains the emphasis on politics in his films. The variety of specific issues presented, though, is wide and eclectic. Only *The Earth Trembles* could be said to follow the 'party line.' Like all his Italian contemporaries, he was fascinated by both the Garibaldi era (*The Leopard*) and by the Fascist era (*General Della Rovere*). One film, *the Conversation Piece*, also touches on the radical student politics of the 1960s.

**The Earth Trembles** Unsurprisingly for a film commissioned by the Communist Party of Italy, its dominant theme is the injustice that degrades the fishermen in small town in Sicily. The fishermen of the town are exploited by the wholesalers, who own the boats and control the competition for selling the fish, thereby ensuring that they can buy the catch at a low price and sell it at a higher price. The scene is thus set for a class-struggle, in the classical Marxist sense, but the film does not conclude with a historically-determined triumph of the working-class against the capitalist owners. Instead, drawing on a 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, Visconti steers the story toward a reflection on the lack of class solidarity among the oppressed. Antonio, who has probably never read a book, let alone Marxist analysis, leads a revolt against the wholesalers when he convinces his family to mortgage their house, buy their own boat and become independent. However, he failed to foresee that he would not be able to convince other fishermen to do that same: they are too cautious and he is too reckless. In fact, by mortgaging the house, Antonio has simply replaced the wholesalers with the bank manager. And, as before, all the risk is with his family. When disaster strikes, he and they suffer. The political message of the film is that a single, bold act is insufficient to achieve any change in the structure of power. Without class solidarity, built presumably by the communist movement, the people of the village will continue to slave for the owners. Antonio's insurgency is impressive but misjudged. The earth may tremble, but nothing will shift permanently until the working class is fully prepared to shake it more forcefully.

**The Leopard** A central theme of this film is the complexity of politics during the wars for Italian independence from foreign rulers. Taking its cue from the source novel, whose author was a leftist member of the aristocracy, and revised by Visconti, who was also an aristocrat and communist sympathiser, the film offers a sharp critique of the nationalist myth that the revolutionary movement was a unified struggle by the masses. Instead of that comfortable illusion, the film shows us several factions working for their own interests: local peasants who wanted, and didn't get, land reform; liberal intellectuals, like Mazzini, who promoted the idea of a republic; a Catholic church allied to the French; enlightened nobles like Don Fabrizio who accepted change as a way of avoiding anarchy; and others who favoured a constitutional monarchy. That last goal—a king of unified Italy—is in fact the historical reality that the film faithfully presents. There was a changing of the guard, as dramatised in the film, first by the replacement of Don Fabrizio by his young nephew Tancredi, and second by the ascendancy of the middle-classes. But as the film also makes clear, not least in the words of the prince, those changes simply amounted to new personnel taking their place in a largely unaltered power structure. The single most significant sentence in this long story is Tancredi's observation that 'for things to stay the same, everything must change'. This was the shrewd strategy adopted by the educated members of the ruling class and by some liberals. By supporting Garibaldi (who wanted unification not social justice) for a while and then reverting to the King of Naples, the ruling classes avoided anarchy and socialism, the two forces that were causing chaos in parts of Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. The upper-class disdain for populist rule is evident throughout the film, especially in references to the 'rabble' of the masses. That is why the penultimate scene of this complex film includes the (off-camera) execution of soldiers who deserted from the royalists to the rebels. Hearing the gun shots while travelling in a carriage, the mayor says, 'Fine army. Just what's needed for Italy.'

Travelling with him, Tancredi kisses Angelica's forehead, as if to say, 'Don't worry. We're all safe now. The radicals will be shot.'

**General Della Rovere** Curiously, this is a political film without politics. It concentrates on the relationship between two men, one Italian and one German, neither of whom has any political commitment. Col Muller dislikes torture and all the barbarity associated with the Gestapo, while Bardone gets along just fine with the occupying German army. These two chaps become friends, share a drink and laugh about the oddity of war. In one key scene, Bardone says, 'These are difficult times, for everyone. Both sides need to show understanding. The propaganda of hatred ruins the soul. Don't lose hope. Our German friends are almost always understanding.' No, they seem to be saying, let's not have any animosity just because your army is killing my people. Let's respect each other while our armies are fighting to the death. The film's apolitical stance reflects the attitude of a large portion of the Italian population. Italy was always muddling up its politics, first an ally of Germany and then joining the Allies. The real-life General Della Rovere was a committed anti-fascist and passionate leader of the resistance, but the film is not about him. It is about a man who pretends to be that hero without sharing his politics. When Bardone accepts death at the end, it is more a personal, ahistorical and moral decision than one based on anti-fascism. Significantly, the film is based on the story of the real-life hero as told by a journalist who himself switched from supporting fascism to fighting it. If there is any clear political message, it is that collaboration is as Italian as pasta.

**General Della Rovere** Despite this ambiguity, the film does present the true suffering of war, though not as prominently as in Rossellini's famous war trilogy. In the opening shots, for example, 'Deserters and draft-dodgers will be shot and executed' reads one poster on a wall. Stray cats scavenge in dark, empty streets. Air raid wardens emerge from bombed-out buildings, and groups of women line up to get water from a single pump. One of the women looks up and says, 'It's cloudy today. They probably won't bomb us today.' Later on, there are bombing raids and blaring sirens, which remind us that while Bardone/Grimaldi is playing out his games, others are suffering and dying. Indeed, the death of General Della Rovere in the film (when he tries to evade a checkpoint) is terrifying. Then, there is the torture in prison and the cold-blooded murder of the men by the firing squad. The film is not about war but everything that happens does so as a consequence of war.

**Conversation Piece** Although this film is largely about society, it does also contain a political undercurrent, which was a nagging concern for most Italian directors of Visconti's generation. One of the film's many mysteries is a half-concealed political sub-plot involving Konrad and Bianca's husband. Konrad, we know, was active in radical politics in Paris only a few years before the events in the story. And we also know that Bianca's husband (who never appears) is a fascist industrialist. When Konrad is beat up, we are led to believe that it had to do with unpaid gambling debts, but later Konrad hints that he is still active in politics. And toward the end of the film, he admits to spying on Bianca's husband, who was plotting to stage a coup by getting rid of communist ministers in the cabinet. This political sub-plot is left intentionally vague, but it does add a frisson of tension to the story.

## LOVE

**Introduction** Visconti's films explore love (and sexual desire) in a wide variety of forms, mostly negative. The danger of possessive love is evident in *Obsession*, his directorial debut, and in *The Innocent*. The precarious nature of innocent romance, which shifts with socio-economic circumstances, is a theme of *The Earth Trembles*. The sad situation of impossible homosexual love is the theme of *Death in Venice*.

**Obsession** The dominant theme of this film is the destructive nature of obsessive sexual desire. It seems that Visconti set out to attack the romanticised image of love as depicted in so many Italian films and novels. For instance, he juxtaposes Giuseppe's singing of love songs ('It's love that bears us toward heaven...') with a shot of Gino listening and being overcome with sexual passion. That passion leads him inside the restaurant, where he meets Giovanna, who says he's built 'like a horse.' They flirt and, when Giuseppe leaves, engage in love-making that is more animal lust than tender affection. The animal in heat image is also reinforced by the repeated references to the hot weather and the cats howling outside. Giovanna also describes her marital sex as 'dirty' and her husband's hand on her as 'fat'. The carnal nature of the love between the two main characters is later highlighted by the gentle way that Gino goes to bed with Anita, a casual acquaintance. The danger of obsessive desire is also driven home during the scene of the amateur singing contest. The arias we hear all speak of seduction, betrayal and deception, while at the same time we watch as Gino and

Giovanna rekindle their lust for each other. She needs him, desperately, to lift her out of her unhappy, loveless marriage, and he cannot shake off the sexual desire that binds him to her. They are both doomed by their obsessive love, which began with a lie (Giovanna telling her husband that Gino had not paid) and developed into a noose around both their necks.

**The Earth Trembles** The political and economic forces highlighted in the film also shape the lives of the main characters, especially their love life. There are three distinct pairs of lovers or would-be lovers, whose romantic hopes are affected by the events depicted in the film. First, there is Antonio, who is love with Nedda, who returns his affection. As soon as Antonio gets the mortgage money and buys a boat, he floats in the air with visions of a marriage and happy future. That is all ruined by the tragic loss of boat and house, plus Antonio's decline into drink. Second, Mara and Nicola are also lovers and would have been planning marriage except that Nicola is slightly lower status and little money; any hope of love overcoming adversity is quelled by the complete loss of money in Mara's family. And third, there is the budding romance of Lucia and the policeman, who appears as her prince charming. He sweet talks her, and she blushes; he offers a silk scarf, which she must refuse, but only out of propriety. In a later scene, we watch as Lucia steals a look at a glittering necklace given to her (we assume) by the policeman. We wonder what he asked for in return. Using these three cases to enter into the inner lives of his characters, Visconti raises his story above the level of political propaganda.

**The Innocent** Within its broad theme of a dysfunctional society, the film pinpoints more specific problems, one being the strict control of sexuality within marriage. As Tullio explains to Guiliana, after some years of marriage, 'love is replaced by affection, friendship, common interests' And when his sexual desire for her is rekindled by jealousy, he explains his renewed passion by saying, 'You've been my wife, my sister, but never my lover.' Tullio is free, more or less, to take a lover, but Guiliana is constrained by her vow at the altar, a 'promise made to God.' At the same time, Tullio is angry that her bastard son will bear his family's name, something that should only be handed down through marriage. It is also significant that Teresa is the only truly 'free' actor because she is no longer married. Divorce had been legalised in Italy only in 1970, a few years before the film was made.

**Death in Venice** While focusing on a dying man's last days, this film highlights his desire or, more accurately, his pursuit of an impossible desire. Again, this theme exists on two levels: the aesthetic and the physical. Auschenbach's desire to achieve purity in art is paired with his desire to experience perfection in the world of the senses. The conflict between these two objectives is the subject of the heated discussions (shown in flashbacks) between the composer and his friend, Alfred. Auschenbach believes that beauty is achieved through the spirit and not the senses. However, he struggles to realise that ideal, and, in one flashback, his 'beautiful' music is booed by the audience. His pursuit of Tadzio is another struggle. The boy is clearly flesh, as revealed by his bathing suit, but Auschenbach never has any direct physical contact with him. Instead, he contemplates the boy, as he might contemplate a painting. Perhaps there is a balance to be had between the spirit and the flesh, as Alfred once suggests. But Auschenbach's pursuit of perfection, whether spiritual or physical, fails every time. That is clearly the message of the final shot, when he stretches out a hand toward Tadzio, who remains distant and unobtainable.

## FAMILY

**Introduction** Before the fundamental social changes of the 1960s and later, the Italian working-class family was typically large and provided an individual with both strength and conflict. That dual-nature of the working-class family is dramatised in Rocco and His Brothers and in *The Earth Trembles*. When he came to make *Conversation Piece* in 1975, however, Visconti chose a main character who had no family and then found that he acquired one by mistake.

**Rocco and His Brothers** As the title announces, this is a story about a family, comprised of five brothers and a widowed mother. Although the family is poor, they have the strength of familial cohesion. We see how close they are on the morning when they wake up and see snow—which means work. They all bustle around in cramped rooms, dressing, eating and laughing with each other before setting out. Leading this coordinated effort is Rosaria, the matriarch, who calls herself the 'hand with five fingers' (sons). In the early sections of the film, the family survives the hardships of city life by pulling together. But even at the beginning, cracks appear. Vincenzo, the oldest, has already separated himself by becoming engaged to a Milanese girl, and he doesn't wear traditional mourning clothes to honour his dead father. Soon, Nadia, the femme fatale, enters the family home

and Simone is caught in her wicked web. The familial fabric begins to fray and is slowly torn apart so that, eventually, only Ciro and little Luca are living with mamma. Brother turns on brother, nearly killing each other in a fist-fight and betraying each other to the police. The original family cohesion has been smashed, but it remains a dream, inspiring Rocco to say that he wants to return to the family roots in the south. Moments later, when Simone confesses to murder, the family starts to scream and accuse each other. Again, Rocco sums it up: 'We're no longer in God's grace. We've become our own enemies.' The family that began the film has vanished. Vincenzo is living apart with his own family. Simone is a murderer and 'lives with a whore'. Rocco is about to sign a contract that will take him to a far away place. Ciro is about to marry and move out. This once-cohesive southern family has been reduced to little Luca and his unhappy mother.

**The Earth Trembles** As the film makes clear, the wholesalers are not the only enemy. There is also the older generation of the fishermen community who are opposed to change. This generational conflict is dramatized primarily within the Valestro family, between Antonio and his grandfather. When Antonio first outlines his plan to the family, the 70-year-old grandfather counsels his grandsons to listen to their elders. 'Strength of youth, wisdom of age,' he says, quoting a proverb. Again, after the boat is destroyed, and Antonio proposes to mortgage the house, the old man counsels caution, reminding him that such a debt is dangerous. He proves right in the end, which prompts another old man to say, 'The poor always pay.' The inbred passivity of the older generation is then summed up when the grandfather cites another proverb: 'Change old for new, you will rue.' His conservative outlook is the result of centuries of suffering and adapting to survive against a bitter sea and an unjust economic situation. If you can't win over the older generation, the young rebels will never succeed.

**Conversation Piece** An important theme in this film is the importance of family. The professor has none, only memories of a wife and mother, and a housekeeper. He has no pet, either, until the strangers present him with a bird that proves to be as raucous as themselves. The first outline of a family appears with the group of four strangers, who form a kind of kin group—mother, daughter and lovers. The whole arc of the story is to move from the professor as a lonely old man to a person who has a makeshift family. In one of lighter scenes, Lietta suggests that he could adopt Konrad as his son, and by extension the whole group of four as a family. This is, in effect, what happens. In a valediction at the end of the film, the professor speaks of his impending death (though he looks quite robust). Addressing the foursome, he says that they have been 'impossible tenants' but now he thinks of them as his 'family.' Then, surveying the paintings on the wall that show family groups (the genre of 'conversation piece'), he says solemnly, 'Your presence upstairs woke me up again, roughly, from a very deep sleep.' The professor and his 'guests' may be incompatible in social and cultural terms, and they rarely understand each other, but their proximity, arguments and shared dramas, have all shaped them all into a fictional family. For the poor professor, these awful people are the only family he has

## DEATH and AGING

**Introduction** Two of Visconti's historical films, *Death in Venice* and *The Leopard* (both of which are adaptations from nineteenth-century novels), are studies in the process of aging and death. Both also feature an aristocratic protagonist, but while Don Fabrizio has the comfort of family, tradition and religion to ease his transition, Auschenbach must face his death all alone.

**Death in Venice** As the title itself suggests, this is a story about death. It begins (through a flashback) with Auschenbach's illness in Munich and ends with him dying on the beach. This theme is introduced by Auschenbach himself when he remembers an hourglass in his parents' house: 'It seems that the sand only runs out at the last moment. Till then it's not worth thinking about. Until the end, when there's no more time left.' His illness and death is the emotional core of the film, but it is accompanied by the deaths caused by a cholera epidemic that sweeps through Venice. These two strands of mortality emerge slowly and overlap as the story unfolds. Auschenbach is in the city to recover from an illness, but he does not seem unwell in the opening sequences. Unhappy and alone, yes, but not ill. Then, signs of the epidemic appear in the form of public notices on city walls. Auschenbach wants to know more but is told that such notices are a 'mere formality' and that there is nothing to worry about. The same might be said about his own condition, until it worsens. Finally, the two strands come together in a brilliant scene when he becomes feverish and collapses on the street, surrounded by fires lit to drive off the pestilence. He never fully recovers from that collapse, suggesting that both his deterioration and the epidemic mirror a wider decay in society. The pestilence is a form of impurity that destroys both his physical life and aesthetic ideals.

**The Leopard** Going deep into the individual characters themselves, the film meditates on the process of aging and death. It begins with a display of the prince's virility when he visits a prostitute in Palermo and then defends himself to the priest, saying he must satisfy his physical. Of course, the aging Don Fabrizio has a ready replacement in the youthful dandyism of Tancredi, but the prince is conscious that he and his whole class is close to extinction. He expresses his anxiety that the continual inbreeding in the aristocracy, marrying cousin to cousin, is sapping its vigour. That is why the prince is happy to bypass his own daughter, the shy Concetta, in favour of the vivacious Angelica as a wife for his nephew. In the final, magnificent ball scene, Don Fabrizio enacts his last gallant gesture by dancing with the youthful Angelica. There is a subtle but unmistakable hint of romantic attraction between the aging man and young woman, but the prince then feels exhausted. In the closing scenes, he looks frail as he wraps a scarf around his neck and says his goodbyes. Choosing to walk home alone, he wanders through the town and crosses the path of a priest hurrying through the dark toward a house where someone is dying. Don Fabrizio kneels down and takes off his hat. Looking up, he says, 'Oh, faithful star. When will you give me an appointment less ephemeral, far from all this, in your region of perennial certitude?' With this poetic death wish, the film closes. The prince's decline and mortality are highlighted by Tancredi's rise and Angelica's vitality.

**APPEARANCE/REALITY Introduction** The theme of images and the imagination is key to two Visconti films. In the first, *General Della Rovere*, the main character is so convinced by his impersonation of a dead man that he takes on that man's personality and becomes him in real life. In the second example, *Obsession*, the two main characters both fantasise about a different life for themselves. And, in both examples, this fantasy-making leads to death.

**General Della Rovere** Underlying the overt politics of the film is the more intriguing theme of appearance versus reality. Who is the protagonist? He is a distinguished-looking, well-dressed, charming, middle-aged man named Emanuele Bardone, who is a gambler and a conman. He introduces himself to others as Col Grimaldi, now an engineer but once an officer in the Italian cavalry. In truth, he was dismissed for debts and embezzlement and then convicted for various crimes from fraud to bigamy. Then he impersonates General Della Rovere as part of a bargain to free him for identifying a partisan leader held in prison. In effect, this is the story of a double imposter (Bardone who is both Grimaldi and Della Rovere) who is charged with the task of identifying another man. Such deception, lying and spying is unavoidable in a country occupied by a foreign power, when one loyalty is laid on top of another. But the film emphasises this ambiguity in both plot detail and characters. First, there is the prominence of the ring, a fake ring that Bardone has given to his girlfriend. For the first third of the story, he tries to sell it, claiming it is 'rare' and 'oriental' and a 'sapphire,' when, in fact, it is practically worthless. Second, there is Bardone himself, who is a fantasist, a man who believes in his own lies. He even appears to be convinced that the ring is genuine. His most significant example of self-deception, however, is his successful impersonation of the General. When he dies at the end, we are left wondering if he might have really become the hero he so desperately would have liked to be.

**Obsession** The second theme in this film, threaded into the first, is the power of dreams. Right after their first love-making session, the two main characters drift into imaginary worlds. Giovanna does not want to be married to the 'fat man' and yearns for a different life. She hates being a cook and smiles when Gino says she 'deserves to be a 'lady'. Earlier, Giuseppe mocked her, saying, 'Think you're a lady, painting her nails all day?' Speaking with Gino, she sighs and says that she 'not a lady, just an unlucky woman.' As for Gino, right after having sex, while listening to her dreams of a better life, he picks up a seashell and listens to the sounds coming from inside. Then he puts the shell to her ear and proposes that they go away together. It is one of the few moments that he is happy, imagining a life inspired by the sounds of a seashell. Unfortunately, the sound of a seashell is not realistic enough for her, and he is too addicted to his 'tramping around' to settle down. Neither of their dreams is realisable because each dream requires the other, who cannot fulfil his or her role within the first person's vision of happiness.

## PSYCHOLOGY

**Introduction** One of the powerful elements in a Visconti film is psychological depth, as illustrated in three examples given here. Guilt permeates *Obsession* like a bad smell, while jealousy drives apart two brothers in *Rocco and His Brothers*, and a feeling of isolation hangs over *Death in Venice*. Nearly every Visconti film explores the inner lives of its main characters, but in these three films the psychological dimension emerges to dominate the story.



**Obsession** A major theme in the film is the guilt that weighs heavily on Gino's mind. By nature, he is a cheerful and carefree person, who just happens to fall madly in love with a married woman. And, blinded by that lust, he goes along with an unspoken plan to do away with the obstacle of her husband. The problem is that he actually liked 'fat old' Giuseppe, who was very chummy and with whom he shared memories of the army. As soon as the deed is done, Gino wants to run away because he keeps seeing the image of the dead man around the petrol station. He becomes moody, drinks a lot and for the rest of the story looks for an escape. He does, briefly, separate himself from the guilt when he meets Anita, but it all floods back when he tells her what he did. Looking empty-eyed, he sighs and says, 'I'll never be my old self.' He is haunted by the murder he has committed, trapped as much by the crime as by his lust for Giovanna.

**Rocco and His Brothers** The single most important factor in the destruction of the family is jealousy. Simone and Rocco, who seem closest in age and appearance, are set against each other from the start. With Vincenzo gone, they both seek to earn money through boxing, but Rocco outshines his older brother in the ring and becomes the manager's favourite. It is Rocco who also tells Simone that Nadia has left him. And so, when Simone discovers that Rocco has 'stolen' Nadia from him, he is furious and nearly kills his brother in a fist-fight. Later, his jealousy is inflamed to a murderous extent when his friends mock him about both his brother's boxing success and Nadia's new high-class clients. Crazy, humiliated and angry, he mercilessly kills Nadia. When the mother hears of his crime, she sums it up: 'It's jealousy,' she says, 'that's what ruined him.' Simone's jealousy is born of a rivalry with his closest brother, a competition that he loses in the boxing ring and in love. That double loss increases his feeling of inferiority and humiliation, both within the family and in front of his friends. It's not just that Rocco has what Simone wants; it's that Rocco has taken those things from Simone. Jealousy is a childish emotion, which, in the hands of a grown man, can become murderous.

**Death in Venice** This film is a study in a man's isolation and loneliness. It opens with a scene of loneliness, showing Auschenbach in a chair all alone on the deck of the steamer, and it ends with another such scene, showing him slumped in a chair on the beach. In between, he barely communicates with his fellow guests at the hotel, except to ask about the cholera in the city. Although he sometimes is physically close to Tadzio and his family, he never speaks a word to them, only whispering in imagined conversations. Their frequent use of Polish remains untranslated, which symbolises the distance between him and them. The repeated and false assurances given to Auschenbach about the cholera is another example of speech that separates rather than brings people together. There is also a brief scene in a brothel, in which a young Auschenbach might have found some kind of bond, but even here he wrenches his hand free from the young woman's grasp. Similarly, in the scenes where he debates art and life, he rarely comes close to his friend, Alfred. In one of those scenes, Alfred describes him as 'a keeper of distances. Afraid to have direct honest contact with anything.' It is only in the flashback with his wife and daughter, frolicking on a grass hill in the Alps, that he is happy in the company of others.

## CHARACTERS

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*Open or closed to new experiences*

*Agreeable or Disagreeable in social Relations*

*Conscientious or Unconscientious*

*Rational or Emotional in their psychological world*

#### 1. Open

a) Lietta (*Conversation Piece*) Daughter of the arrogant Bianca, Lietta displays some of her mother's disagreeable qualities. She can be manipulative and deceptive, but she is sweeter, less hardened and more congenial than the Marquise. Throughout the story, she plays the part of a go-between who soothes the ruffled feathers of the professor.

b) Gino (*Obsession*) Gino is a likable chap. Young, handsome and well-built, he has no obligations and no worries. He lives like a tramp, but he is, in fact, a semi-skilled labourer who moves from place to place, picking up jobs. Although he loves his life on the open road, he falls desperately in love with Giovanna. He is a dreamer, and he shows tenderness, too, but he is a doomed man.

c) Spaniard (*Obsession*) The Spaniard, so-called because he spent years in Spain, is a

street-performer, who is a soulmate to Gino. Like him, he likes life on the open road, working here and there and moving on when it suits him. Consistent with that life-style, he is generous with his money and helps out strangers. He also has a philosophical streak to him, though it baffles Gino. He is a character not found in the source novel and was invented by the director to symbolise Gino's dream of a life without attachments in opposition to the settled life represented by Giovanna.

d) Rocco (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Rocco is the most complicated of the brothers. He is naïve and innocent at the beginning, a young man who becomes a soldier and finds love with Nadia. In some ways, he is a Christ-like figure who endures suffering as a sacrifice for others. He is person with empathy, but his loyalty to his family can also make him insensitive to others. In the end, Rocco is a disillusioned saint, as morally damaged as Simone.

e) Lucia (*The Earth Trembles*) Dark-haired and slim, Lucia is perhaps in her mid-teens. She is a hard worker, helping her mother and older sister with domestic chores. As a young girl, though, she has dreams that momentarily set her free from the misery all around her.

f) Tancredi (*The Leopard*) Tancredi is the handsome young nephew of Don Fabrizio, the prince. As such, his youth is set in direct contrast with the aging and experienced uncle. He is the symbol of the future, a man who becomes a politician in the new unified government in Turin. While he has the vigour of youth, he is also sharp in his understanding of the changing times. Ambitious and opportunistic, he is difficult to like but nevertheless wins the affection of a beautiful woman

## 2. Closed

a) Professor (*Conversation Piece*) The unnamed professor is a retired and aging man who prefers paintings to people. Inside his luxurious bunker, he has cut himself off from the chaos of the outside world, until it invades his privacy and he finds it not as distasteful as he feared. We know little about his past except that his marriage failed, that he was in the war and was a scientist who got disillusioned with progress and technology. Although serene on the outside, his inner emotions do erupt from time to time. He is polite, accommodating and considerate, yet he remains an enigma.

b) Tullio (*The Innocent*) Tullio is a wealthy, self-indulgent and egotistical aristocrat. His arrogance in his wilful mistreatment of his wife is unforgiveable, but, to his credit, he is a liberal and an atheist in a deeply religious Italy in the 1890s. He strains our sympathy by his frequent bouts of tear-stained self-pity, and yet, it is possible to see him as a victim of the world around him. When his love for his wife is rekindled, albeit by jealousy, we almost feel that he has recovered his humanity. Nothing, however, can forgive his unbearable act of cruelty at the end.

c) Don Fabrizio (*The Leopard*) Don Fabrizio is an old man and a member of an old ruling class. He has great pride in his family history and the history of Sicily, but that does not prevent him from understanding and, to a limited extent, accepting the changes happening all around him. He is a liberal-minded and scientifically-orientated noble, who is candid and honest with everyone. Dignified, handsome and with a manly head of hair, he is the leopard.

## 3. Agreeable

a) Tadzio (*Death in Venice*) Tadzio is almost as enigmatic as Auschenbach, especially as he is given no backstory at all. He is a young boy, one of four children brought to the seaside by their mother and governess. The family are Polish but speak French, and perhaps English, too. But Tadzio says little beyond a few words to his young friends. He is a mute character, who communicates through looks and actions.

b) Vincenzo (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Vincenzo, who was once a good boxer, is the oldest son and the one who settled first in Milan. He is a responsible person, who takes care of his family while also devoting himself to his fiancé, later his wife and their young baby. After the first segment of the story, carrying his name, he fades out of the picture simply because he has set up a separate household.

c) Cola (*The Earth Trembles*) The second brother, in terms of age, is Cola. Although he hangs back a little, letting Antonio lead the family, he is loyal to his brother and affectionate toward everyone. He is a little less cautious than Antonio, and, when provoked, he lashes out in anger. Precisely because he is not the oldest brother, he has the freedom to leave the family and seek his fortune abroad.

d) Angelica (*The Leopard*) Angelica is a young and ravishingly beautiful woman. As the daughter of the wealthy mayor, she commands a dowry that convinces Don Fabrizio that she is a suitable wife for Tancredi. Beyond her family wealth, she is also a spirited and intelligent young woman, someone who would be a suitable hostess at a party in Vienna or Paris. Beneath the splendid surface, she is also a modest person, sincere in her feelings and gracious in her speech.

#### 4. Disagreeable

a) Mayor (*The Leopard*) Don Calogero, the mayor, is the opposite of his pleasing daughter. The mayor is an ambitious man who rose in stature from peasant stock to become a figure of respect. He is obsequious to the prince and his family, bowing and cringing before them, unaware that he is being laughed at by his betters. The mayor takes great pleasure in the office he has gained and he has great pride in the wealth he has amassed, some of it, apparently, by devious means.

#### 5. Conscientious

a) **Ciro** (*Rocco and His Brothers*)                      **Ciro** is a less important figure than Simone and Rocco. More like Vincenzo, he adapts to his new environment, finds a job and gets engaged to a local girl. He is more level-headed than his brothers and tries to avoid problems. At the same time, he is devoted to his family and is torn apart by Simone's behaviour. But his sense of justice is stronger than his loyalty to his brother.

b) **Antonio** (*The Earth Trembles*) Antonio is the central figure in the story. The initial success and then final defeat are both his. We know little of his background, before the story begins, except that he served in the army on the mainland, which might explain why he is more independent-minded than the other fishermen. Whatever the reason, he is a courageous young man, prepared to fight against the exploitation by the boat-owners and against the passivity in his own family and community. He is certainly an intelligent and proud young man, who shows affection to his younger brothers. Even in defeat, he shows dignity.

c) **Mara** (*The Earth Trembles*) Although only a few years older than her sister Lucia, Mara is more like a junior mother in the family. She is not as pretty as her younger sister, but she is also more cautious and pragmatic by nature. She has imbibed the values of her community, primarily those of personal modesty and resignation to one's fate.

d) **Giuliana** (*The Innocent*) As the neglected wife in a classic love triangle, and as a woman who is patient and loyal to her cheating husband, Giuliana has our sympathy from the outset. She is also a deeply religious person, who judges herself by the moral precepts of the church. Underneath this mistreated and conventional woman, though, we also see strength and passion. She suffers a great deal, but she has reserves that ameliorate her pain.

#### 6. Unconscientious

a) **Konrad** (*Conversation Piece*) Konrad is a young man who was once active in radical student politics and is now a professional gigolo. He considers himself a failure and appears to be at war with the world and everyone in it. Like the professor, with whom he shares an appreciation of art, Konrad is mysterious. At the end, it seems that he is still involved in underground radical politics, even spying on Bianca's fascist husband. He does open up to the professor, revealing some secrets of his past, but his death is unexplained.

b) **Bianca** (*Conversation Piece*) Bianca is a selfish and wealthy socialite, convinced that the world revolves around her and her needs. She pays a lot to keep Konrad as her toy boy, jets off to Paris and London on a whim and insults anyone who crosses her path. She is a portrait of decadent elegance and unearned arrogance, easy to dislike but hard to dismiss.

c) **Giovanna** (*Obsession*) Giovanna is a young woman who married for security rather than love. She feels she deserves more than to be a cook and help manage a petrol station owned by her old and unattractive husband. In fact, she is desperately unhappy, ready to do whatever it takes to change her life. At the same time, she is practical and will not return to a life of poverty. Of all the figures in the film, she is most tragic since her desire to be free leads to her death.

d) **Simone** (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Simone is a weak character who falls prey to the fleshpots of the big city. Both Rocco and Luca speak of him as a changed person, who forgot the good 'roots' of his upbringing in southern Italy. Once ensnared by the delightful Nadia, he is on a

downward spiral of deceit, betrayal and murder. As a tough boxer, he has the physical strength to inflict pain on others, and, when fuelled by insane jealousy and hate, this is what he does.

e) Nadia (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Nadia is another complex character in this film. She is certainly the femme fatale who contributes to the ruin of Simone and, by extension, the whole family. She is a prostitute, she is flighty and she changes lovers like a new dress. So, it is easy to dislike her, but she is also an object of our sympathy. She does what many 'poor girls' do to make money, and she appears genuinely in love with Rocco, who gave her courage to believe in herself. She is also candid and confronts reality. She certainly does not deserve her tragic death.

### 7. Emotional

a) Auschenbach (*Death in Venice*) Gustav von Auschenbach is a German composer of classical music, or at least he was one. Through flashbacks, we know that he was married and had a daughter who died. We also see that he is an intense man, dedicated to his ideals of purity and beauty. In the present, he is ill and lonely, but derives pleasure by watching a beautiful young boy, who returns his glances.

b) Giuseppe (*Obsession*) Giuseppe is a barrel of a man, who laughs with his big belly. Older than his wife, he likes to control her, though he remains wilfully ignorant of her desire to leave him. He is outgoing and, after some initial suspicion, strikes up a friendship with Gino. Although likable, especially to men, one can appreciate why Giovanna is so unhappy with her marriage to him.

c) Rosaria (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Rosaria is a strong character, a grieving widow and a matriarchal support for her sons. She is a traditional woman from southern Italy, a pious Catholic and a social conservative, who is quick to condemn Nadia as a 'loose woman'. Rosaria is a proud woman who stands up for herself and her family, but she is also a woman with deep regrets.

### 8. Rational

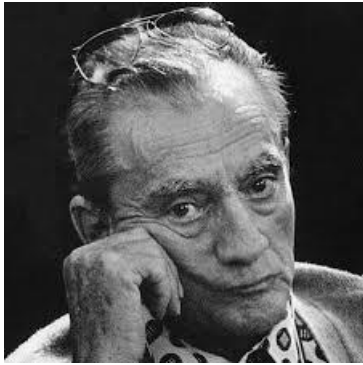
a) Teresa (*The Innocent*) Teresa is the polar opposite of Giuliana, her love rival in this story. Most important, she is a widow and therefore a 'free' woman. More than that, she is haughty, wilful and seductive. She is also intelligent, able to articulate the complexities of the social world that controls her, Tullio and Giuliana. With her cold, austere personality, she is difficult to like, but we can also understand that she is shaped by social norms.



(Luchino Visconti, centre, with his brothers)



(Visconti as a young man)



(Visconti in later life)



(With Dirk Bogarde, who played the part of Auschenbach, on the set of *Death in Venice*).