

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Visconti's Films

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. Til 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.