

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Visconti's Films

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 19th-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.