

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Visconti's Films

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 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 Pardonni 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.