



LUCHINO VISCONTI

VISCONTI'S LEGENDARY FILM, *THE LEOPARD*, IS ABOUT TO BE RELEASED ON DVD, BUT THE DIRECTOR'S MOST INSPIRED WORK WAS THE STORY OF HIS OWN LIFE

Truly great artists have two responsibilities: to create lasting works of beauty and, more important, to give rise to unauthorized biographies filled with tawdry gossip. Some of the most enigmatic of these anecdotes can be found among the 19th-century aesthetes and decadents. To wit: in an absinthe-fueled haze, Arthur Rimbaud repeatedly stabbed his bum-chum Paul Verlaine with a dagger. Richard Wagner had three children with Cosima Liszt von Bülow, who all the while was married to his colleague. Gérard de Nerval owned a pet lobster that he took for walks—on a pale blue leash—claiming that it knew the secrets of the depths. The pièce de résistance in the home of Count Robert de Montesquieu (who wore freshly picked violets around his neck in lieu of a cravat) was a live turtle with a gold-plated shell inlaid with emeralds, sapphires, and obsidians.

The cinematic heir to this tradition of fin de siècle eccentricity was Italy's Luchino Visconti, the director of such classics as *The Leopard*, *Death in Venice*, *The Damned*, and *Ludwig*. A fabulously wealthy homosexual communist nobleman, Visconti lived his films.

Born in 1906 into one of the richest and oldest families in Milan, Count Don Luchino Visconti di Modrone could trace his lineage back to King Desiderius, the last despot in northern Italy's 8th-century Kingdom of the Lombards. His family crest was a serpent swallowing a child.

Luchino's father, Giuseppe Visconti, Duke of Modrone, was a bisexual philanderer who counted the Queen of Italy among his lovers. His mother, Carla Erba, heiress to a pharmaceutical company, was referred to simply as "La Erba," as if she were a public monument or a work of art.

With a penchant for breaking mirrors and smashing fine china against the wall, their son Luchino was guided by his philosophy that "we are here for this: to burn until death, which is the last act of life, completes life's work by transforming us into ashes."

Visconti himself transformed 120 cigarettes a day into ashes. Toward the end of his life, the hard living resulted in a stroke, and he was prescribed a liquid medicinal. "It was always spilling in my pocket," he lamented. "One day I was so upset that I threw it away, saying, 'It is not possible to always have wet pockets because of this damned medicine.' See how stupid I was? I paid

for it dearly." A few months later, he suffered another, more serious stroke. "I remember everything exactly," he recalled. "I never had a moment that was not clear. I remember that Enrico Mediolini took off my shoes while I was on the bed. I was wearing socks of a brilliant blue. 'How could I have made such a mistake?' I asked myself." Visconti was referring not to the discarded medicine, but to his questionable choice of socks. Is it any wonder that a modern aesthete like Manolo Blahnik has said that if he could die and come back as any person, it would be Luchino Visconti?

Of the count's many films, *The Leopard* (*Il Gattopardo*, 1963) remains his most intoxicating. Long unavailable, it is finally being rereleased this May. The Criterion Collection, in conjunction with the British Film Institute, is issuing a newly restored, three-disc special edition of both the 187-minute Italian version and the 161-minute English-language version.

The story of Sicily's aristocracy succumbing to the political upheavals of Italy's unification during the 1860s, *The Leopard* stars Burt Lancaster as the aging prince. Alain Delon plays the prince's nephew, Tancredi, a young rebel who marries Angelica (played by Claudia Cardinale), the daughter of a wealthy industrialist. These are characters who, in all earnestness, say things like: "If you know all the rooms in a palace, it's not worth living in it."

A sumptuous examination of decay, the film is almost as lavish as the real-life stories behind the production. Following in the footsteps of his father (who once built an entire town in the 14th-century style), Visconti was obsessive in his attention to detail. He oversaw the nearly two-month-long building of a castle's facade. He also tore up asphalt streets, replacing them with cobblestones. In a nod to the depraved Roman emperor Elagabalus, who had gold and silver powder strewn wherever he walked, Visconti imported truckloads of dust to be deposited on the reconstructed streets.

An enormous refrigerator and oven were custom-built to maintain the temperature of the "cruel, colored delicacies" in the enormous buffet scenes, such as waxy chaud-froids of veal and pink foie gras protected by cuirasses of gelatin. Shirts were repeatedly soaked in tea, dried in the sun, then buried in the ground to get the correct shade of revolutionary red. Candles with a higher percentage of purified fatty acids were specially manufactured to prevent them from melting in the heat of the studio lamps and the punishing Sicilian summer. (It took fifty-five minutes to light the thousand candles in the ballrooms.) Each day, the production's fifteen florists brought thousands of fresh flowers into countless rooms, regardless of whether the rooms would be used for filming.

Despite winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes, *The Leopard* is rarely seen. When the film was released in North America by Twentieth Century Fox, who considered it too long, Visconti was outraged that it had been re-edited without his approval. "It is now a work for which I acknowledge no paternity at all," he said. Built on a surface plot about the unification of the north and south of Italy, *The Leopard* is a timeless meditation on death and change. The film's defining line is "If we want everything to stay as it is, everything must change."

This sort of seeming contradiction is at the very core of Visconti's being. He is considered the father of Neo-Realism for his early films dedicated to the proletariat; his later films, however, are morbid in their decadence. The Marxist in him believed in the possibility of social equality, but his aristocratic side was attached to a fading world of opulence and entitlement. This duality propelled all of his work. As Carl Jung says, "The greater the tension between opposites, the greater the energy."

Even Visconti's death was marked by extremes. He had two funerals: a Roman Catholic burial rite in the cathedral, attended by nobility and the international jet set; and a separate Marxist service attended by his red compatriots.

"The sheets of the dying are always dirty," says the prince to the young lovers in *The Leopard*. "I often think of death. It doesn't scare me at all. You're too young to understand. To you, death doesn't even exist. It's just something that concerns other people."

It has often been pointed out that the character of the prince is actually Visconti himself. Nothing confirms this so much as a statement made by the director: "I'm not afraid of death. I think of it as normal, like having lunch or dinner or going to the movies. It's the same thing to me. Death doesn't worry me. It's like being born. Birth and death are the same thing. Perhaps it's better to die."

While listening to Brahms, Visconti slipped into oblivion on March 17, 1976. He wanted his epitaph to read, "He adored Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Verdi." Whether his request was honored, however, is unknown: the site of his burial remains a mystery to this day. **Adam Leith Gollner**

Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale, film stills from *The Leopard*, 1963. Photography courtesy the Criterion Collection.

The Leopard is being rereleased this May by the Criterion Collection. Also coming soon is a new two-hour documentary film, made by Adam Low for BBC/Arena, entitled *The Life and Work of Count Luchino Visconti*.

For information: www.criterionco.com