

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## ***The Leopard (Il Gattopardo)*** 1963

Luchino Visconti

### OVERVIEW

Visconti's epic film was based on a 1958 novel with the same title by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Although the film is faithful to the source novel, it dispensed with the final chapters that take place years after the main events of 1860. Like the novel, the film presents this story of change, revolution and expediency, while injecting drama through the closely observed lives of its main characters. The director became involved in the production only at an advanced stage and initially objected to the producers' decision to cast Burt Lancaster in the lead role of a quintessentially Italian and, even worse, Sicilian story. Presented with operatic grandeur, it was a far cry from Visconti's earlier and explicitly Marxist films (such as *The Earth Trembles*), but it still contains a subtle analysis of the social change and political history of the mid-nineteenth century, when Italy became a unified country. *The Leopard* received critical acclaim in Europe and won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. In the US, where the film was cut, its colours badly processed and dubbed into English, it was not an initial success. Only in 1983, when a properly subtitled print of the Italian cut arrived in America, did it gain public and critical success.

### SYNOPSIS

Don Fabrizio's family in Palermo is shaken by Garibaldi's invasion of Sicily. His nephew, Tancredi, joins the rebels, while Don Fabrizio takes his family to his summer residence in the mountains. When Tancredi returns as a member of Garibaldi's army, Don Fabrizio accepts that compromise is better than the anarchy represented by Garibaldi. He then blesses a proposed marriage between Tancredi and Angelica, the daughter of the local mayor. His own daughter, Concetta, who loved Tancredi is devastated and refuses any other suitors. When Don Fabrizio is offered a post in the government of a united Italy, he refuses. The story ends with a grand ball, the debutante party for Angelica, who is introduced to high society. Don Fabrizio dances with her, displaying their mutual attraction, before walking home alone and contemplating his own mortality.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Don Fabrizio	Don Fabrizio is the prince of Salina.
Tancredi	Tancredi is his nephew.
priest	The priest is employed by the family.
Concetta	Concetta is a daughter of Don Fabrizio.
Don Calogero	Don Calogero is the mayor of Donnafugata, the summer residence of Don Fabrizio.
Angelica	Angelica is the mayor's daughter.

### STORY

*Prayers* The film opens with the family and servants of Don Fabrizio gathered for prayer in a luxurious mansion near Palermo, Sicily. The year is 1860, with the various states of Italy at war. The serene praying is disturbed by shouts beyond the closed doors of the drawing room. A dead soldier has been found in the garden. At the same time, Don Fabrizio receives a letter warning of danger and urging him to take refuge on a ship in the harbour. He then reads a newspaper article announcing that Garibaldi's army has landed in Sicily. The household is in turmoil, the priest cries 'revolution' and Don Fabrizio tries to restore calm. When he leaves the room, the women and priest fall to their knees and pray.

*Palermo* On their carriage ride into Palermo, Don Fabrizio dismisses the priest's anxiety about the war. At road blocks, the royalist soldiers recognise him and let the carriage through. Sending the priest away to see his Jesuit friends, Don Fabrizio visits his favourite prostitute.

*Tancredi* The next morning, Tancredi, who knows about his uncle's indiscretions, teases him and calls him an 'old libertine.' Then Tancredi says he's going to join Garibaldi's army in the mountains. Don Fabrizio scoffs at the rebels, but Tancredi says, 'For things to remain the same, everything must change.' Don Fabrizio isn't quite sure what he means, but he bids his cousin a warm goodbye and hands him a bag of gold coins. Dashing out, Tancredi kisses Concetta, Don Fabrizio's daughter, and drives off as his uncle and others watch from a balcony.

*Political debate* In his study, surrounded by large astronomical instruments and books, Don Fabrizio has a conversation with the priest. The priest, who also knows about his nocturnal habits, urges him to confess, but the prince defends himself by claiming that his wife doesn't 'give satisfaction' in bed. Then, he explains that the revolutionary changes in the country are an illusion. Having reflected on Tancredi's words, he realises that the middle-class radicals don't want to destroy the aristocrats, only replace them. The priest protests that the nobles and the middle class will steal land and money from the church, and leave the poor destitute.

*Battle* In a bloody and chaotic battle for Palermo, royalist troops execute civilians as traitors and local people hang royalist supporters. After street-to-street battles, Garibaldi's men defeat the royalists and Don Fabrizio moves his family to Donnafugata, his summer residence in the mountains.

*Class division* With a travel permit given to him by a Garibaldian officer, Don Fabrizio's party is allowed through the roadblocks, but peasants fleeing the war are not. Drinking with ordinary people in a tavern, the priest says that 'the nobles live in a world of their own. They're not bad people, just different.'

*Donnafugata* En route to Donnafugata, Fabrizio's party, including the wounded Tancredi, stops off for a picnic, and local peasants show their respect to the prince. In a flashback, we see that Don Fabrizio had welcomed a Garibaldian general to his mansion. Middle class, well-educated and interested in the mansion's frescoes, the rebel general and his fellow officers blend in with the noble family. That is how Don Fabrizio obtained the vital travel permits. In Donnafugata, his family is greeted with music and ceremony. As they file into the church, local people take off their hats and bow.

*Concetta* That afternoon, the priest informs Don Fabrizio that Concetta, his daughter, is in love with Tancredi, something the prince already knows. Although Tancredi has not made a proposal, Concetta is sure that he loves her. Don Fabrizio isn't impressed since he thinks that Concetta is too meek to be the wife of a man who will one day become an ambassador in Vienna or Paris. Besides, Tancredi needs a wife with a dowry larger than what he himself can offer.

*Dinner party* Don Fabrizio makes a point of inviting local middle-class men and their wives to a dinner party. At the sumptuous event, Angelica, the mayor's daughter, catches the eye of Tancredi and makes Concetta jealous. Tancredi tells a racy story that disgusts Concetta but entertains Angelica. Later, Don Fabrizio looks up the history of Angelica's family and is convinced that she would be a suitable wife for Tancredi.

*Plebiscite* After Don Fabrizio votes 'yes' in a local plebiscite calling for a united Italy, the long-winded mayor announces that 100% voted yes. Early the next morning, when Don Fabrizio goes out rabbit hunting, he asks his gamekeeper how he voted. The man says he voted 'no', even though Don Fabrizio urged him to choose 'yes'.

*Angelica's family* The gamekeeper tells Don Fabrizio that the mayor is ambitious and devious. He adds that Angelica is 'intelligent and a real lady.' Hearing this, Don Fabrizio decides to ask the mayor for permission for Tancredi to marry Angelica. First, though, he locks up his gamekeeper in order to prevent the news from leaking out. At home, Don Fabrizio's wife is furious that Tancredi wants to abandon Concetta and marry Angelica. He defends his cousin, saying that Tancredi needs money and has never made a formal proposal to Concetta.

*Marriage proposal* Don Fabrizio has a frank talk with the mayor and makes the formal proposal for marriage, which is accepted. When the prince mentions Tancredi's reduced inheritance, the mayor

promises a dowry of a large estate plus an enormous amount of fertile land and a considerable amount of gold.

*Tancredi and Cavriaghi* That evening, as Don Fabrizio is reading aloud to his family, Tancredi arrives, with a fellow officer, Count Cavriaghi. When Don Fabrizio asks why they are no longer in red (the colour of Garibaldi's army), Tancredi explains that Garibaldi is in the past. He and his friend are officers in the army of the king of Italy. When Tancredi shows everyone the ring he bought for Angelica, even Concetta praises its beauty. Cavriaghi presents Concetta with a book of poetry engraved with her initials. At that moment, Angelica runs into the room and embraces Tancredi. The lovers escape to an unoccupied wing of the mansion, where they explore empty rooms. When Cavriaghi joins them and says that Concetta does not return his affection, Angelica says it's because she's still in love with Tancredi.

*A proposal* A guest arrives at the palace in Donnafugata and offers Don Fabrizio a high position in the new unified government. When he hears that he would be a senator, responsible for formulating laws, Don Fabrizio declines the honour. 'I am a member of the old ruling class,' he tells the emissary, 'hopelessly chained to the old regime. The emissary tries to convince him of the need for honest men in the government, but Don Fabrizio still refuses.

*Debutante ball* A grand ball is held at the villa of a neighbouring prince, bringing together nobles and commoners, royalists and revolutionaries. It is a debutante ball for Angelica, who dazzles onlookers with her beauty. Don Fabrizio feels fatigued and confesses that he thinks about his own death. When Angelica asks Don Fabrizio to dance with her, he gladly accepts. Don Fabrizio and Angelica take the floor and dance, making everyone stop and admire them, while Tancredi and the prince's wife look on with displeasure at their obvious display of mutual attraction. Afterward, Don Fabrizio wanders through the crowd like a ghost.

*A changed man* Speaking to Angelica, Tancredi says, 'The new country needs law and order... like shooting those deserters who went back to Garibaldi.' Angelica is distressed and asks if it's true. 'Yes, they'll be shot at dawn,' Tancredi says, 'and rightly so.' Hearing him, Concetta gets angry and says he's a changed man.

*Time to go* In the early hours, some young dancers are still spinning to music. As other guests file out, Tancredi wakes the mayor and tells him it's time to leave. Don Fabrizio tells Tancredi to accompany his wife and daughters home in the carriages, while he walks. When Tancredi tells him that he will be a candidate in the new elections, Don Fabrizio smiles. On his walk home through the town, Don Fabrizio kneels and crosses himself when a priest goes into a house to say the last rites for someone. Looking up at the sky, the prince asks when his time will come. Riding home in the carriage, Tancredi and the mayor hear the gunfire of the execution squad. Both agree that it's for the best, for Sicily.

## THEMES

*1. Politics* A central theme of the 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.'

2. *Society* Twinned with this political transformation 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 sensorially 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.

3. *Youth and aging* Going even deeper into the individual characters themselves, the film also meditates on the process of aging. 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.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Don Fabrizio** 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.

*Patriarchal* As usual, we get a good sense of the main character from the first scene of the film. In that opening, the serenity of afternoon prayers is replaced by fear when news of the Garibaldian revolution invades the family home. A soldier is found dead in the garden and friends are seeking refuge on ships. The women are distraught, men look anxious and the priest falls to his knees. Amid that chaos, Don Fabrizio takes control, ordering carriages, telling people where to go and striding around the villa like a general commanding his troops. When he stops, he stands tall in the middle of a spacious room, all the others turn to face him. He pulls out his watch and says, 'Dinner. In half an hour.' With a very slight bow, he takes his leave, accompanied by the priest, and rides off to Palermo. Don Fabrizio is a man of authority and stature, a patriarch in an old and proud Sicilian family.

*Candid* One of Don Fabrizio's endearing traits is his candour. He is a touch authoritarian, but he does not dissemble. A good illustration of his straightforwardness is a pair of scenes, one after the other, with the priest. First, when the priest admonishes the prince for visiting a prostitute, he turns on him and says, "I'm a vigorous man. I can't find satisfaction with a woman who gives the sign of the cross in bed and says Ave Maria with every embrace. I've had seven children with her and never seen her navel. Is that right? She's the sinner." Shortly after that little speech, the holy man enters the prince's bathroom, sees his excellency naked and turns to go. Don Fabrizio simply says, 'Don't be silly, father. Naked bodies are innocent. Hand me a towel.' He is open in every sense of the word.

*Acute* Don Fabrizio is also a man of perception and reflection. That quality is displayed in another conversation with the priest, when he leans back in his chair and says, 'You know what's happening in this country? Nothing. Simply an imperceptible replacement of one class by another. The middle-class doesn't want to destroy, only to take our place...pay us off and then everything can go as it was.' The priest protests and argues the nobles will come to an agreement with the middle-class and leave the church without power. 'Our lands will be seized and carved up by the ringleaders,' the priest says. The prince listens, considers for a moment and says that the church is immortal, but the aristocracy is not. 'If the liberals promise us another 100 years of life, that's eternity,' he says. He then points out that the church would sacrifice the nobles if by doing so it could save itself. Don Fabrizio is capable of understanding the complexity of social and political change even while those transformations are still unfolding.

*Pragmatic* As the above examples suggest, the prince is also a pragmatic person. That characteristic is firmly established in a late scene, when an emissary from the new government arrives and offers Don Fabrizio a seat in the senate. The prince listens intently and then says, 'Listen. I am a member of the old ruling class, hopelessly linked to the old regime....I belong to an unfortunate generation, straddling two worlds and ill at ease in both.' Although Don Fabrizio is proud, he is not ambitious. Instead, he is a realistic man, as shown here when he realises that he is not the right person to make laws for a new country. A new age demands new people. He is interested in results not in reputations.

*Proud* Don Fabrizio is proud of his class, his ancestry and of his country of Sicily. He knows his days are over, but he does not lose his sense of dignity. His deep emotions are revealed in a brief scene. It is early morning. The emissary has failed in his mission to tempt the prince to accept a seat in the senate. The two men stand next to the carriage that will ferry the emissary back to Turin. He says he has confidence that the new government will improve the lives of people in Sicily. The prince says that things should change but they won't. 'Maybe in two hundred years things might be different, but they'll be worse,' he predicts. Then he helps his visitor into the carriage and says, 'We were the leopards. Those who take our place will be jackals.' The leopard is the formal symbol of Don Fabrizio's ancestors. It is a strong, graceful and proud animal.

*Tancredi* Tancredi is the handsome young nephew of 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.

*Enthusiastic* We first see Tancredi when he comes to say goodbye to his uncle in the villa outside Palermo. The news of Garibaldi's army landing in Sicily has spread and he is ready to join the revolutionaries. After chiding his uncle for being 'an old libertine', referring to his visit to a prostitute, Tancredi says he is going away. He is smartly dressed, so his uncle asks where he's headed. A duel, perhaps? 'Yes,' Tancredi says with a smile. 'A huge duel. With the king...Great things are brewing. And I won't stay at home.' This is Tancredi the enthusiastic young man, restless and ready for danger.

*Shrewd* But Tancredi is not simply a hot-headed youngster. He also has a political acumen that guides his actions. That quality is revealed in the same conversation described above. At the end, when Don Fabrizio scoffs at the rebel army that his nephew is about to join, Tancredi points out that the aristocracy cannot stand by idle while others change the social and political landscape to their advantage. He mocks the middle-class liberals' idea of a republic (proposed by Mazzini). 'Unless we get involved,' Tancredi argues, 'the middle-class will foist a republic on us.' Then he speaks one of

the definitive statements of the film: 'For things to stay the same, everything must change.' This is a shrewd sociological analysis, and one that the skeptical Don Fabrizio himself comes to accept.

**Audacious** Tancredi's youthful vigour and daring make him audacious at times, as we see in the scene of the formal dinner. The prince has invited all the best families of Donnafugata, including the mayor and his daughter, Angelica, to have a meal with his family. In the middle of the general chatter, Tancredi, wearing a bandage over his injured eye, bursts out with a story about an incident before a big battle. They needed to put a lookout inside a convent and had to break down its doors, which frightened the nuns. 'It was comical,' Tancredi says, having gained everyone's attention at the big table. 'All those old ugly nuns, huddling around the altar, eyes wide with fear. Lord knows what they feared from the excited young men!' Some of the ladies frown at this sexual innuendo, but Tancredi is in full flow and says, 'One of the officers said, "We don't have time now. But we'll be back, when you've got some younger novices." We all laughed.' Now, even the virile Don Fabrizio looks concerned. Tancredi has certainly crossed one of the fine lines of dinner table etiquette.

**Opportunistic** Both Tancredi and his uncle are realistic pragmatists, but the nephew is more opportunistic, as illustrated in a scene in the early section of the story. Tancredi has long ago joined the Garibaldian rebels, who then succeeded in conquering Sicily. Now, months later, he returns to his uncle's villa with his fellow officers. Everyone is in good spirits, laughing and joking about Sicily's weather. Then Don Fabrizio notices that Tancredi and his friends are wearing the royal blue uniform of the King of Naples. 'I don't understand you,' he says. 'Don't you Garibaldi fellows wear red shirts anymore?' To which, Tancredi says, 'Garibaldi's men? That's all in the past. We are officers in the army of His Majesty the King of Italy.' Tancredi is happy to be rid of the Garibaldi 'rabble, good only for ambushes and looting.' Tancredi was happy to wear Garibaldi's red when that movement was in the ascendancy. But now, after it has waned, he switches to the royalist uniform he always favoured. He is, quite literally, a turncoat.

**Angelica** 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.

**Gauche** For all her beauty, Angelica is a product of her background, daughter of a nouveau riche father and a peasant mother. Her social awkwardness emerges in a major scene, when Don Fabrizio has invited all the town's bourgeois families to a formal dinner. She looks fabulous but later embarrasses everyone during the story told by Tancredi about the convent (see Tancredi's illustrative moments above). The story is only mildly salacious, hinting at a soldier's sexual desire for young novices in the convent. It is also funny, at least to Angelica, who bursts out laughing while the others, especially the women, are grim-faced. 'What fine soldiers!' she exclaims. 'I wish I'd been there.' Tancredi smiles and says, 'If you'd been there, we wouldn't have had to wait for young novices.' Hearing this provocative comment about her own sexuality, Angelica does not blush or drop her eyes. Instead, she throws back her head and laughs heartily. She can't stop laughing, like a drunk in a tavern, at something that is improper for a lady to even hear. Eyes dart around the table, silently anxious about how to stop this unseemly display of behaviour. Angelica has just revealed that she lacks the social graces required of the upper classes.

**Sincere** Fortunately, Angelica is sincere as well as beautiful, otherwise she might be a more dangerous character. Her innocence is illustrated during the long and justly famous ball scene that concludes the story. It is her night, her debut in society, but she is modest and pays tribute to Don Fabrizio for allowing her marriage into the upper class. Looking glamorous, she asks the prince to dance with her, and when she is spinning around in the ballroom, she says that she is grateful to the prince for what he's done for her. Gauche and unsophisticated though she may be, Angelica has a good heart.

**Mayor** Don Calogero, 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.

*Pompous* Like his daughter, the mayor, Don Calogero, is a jumped-up figure. Unlike her, though, he is full of pomposity. After all, and as he might say, he is the mayor. And he is at his most bombastic when speaking in that official capacity. A good example is his speech to the crowd to announce the results of the plebiscite. Standing on the balcony of town hall, overlooking the crowd in the piazza, he has arranged for a brass band to accompany him. He clears his throat and begins to speak, using five words when one would suffice and revelling in platitudes about a united Italy. When the band begins to play in the middle of a sentence, or when the wind blows out the candles he needs to read his written speech, he fails to see the humour of the situation. That would demean him and that he cannot allow. The fact that he rigged the vote count cannot, in his own estimation, detract from the glory of the event.

*Proud* The mayor is summoned by Don Fabrizio, who proposes the marriage between Tancredi and Angelica. At first the mayor says nothing, but then grins widely. 'Excuse me, prince. This wonderful surprise took my breath away.' Then, when Don Fabrizio speaks of Tancredi's poor financial situation, the mayor swells up with pride. Now, he can spread out his wealth in front of the scion of this illustrious family. Coming close to the prince, and speaking in a whisper, the mayor explains all the assets he will settle on Angelica when she marries. A large estate, acres and acres of fertile land and gold, as well. Detailing these riches, the mayor chuckles with the delight of someone who is impressed with the image he has just created. The mayor is nouveau riche, but his riches are immense.



(Angelica and Don Fabrizio at the ball)



(Don Fabrizio)



(Angelica and Tancredi)



(The engaged couple)