

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Conversation Piece*** (*Gruppo di famiglia in un interno*) 1974 Luchino Visconti

### OVERVIEW

This, Visconti's penultimate film, is different from his previous works. For one thing, it was shot in English and entirely inside a single house (due the director's poor health). Also, it is concerned not with the grim realities of poverty and social inequality, but rather with an old professor's musing on death and his interaction with an odd group: a rich woman, her liberated daughter, her right-wing boyfriend and an ex-Marxist gigolo. The title refers to a type of painting, especially popular in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, which shows a family group, usually a family. The main character in the story, an American professor living in Rome, is a collector of that genre. The story is complex and mysterious, weaving together the contemplative professor with the gaggle of rich, spoiled strangers. In addition to these subtleties, the film features Visconti's typically lush visual language and engaging score. While few would consider this a masterpiece, it did win several major awards within Italy, including best film and best foreign actor at the David di Donatello Awards ceremony.

### SYNOPSIS

A retired American professor living in Rome has his life turned upside down when a group of rich and noisy strangers inveigle their way into occupying his upstairs apartment. They continually argue about contracts, loud music and proprieties, but the professor slowly finds himself drawn to this raucous group, especially to Konrad, a young and handsome ex-radical student. In the end, the professor calls them his 'family', a happy ending that is upstaged by an explosion that kills Konrad. Whether it was suicide or murder is only one of the many mysterious that flow through this entertaining story.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Professor	The unnamed professor is an American living in Rome.
Bianca	Bianca Brumonti is married to a rich industrialist.
Konrad	Konrad, a blonde-haired German, is her young lover.
Lietta	Lietta is her even younger daughter.
Stefano	Stefano is Lietta's boyfriend.

### STORY

*Strangers* A retired American professor examines an oil painting in his expensive house in Rome. He tells the sellers that it is 'exquisite' but refuses the asking price. Meanwhile, a woman wanders around the spacious rooms. When the sellers leave, she reveals that she doesn't know them and only came to see about renting the apartment upstairs. The professor says it's not for rent, but the woman, Bianca Brumonti, insists on having a look. They are joined by her young daughter, Lietta, who, like her mother, appears from nowhere. While they inspect the luxurious apartment, a third stranger walks in. He's Lietta's boyfriend, Stefano. As they start to leave, yet a fourth person appears in the doorway. He's Konrad, Bianca's much younger lover. The foursome are pushy and rude, in contrast to the professor's gentility.

*Only for one year* When they leave, the professor calls the sellers and says he'll buy the painting but is told it's been sold. Seconds later, Lietta and Stefano burst into his study carrying the painting, which they give to him as advance payment for rent. Astonished, the professor also learns that Bianca has been in touch with his lawyer to draw up a contract to rent the apartment for a year. 'Just for a year,' Lietta says, with a winning smile.

*Konrad* One evening, the professor comes home and finds the apartment in near ruins. Konrad pulls a gun but then explains that he is redecorating the place and that the painting they gave him was actually a deposit for the purchase of the apartment. The professor is incandescent with rage but allows Konrad to use his telephone downstairs. When Konrad sees the damage done to the professor's house, he advises him to sue Bianca, whom he's just broken with. Then Konrad makes himself at home, smoking, drinking wine and using the telephone to call his friends. But his good taste in music and art prompt the professor to reassess him.

*Becoming friends* Next day, Bianca flies in from Paris and argues with the professor while builders are knocking down the walls of the apartment. She confesses that Konrad is her expensive gigolo. Later, the professor agrees to sell the apartment to Bianca if everything is put back as it was, at her expense. Konrad arrives with a photograph of a friend's painting that sheds light on the history of one of the professor's paintings. The professor is impressed and discovers that Konrad studied art history but quit because he got involved in the Paris riots of 1968. Slowly, the strangers become part of the professor's household, eating in his kitchen and frolicking in his living room. And he is disappointed when they don't show up for a dinner that he arranged for them.

*Chaos return* After an absence of several weeks, sailing on a yacht, they bring him a parrot as a present, and he shows them a room built by his mother during the war to hide partisans and Jews from the fascists. That night, he hears noises upstairs and finds Konrad badly beaten by thugs. The professor puts him in the secret room, tends to his wounds and wants to call the police. When Konrad convinces him that no one must know what happened, the professor shares with Konrad his fear that science has turned 'technology into a kind of slavery.' Bianca shows up, but the professor keeps Konrad's presence a secret.

*Dreams of youth* Waking from a dream, in which his dead wife appears, the professor goes into the next room and sees the three young people having sex together. Lietta tells the professor it's just 'a game' and wants to know what he was like when he was young. Saying he's still an attractive man, she kisses him, as if he's a sleeping prince to be awakened into youth. She also suggests that he would be a good father and says she'll let him adopt her child if she gets pregnant. When he says he's too old and needs an older child, she suggests that he adopt Konrad.

*Police* When the police arrive at the house, having arrested Konrad on his way to Munich, the professor confirms Konrad's alibi for an unspecified crime. He goes upstairs to tell Bianca, Lietta and Stefano, who are decorating the apartment in ultra-modern fashion. In the course of another argument, he criticises Bianca for letting her daughter be in close contact with a man (Konrad) whom she considers immoral.

*New family* When Konrad returns to the apartment, the professor invites them all to join him for dinner the next evening. The three young people, in evening dress, take dinner in the professor's house. He agrees that they are his 'new family'. Bianca arrives, as 'mother' of this new arrangement, and is welcomed kindly by the professor.

*Political accusations* When Bianca announces that her husband, a right-wing fascist, has ordered her to never see Konrad again, Konrad argues with her. Konrad says she won't marry him because he's too young and socially below her. Konrad then reveals that he has been spying on Bianca's fascist husband because he was planning a coup; he also claims that her husband left town when the plot was discovered. Stefano attacks Konrad as a hypocritical Marxist, and Bianca defends her husband, saying he is right-wing but not a criminal. When Konrad and Stefano fight, the professor breaks it up and condemns them both. Konrad departs, advising the professor to stay safe in his house, with his paintings, away from fascist violence.

*Explosion* The housekeeper hands a letter to the professor, which says: 'I won't see you again' and is signed 'Your son, Konrad.' The professor rushes upstairs just as an explosion rips through the apartment and kills Konrad. Some time later, the professor lies in bed, ill and recovering from the shock of finding Konrad. Bianca says that suicide was Konrad's 'way of having the last word'. When she leaves, Lietta tells the professor that it wasn't suicide. 'Believe me,' she says, 'they killed him.' She leaves and the professor weeps.

## THEMES

1. *Society* 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.'

2. *Communication* Rumbling beneath this social division is a more subtle idea of understanding and misunderstanding. 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.

3. *Politics* A third theme is that of politics, 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.

4. *Family* A final theme in the film is the importance of family. The professor has none, only memories of a wife and mother, and a housekeeper. He has no pet, either, until the strangers present him with a bird that proves to be as raucous as themselves. The first outline of a family appears with the group of four strangers, who form a kind of kin group—mother, daughter and lovers. The whole arc of the story is to move from the professor as a lonely old man to a person who has a makeshift family. In one of lighter scenes, Lietta suggests that he could adopt Konrad as his son, and by extension the whole group of four as a family. This is, in effect, what happens. In a valediction at the end of the film, the professor speaks of his impending death (though he looks quite robust). Addressing the foursome, he says that they have been 'impossible tenants' but now he thinks of them

as his 'family.' Then, surveying the paintings on the wall that show family groups (the genre of 'conversation piece'), he says solemnly, 'Your presence upstairs woke me up again, roughly, from a very deep sleep.' The professor and his 'guests' may be incompatible in social and cultural terms, and they rarely understand each other, but their proximity, arguments and shared dramas, have all shaped them all into a fictional family. For the poor professor, these awful people are the only family he has.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Professor** [closed] The professor is a retired and aging man who prefers paintings to people. Inside his luxurious bunker, he has cut himself off from the chaos of the outside world, until it invades his privacy and he finds it not as distasteful as he feared. We know little about his past except that his marriage failed, that he was in the war and was a scientist who got disillusioned with progress and technology. Although serene on the outside, his inner emotions do erupt from time to time. He is polite, accommodating and considerate, yet he remains an enigma.

**Reclusive** The first thing we notice about the professor is that his house is filled with books and paintings, and he appears lonely. The spacious rooms seem larger because he is the only person in them, aside from his loyal housekeeper. He has withdrawn from human contact, and all we know about his previous life are fleeting visions of his mother and wife/lover. When the jet-set crowd invade his private space and demand to rent his upstairs apartment, he is not interested. In one early scene, he is speaking to young Lietta, who tries to sooth him by saying they only want the apartment for one year. He explains that he is planning to convert the apartment into a huge library and does not want human beings up there. With his gentle eyes and calm voice, he provides Lietta with a self-assessment. 'I'm an old man,' he says. 'Neurotic, perhaps even hysterical. I get disturbed by strange noises and strange people.' This statement is revealing because it suggests that his calm exterior is a disguise for a more complicated emotional person. As the story unfolds, we see that this is true.

**Pliant** Despite his reluctance, indeed his explicit refusal, to rent the apartment to the strangers, the professor does not actually prevent them from occupying that space. He argues with them, and he gets angry, but he always gives in and accepts the situation. A good illustration of his malleability is a scene when he first encounters Konrad in the apartment. The young man informs the astonished professor that the painting they gave him was a deposit for a purchase of the apartment. The professor is incensed—he's been tricked—but a moment later, he lets Konrad use the telephone in his rooms below. Sitting back, he silently observes Konrad conduct his private life over the phone and then offers him a glass of wine. He winces with pain when he hears Konrad swear and scream. Only when Konrad slumps down on his couch, stretches out his legs and smokes a cigarette, does the professor make a comment. 'It's not my business to interfere in other people's life, but...' We never know what he was about to say because Konrad cuts him off. This scene is a perfect encapsulation of the entire complex plot: the professor resents but does not prevent the invasion of aliens into his private space.

**Gentle** Although the professor does explode with anger once or twice, he is serenely calm for most of the story. More than that, he is tender and gentle, especially with Lietta and Konrad. We see this clearly in the scene when he finds Konrad badly beaten and lying on the floor in the apartment. He drags the young man down into his house, where he tends to his facial wounds like a nurse. He puts him to bed and is there when he awakes, frightened. 'Don't move,' he says. 'Try to stay calm.' Later, he brings him food and looks after him until he recovers. Another person might have sent Konrad to hospital or had him thrown out altogether, but the professor's immediate and instinctive reaction is to comfort the injured Konrad. The scene does hint at a homosexual attraction, which grows as the story advances, but the professor's primary emotion is to treat Konrad with gentle care.

**Konrad** Konrad is a young man who was once active in radical student politics and is now a professional gigolo. He considers himself a failure and appears to be at war with the world and everyone in it. Like the professor, with whom he shares an appreciation of art, Konrad is mysterious. At the end, it seems that he is still involved in underground radical politics, even spying on Bianca's fascist husband. He does open up to the professor, revealing some secrets of his past, but his death is unexplained.

**Belligerent** Konrad is belligerent from the moment we first see him. He draws a gun on the professor and then tells him that he owns the apartment. When the professor protests, Konrad says

he needs to make a call to Bianca in order to clear things up. Once inside the professor's house, he orders himself a whisky and calls Bianca. What he says to her, however, has nothing to do with the dispute about the apartment; instead, it is a stream of invective and insults: 'You ugly bitch, what's this bullshit about? The apartment, you whore!' He ends the conversation by calling her the 'Marquise of Shit' and telling her that their relationship is over. From the beginning of the scene, Konrad wears an angry expression, ready to confront and battle with everyone and everything.

**Vulnerable** Konrad's confrontational exterior hides and compensates for a vulnerability that he reveals only once in the story. After the professor has nursed him back to health, Konrad unburdens himself a little. Sitting in the large living room, wrapped in a towel, Konrad admits that he lied about the attack on him. Then he starts to explain that he 'wasn't always like this. Once...' He stops and says, 'Shit! I don't give a damn about the things I once believed in,' referring to his radical politics. Next, he says that he wants to ask for the professor's advice. He is afraid, he says because he 'hears footsteps' at night and he wants a 'clean break'. This is a very different Konrad. Gone is the belligerence and swagger, replaced by regret and humility. He remains mysterious, but we see that he is vulnerable.

**Lack of confidence** Konrad's tough outer shell also compensates for his low opinion of himself. That deficiency comes out in a particularly nasty exchange between him and Bianca toward the end of the story. The whole 'family' is having coffee in the professor's house, a scene of domesticity and relaxation. Bianca tells the story of how her husband has left down and ordered her to get rid of Konrad, which prompts Lietta to suggest that she should marry Konrad. Bianca laughs at that suggestion and says that Konrad isn't good enough for her. Incensed, Konrad demands to know why and then explains it himself. 'I know why. I know who I am...I won't let you make fun of me. Tell me, darling,' he says to Bianca in a sneering voice, 'why, according to the rules of your respectable society, I am not marriage material...It's because of my life. A kept lover. Illegal dealings...Because I'm not successful. Because I'm still just a rich woman's lapdog.' Konrad suffers from low self-esteem, but at least he is honest with himself in declaring himself a failure.

**Bianca** Bianca is a selfish and wealthy socialite, convinced that the world revolves around her and her needs. She pays a lot to keep Konrad as her toy boy, jets off to Paris and London on a whim and insults anyone who crosses her path. She is a portrait of decadent elegance and unearned arrogance, easy to dislike but hard to dismiss.

**Pushy** Bianca Brumonti, or the Marquise, as she would prefer to be addressed, enters the story and the professor's house without invitation or expectation. In this early scene, she has simply followed in behind two art dealers, whom she met in the elevator, who have brought a painting to the professor. As they men talk about the painting, she excuses herself and wanders out to the veranda so she can get a good look at the upstairs apartment and then examines the house itself. When the art dealers leave, she is sitting on a couch, smoking one of her endless cigarettes. The confused professor asks politely who she is, and she replies that she wants to rent his upstairs apartment. It's not for rent and she knows it, but she thinks she is entitled to have whatever she wants. The professor repeats that it's not available and that he wants to make it into a library, but she talks over him, saying that having a lot of books is 'foolish' and that, if he likes, she has a lot of 'modern' bookcases. 'At least let me look at it,' she whines. 'If I don't like it, then that's that.' The professor can only stare at her with astonishment. She is precisely the kind of arrogant person that he hides from.

**Haughty** Soon after that scene, Bianca rises to new heights of insolence when the professor goes upstairs and discovers workmen knocking down walls in the apartment. Instead of apologising, Bianca, dressed in chic Parisian fashion, dismisses his complaints. 'I don't want to talk to your lawyer,' she says, 'those things don't interest me.' When he complains again, she says, 'Professor, your behaviour is disgraceful' and blames him for revealing to Konrad her secret about the contract. 'You had no right to interfere,' she screams at him. Then she accuses him of taking Konrad's side in the dispute. The whole scene is shot through with Bianca's hysteria, raised to an operatic level, which suits her as the haughty diva on stage.

**Cruel** Bianca waits until the end before delivering her cruellest blow. She and the others are in the professor's house. Everything seems calm and polite, as Lietta serves them coffee. 'With cream? Without cream?' Until Bianca drops her bombshell: her husband told her to get rid of Konrad, and she said she'd get a divorce. No, she has no intention of marrying Konrad, she informs the group and laughs at such a silly idea. She won't marry him because, as she says, 'he's not marriage material.' She delivers that verdict with a wicked smile of satisfaction. It is a brilliant performance, revealing a

character so cruel that she revels in her ability to hurt and humiliate others.

**Lietta** Daughter of the arrogant Bianca, Lietta displays some of her mother's disagreeable qualities. She can be manipulative and deceptive, but she is sweeter, less hardened and more congenial than the Marquise. Throughout the story, she plays the part of a go-between who soothes the ruffled feathers of the professor.

**Persuasive** Young and bouncy Lietta has a winning personality, even with it comes to the reclusive professor. We see that quality in her first major scene that occurs right after the professor has explained to her that he won't rent the apartment because he's old and hysterical, and doesn't like strangers. 'You're neither old nor hysterical,' she says. 'You're interesting, and you know it.' As the professor shakes his head at her, she continues her charm offensive. 'Maybe you are a little crazy,' she concedes, 'like all interesting people.' Finally, she announces that the gift of the painting is a deposit for renting the apartment. The poor professor can only look bemused at this spirited young woman, who smiles so demurely and humours him. Whatever her motive, she is persuasive.

**Provocative/playful** Lietta has another major scene, also with the professor, where she is sexually playful. He has just discovered her and the two young men having a sexual romp in his living room. After she puts on some clothes, she explains that 'it's just a game. There's no harm in it, honestly.' She goes close to him, sits on the floor and holds his hand, like a dutiful daughter. But then she tells him he's 'still an attractive man' and that she wants to 'know all about the professor's private life'. She kisses him and says to Konrad, who has told her not to be an idiot, 'I like him. I'd marry him if he asked me.' Finally, she says that he would be a great father and suggests that he adopt Konrad as his son. This is Lietta at her best, a mixture of provocation and play.



(Lietta and her mother, Bianca)



(the professor)



(Bianca and Konrad)