

Blu-Ray Review: 'The Leopard' Basks in the Bittersweet Glow of Nostalgia

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CHICAGO – Many great films have been made about the changing of eras and the passing of power from one generation to another. But few are as masterfully conceived and as lovingly detailed as Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti's 1963 classic "The Leopard." Gorgeously restored on Blu-Ray, this near-masterpiece was sliced and diced by Hollywood for American audiences, but is now presented in its original three-hour running time.

As one of the founders of Italian neorealism, Visconti is well known for his depictions of upper-class life, which are somewhat inspired by his own upbringing in one of Italy's wealthiest families. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's 1958 novel of "The Leopard," published a few months after the author's death, was an ideal fit for Visconti's stylistic and thematic obsessions. The story centers on members of the Sicilian aristocracy during the Risorgimento (Italian unification) of the early 1860s. The aristocracy's delicate bubble of insulated privilege can be easily popped by a scandalous laugh or a news bulletin from the outside world.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

Burt Lancaster stars as Prince Don Fabrizio Salina, a crumbling mountain of a man who knows that his time is up. There's a brilliant moment when the Prince, in the midst of shaving, spots his nephew, Tancredi (Alain Delon), in the mirror, thus symbolizing the changing face of national identity. The bulk of the film is about Tancredi's courting of and eventual marriage to Angelica (Claudia Cardinale of "8 1/2"), the daughter of ex-peasant Don Calogero Sedara (Paolo Stoppa), whose rise in society mirrors the growing prominence of the bourgeoisie over the aristocracy. Tancredi's willingness to adapt is in keeping with the film's recurring theme, "For everything to remain the same, everything must change." The Prince, however, refuses to adapt, a fact he makes shatteringly clear during one of the film's best sequences, where he turns down the offer of a senate seat. He believes that all Sicilians want is eternal sleep, "and they will always resent anyone who tries to awaken them." The film concludes with a 40-minute sequence set in a ball that's unforgettably used as an allegory for the decadence and death of the aristocracy.

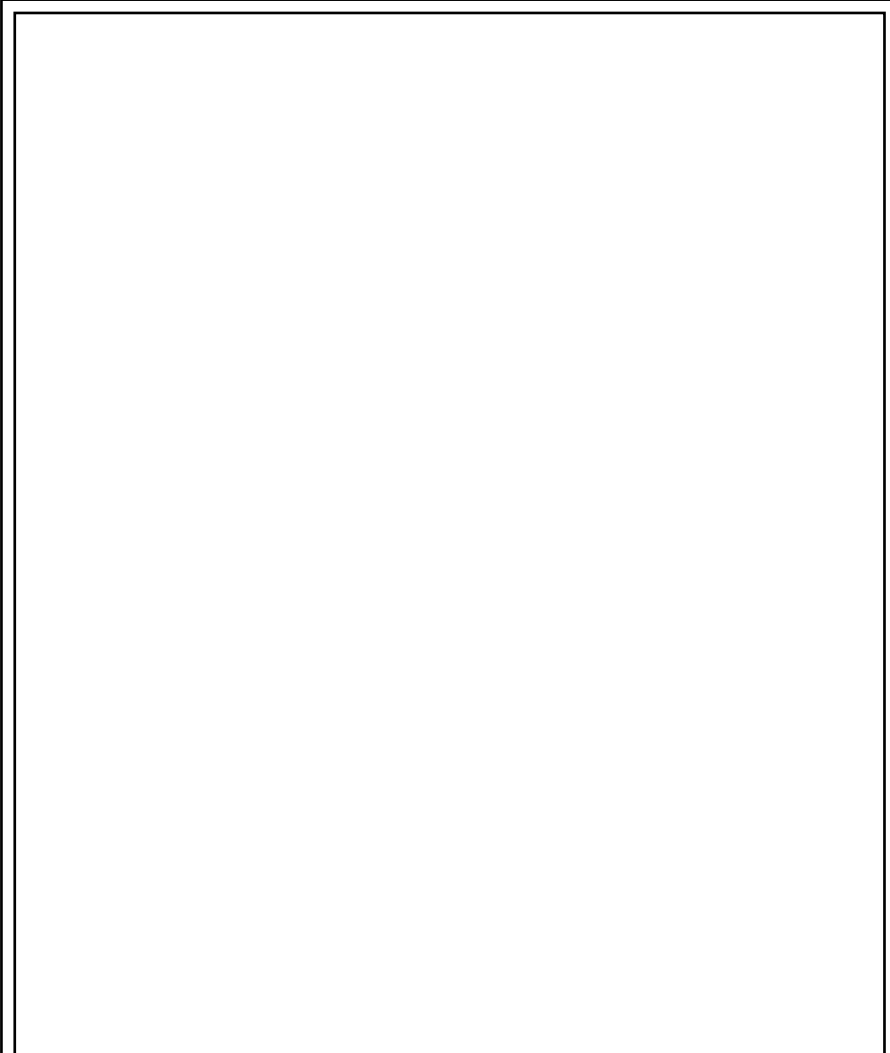


Alain Delon, Claudia Cardinale and Burt Lancaster star in Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard*.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

Though this film may sound like homework to some moviegoers, it offers a sumptuous feast for the eyes and a wealth of provocative complexity for the mind. The communist Visconti was decidedly liberal (unlike *Lampedusa*), but he refused to portray the evolution of Italian society in a wholly positive light. Tancredi is repeatedly described by other characters as “charming,” but he comes off like a first-rate jerk, smugly insensitive to the feelings of his dumped girlfriend, while favoring Angelica merely because of her beauty and money. One of the film's most chilling subplots is Tancredi's transformation from a revolutionary war hero to a future politician with fascist undertones.

The lush imagery created by cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno, production designer Mario Garbuglia and costume designer Piero Tosi evoke the texture of a living painting by an artist such as Pieter Bruegel. If there's one glaring misstep in the film, it's the casting of an American actor in the lead role. Though all of the film's dialogue is post-sync, it's a particular distraction to see Lancaster dubbed with an Italian voice. Though Lancaster powerfully captures the Prince's sense of longing, in a way similar to his channeling of the Nazi judge in 1961's “*Judgment at Nuremberg*,” it's a shame that his performance can't be appreciated in its entirety (an Italian actor would've been preferable). That being said, “*The Leopard*” is a spectacular achievement—opulent, deliberately paced, but never short of mesmerizing.





The restored high-definition digital transfer of "The Leopard" is presented in its original Super Technirama aspect ratio of 2.21:1, with an uncompressed monaural soundtrack that preserves the film's original Italian dub. Film scholar Peter Cowie's audio commentary on the 185-minute cut is a leisurely and pleasant listen, effectively comparing the film and book by accompanying the images with excerpts from Lampedusa's text. The book's epilogue, detailing the deterioration and corruption of its characters, is far more pessimistic than the film's wistful ambiguity. He also mentions how movies such as Martin Scorsese's "The Age of Innocence" were heavily influenced by the film. The butchered 161-minute cut released in America is included on the second disc, and its atrocious English-language dub renders the film unwatchable. What's worse is that Lancaster's own voice lacks the gravity and nuance of his physical portrayal, making him appear even more woefully miscast.

In the excellent 61-minute making-of documentary "A Dying Breed," Sydney Pollack recalls overseeing the film's disastrous sound mix for the U.S. release. Screenwriter Suso Cecchi d'Amico recalls how Lancaster based his performance on the personality and background of Visconti himself. Lampedusa's cousin, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, succinctly notes the key difference between the source material and its adaptation with his observation that "the Risorgimento is seen by Lampedusa through the eyes of those who lost, and by Lucchino through the eyes of those who won." There's also some insightful reflections from Cardinale, Tosi, Garbuglia, Rotunno (who oversaw the film's digital restoration), and screenwriter Enrico Medioli.

The disc also includes an extended interview with producer Goffredo Lombardo, whose Titanus Films was bankrupt by Visconti's extravagant budget on the picture. Yet Lombardo shows no signs of bitterness, declaring the film to be his best work, and even speculating on the possibility of a sequel that illustrates how "Italy's history became intertwined with the birth of the Mafia in Sicily." Viewers hopelessly confused by the film's complex historical backdrop will find enlightenment in scholar Millicent Marcus's 13-minute master class on Italian history circa 1860. The disc also includes four still galleries, posters, Italian newsreels, and two absurd American trailers that make the film look like an action-packed follow-up to "Gone With the Wind."

'The Leopard' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Burt Lancaster, Alain Delon, Claudia Cardinale, Paolo Stoppa, Rina Morelli, Romolo Valli, Mario Girotti, Pierre Clementi, Lucilla Morlacchi, Serge Reggiani and Leslie French. It was written by Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Pasquale Festa Campanile, Enrico Medioli, Massimo Franciosa and Luchino Visconti and directed by Luchino Visconti. It was released on June 29th, 2010. It is not rated.



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