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Burt Lancaster and Cluade Cardinale play leading roles in 'The Leopard,' a 1963 Luchino Visconti film that helped establish Lancaster's reputation as a talented movie actor.

Stylish film returns to screen restored

By Kevin Thomas
Los Angeles Times

THE LATEST RECONSTRUCTION of an important film to surface is "The Leopard," Luchino Visconti's sumptuous 1963 film of the Giuseppe di Lampedusa novel, which is being released by 20th Century-Fox for the first time in its Italian-language version (with excellent English subtitles) and at a 185-minute length, 20 minutes longer than the English-language version released by Fox.

(The original running time was 205 minutes. What about those still-missing 20 minutes?)

The restored print has been processed by Technicolor, as it was originally intended, instead of by Fox subsidiary DeLuxe. The color, as much as the cuts, caused Visconti to disown the English-language version.

For those of us who were able to overlook the jaggedness of the English version in our admiration for Visconti, this restoration is cause for rejoicing. At the same time, it must be said that "The Leopard" has no wider appeal than it did the first time around. The now-restored, carefully measured pacing so crucial to the film's meaning may seem merely ponderous to some, for Visconti places considerable demands on our attention span and stamina. Those who bring a knowledge of Visconti and a love of his work are most likely to appreciate "The Leopard."

In period, scope and story, "The Leopard," set against Italy's turbulent era of unification in the 1860s, brings to mind "Gone With the Wind" as an evocation of a crumbling aristocracy. It has battle scenes, a grand ball and a pragmatic survivor as a protagonist. But "The Leopard" is as contemplative and intellectual as "Gone With the Wind" is dynamic and emotional. The original "Leopard" is an instance of the historical epic as an art film, and, as such, is close in spirit to "Heaven's Gate."

So much for the qualifications: "The Leopard" is a glorious triumph of personal expression at its most elegant and opulent. Like Di Lampedusa, Visconti, who died in 1976 at 69, was born a nobleman. "The Leopard," as a saga of inevitable loss, corresponded precisely with the paradox within Visconti, who was at once a count and a Marxist, a paradox that charged all his films.

As the film opens, at the San Lor-

enzo country estate of the prince of Salina (Burt Lancaster), his large family proceeds with morning prayers as if there were no gunfire on their vast grounds. Early on, the sagacious, prescient prince takes to heart the wise remark of his beloved nephew (Alain Delon): "In order for things to stay as they are, things will have to change." The entirety of "The Leopard" has to do with the introspective prince acting upon these words, culminating in his confrontation with what that has cost him.

As the revolution draws closer, the prince moves his family and large retinue to mountainous Donnafugata, a small town where they have a palace immense enough to satisfy the prince's observation that no palace is worth having if you can count all its rooms.

The prince has concluded that survival means accommodating the emerging, increasingly wealthy middle class. Meanwhile, Delon has swiftly progressed from the red shirts of the quickly betrayed Garibaldi to the rich uniform of the new unified monarchy of Victor Emmanuel without a twinge of conscience.

The prince will now marry his impoverished but ambitious nephew to the daughter of Donnafugata's mayor (Paolo Stoppa), a man as vulgar as he is rich. Since the daughter is Claudia Cardinale at her most tempestuous and ravishing, passion and convenience for once coincide, though at the expense of the prince's plain, pallid daughter Concetta (Lucilla Morlacchi), who had her heart set on her dashing cousin. (She has the compensation of being pursued by a handsome, blond young general, played by Giuliano Gemma, who became spaghetti-Western star Terence Hill.)

Accompanied by Giuseppe Rotunno's rich, autumnal images and Nino Rota's romantic yet elegiac score, "The Leopard" proceeds in stately, measured fashion from one remarkably comprehensive and subtle sequence to another. There's the much-commented-upon pan of the dust-covered and weary Salina family: freshly arrived in Donnafugata, seated in a row in church, looking as if they had turned into statuary (or corpses), becoming part of the ancient Baroque decor surrounding them. There's the wonderfully sensual game of hide-and-seek played by Delon and Cardinale in the vast abandoned section of the Donnafugata palace, once a kind of harem for the Salina men, hints



Delon. The witty and ironic observations that the prince makes throughout the film culminate memorably in his explaining to an envoy (Leslie French) of the new government that he cannot become one of its senators, straddling as he does two worlds, "and unhappy in neither." He recommends Stoppa in his place.

The prince then expounds upon the Sicilian character, which he says succumbs to "a voluptuous immobility." He insists that Sicilians cannot be "improved," for they already consider themselves perfect, their vanity exceeding even their wretchedness.

Following this crucial exchange, "The Leopard" climaxes in an incredibly lavish ball sequence that lasts a deliberately suffocating 51 minutes. Here Visconti daringly attempts — and succeeds in — externalizing the increasingly wearied prince's innermost feelings as he at last experiences the full impact of all that he has set in motion. The ball becomes Cardinale's debut into the aristocracy — and the prince's farewell to a way of life that he knows must be altered irrevocably. In at last acknowledging his own attraction to Cardinale, the prince makes the connection between his own mortality and the waning of his class. He accepts the loss, but is convinced that leopards and lions like himself will be succeeded by jackals and sheep.

In most international co-productions there is no true original-language version, and "The Leopard" is no exception. According to a 1964

article in Sight and Sound, most of the shooting was, in fact, done in English, yet most of the actors reverted to their native languages before it was over. For the Italian version, the entire cast, including the Italian actors, was dubbed into Italian. For the French version the French actors, including Serge Reggiani as the prince's garrulous hunting companion and Pierre Clementi as the prince's young son, and Cardinale, dubbed themselves. For the English version only Lancaster and French, a Britisher, dubbed themselves. The rest were dubbed by American actors.

Even though Burt Lancaster's role is dubbed into an Italian that has no resemblance to his distinctive voice, he is nevertheless superb in this most reflective and interior of roles. (It is said that he modeled the prince on Visconti himself.) If anything, it is possible to appreciate his performance even more now, in the light of his recent extraordinary work in "Atlantic City," "Go Tell the Spartans" and "Conversation Piece," Visconti's penultimate film, than 20 years ago when he seemed more star than serious actor. Delon and Cardinale are also terrific in any language, but if ever there was an actor qualified to fill the title role in "The Leopard" (rated PG for its complex, heavy demands), whom Di Lampedusa patterned after his own great-grandfather, it was — and is — Burt Lancaster.

The restored version of "The Leopard" opens Nov. 20 at the Castro Theatre in San Francisco.