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Conversation Piece

The protagonist (Burt Lancaster) of Luchino Visconti's *Conversation Piece* (Fox-Rank) lives alone in a sombrelly splendid apartment in Rome. He is a man of science who has abandoned science when he discovered that it was not neutral; he has turned instead to his collection of paintings, to music, to a composed, contemplative silence. He is *il Professore*: rich,

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respected, and left alone. He inhabits, or imagines he inhabits, a small private world, an area of the real world cut off from politics, human claims, or time.

Time, however, provides the film's first image. The roll of a cardiograph unwinds behind the titles: the Professor has had a heart attack. This turns out in the end to be a flashback device, but of an unobtrusive kind and one which serves principally to open a theme. Which is: death is expected to interrupt the careful stasis of his days, and death in such a form is desirable, the ultimate though unspoken objective of his death-in-life. In choosing the manner of his life the Professor has also selected the stage for his death.

The Italian title, *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno*, tells how to look at the film, which is played entirely within the Professor's apartment and the apartment above him, and on the stairs and landings in between. Daylight is seen on the balcony, but it is studio daylight against a studio backdrop. But for *Death in Venice*, one might have supposed that set-planning of this order of severity would have dictated a *mise en scène* of similar spareness. However the contrary is the case. Like *Death in Venice*, *Conversation Piece* achieves its chamber music effects by the use of massive wide-screen and a majestically opulent score, and develops its introspective and auto-analytical theme with the aid of a camera style which lingers over faces and furniture and shadows as the Professor, with his magnifying glass, lingers over his paintings. Expensive technical resources which might normally be held in reserve for battles and chariot races are used here for a domestic story about the isolation of the self, and what happens when that self is suddenly invaded.

The invaders are Bianca Brumonti (Silvana Mangano), her son and daughter, and her lover Konrad (Helmut Berger). They enter the Professor's world like a barbarian horde, trampling over his refusals, seizing the upper apartment, and pulling down the walls. Harmony and order are violently overthrown. The Professor's protests are brushed aside as if his words have no meaning. The law on which he has always relied turns out to be ineffective. With her white face make-up, her black eye-shadow, her flaring nostrils, Bianca is the image of a vulpine Medusa, flooding the Professor's world of crepuscular sensibility with a stony, petrifying light. Blinking and protesting, he awakes.

What he awakens to makes up the rather unsatisfactory body of the film. Bianca and her children are rich. She is the wife of an industrialist, 'a well-known Fascist', as Konrad describes him. Konrad is himself some kind of revolutionary, active on the Paris barricades in 1968. The stark, absurd polarities allow the Professor no point of connection. Indeed, the audience can make no connection either; and there is a great deal at the centre of *Conversation Piece* which is hard to take. There is a nude pot-smoking scene which is no doubt dreadfully depraved. Konrad turns out to be archly knowing about music and painting. All this makes the audience restless; and indeed the falsity and pretension of much of the dialogue is severely dispiriting.

The Professor's involvement with his new family is intercut with a series of near-subliminal flashbacks to his old family, to the women—disturbingly represented by unnamed celebrities such as Claudia Cardinale and Dominique Sanda—who expected something of him, something he wouldn't give. These short, reproachful scenes work better in their contemplative way, in my opinion, than the theme of Konrad becoming the Professor's adopted son works in its active and melodramatic way. In the end Konrad commits suicide (it doesn't seem to matter very much), and the Professor suffers his heart attack. He is visited by Bianca, no longer malign, and her daughter. He has recovered his interior poise, and the film ends



'Conversation Piece': Stefano Patrizi, Claudia Marsani, Silvana Mangano

on a note of composure as if it too had found its natural point of balance, half in love with easeful death but paying lip service to the human need for friendship.

In spite of what seem to me to be major weaknesses, *Conversation Piece* is a haunting film, beautiful to look at and to listen to. The centre of it all is Burt Lancaster's performance. He makes those familiar gestures with his open hands, which here seem to be attempts at policing the chaos of events. His stiff movements and the way he holds his head suggest perplexity, but also purpose and aggression, subtly at odds with the story. 'I studied. I travelled. I was in the war.' His clipped style, his voice and carriage somehow expressing the control of a barely containable force, gives back to the film the solemnity and dignity which elsewhere is dissipated.

JAMES PRICE