

# Italian actress Claudia Cardinale and European cinema of the 1960s

David Walsh  
10 October 2025

Italian actress Claudia Cardinale died September 23 at her home in France. Cardinale was one of the most prominent performers of the 1960s and 1970s, in Italian and European cinema above all. For her beauty, intelligence and personal strength, she was sought out by many directors.

A varied bunch, the latter include Mario Monicelli, Pietro Germi, Mauro Bolognini, Abel Gance, Luchino Visconti, Valerio Zurlini, Philippe de Broca, Federico Fellini, Blake Edwards, Henry Hathaway, Philip Dunne, Richard Brooks, Franco Rossi, Alexander Mackendrick, Sergio Leone, Jerzy Skolimowski, Werner Herzog and Marco Bellocchio.

Born in Tunisia in 1938, the daughter of a Sicilian-born railway worker and his wife, Cardinale spoke French and the Sicilian dialect at home. She was not fluent in Italian until she began making films in the late 1950s. Famously, she got her start in cinema accidentally, winning a beauty pageant in 1957 (as the most beautiful Italian girl in Tunisia) whose first prize was a trip to the Venice film festival. Producers saw her there and she was invited to attend a film school in Rome, where she didn't stay long. Her own plan at the time was to become a school teacher.

Cardinale writes in her autobiography *Mes étoiles* [*My Stars*], that “the chance to meet extraordinary people, who leave such an impression on you that they change your life, your ambitions, your dreams, people you admire—that’s something. I don’t deserve any credit. Fate has often decided for me.”

It wasn’t fate, in any mystical sense. And, of course, she’s being too modest, she does deserve some credit. But it is true that it was not merely Cardinale’s undeniable personal appeal that helped her to become a central figure in a number of important, insightful films.

The point is, first of all, that there were important, insightful films in which to act. Cardinale joined the Italian and European film industry in the late 1950s, less than 15 years after the end of World War II and the defeat of Italian and German fascism. A general hostility to the ruling classes prevailed, ruling classes that had either openly or tacitly embraced brutal dictatorship and war. Socialism, “humanism,” anti-authoritarianism and various forms of critique of the existing society permeated the cinema world. Along with that, inevitably, the presence of the working class or the lower orders in general in films was far more pronounced than it is today.

In Italy in particular. In her memoir, the actress herself notes that in that epoch “when Christian Democracy reigned over Italy...the entire intelligentsia was left-wing or far-left.”

She comments on her participation in the Italian film industry at the time:

Between 1958 and 1973, I made some fifty films, on average three per year, more than half of which were with the greatest Italian directors. Italian cinema was then at the height of its power. It was the second largest in the world after Hollywood, producing between 250 and 300 films per year. Each year, some 800 million

tickets were sold: a record for a population of some 50 million. If we subtracted babies, children, and the elderly, this meant that every adult Italian, in the city and the countryside, went to the cinema at least once a week.

A small role in Monicelli’s classic comedy, *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958), as the sister of one of the hopelessly unsuccessful small-time criminals, made an impression, as did a part in Bolognini’s *Bell’Antonio* (1960), with Marcello Mastroianni. She also appeared briefly in Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) about a family from southern Italy living and coming apart in the industrial north.

Interestingly, at the time of her appearance in Pietro Germi’s *The Facts of Murder* (1959), one observant commentator noted her abilities. Out of all the reviews, she writes,

that ignored who I was, that despised my work as an apprentice actress, growing up, maturing in front of the cameras, there was a flash, a miracle: my first gift in this profession. A real review by Pier Paolo Pasolini, a young avant-garde writer and director of thirty-six. His entire review of Germi’s film was based on an analysis of my gaze. I had a way of observing, he said, that belonged only to me, three-quarters turned, from the “corner of her eye.”

Cardinale’s first major role, which had a deep, endearing effect on audiences, came in *Girl With a Suitcase* (1961), about a young woman, Aida, pursuing a wealthy man who seduced and abandoned her. She intrigues his younger brother instead, with ultimately unhappy and degrading results. In her autobiography, the actress explains that left-wing director Valerio Zurlini

had to fight to get me on board. Aida was a very complex character, and people in the industry still didn’t consider me a “real” actress. Why did he insist so much? Because, he replied, I didn’t need to “play” Aida. I “was” Aida. What could have made him think that? Aida is a little prostitute from Parma, a working class girl who suffers, lost, tormented, with a tragic destiny, and who talks, who talks incessantly.

Cardinale further explains:

Aida is in love with a boy from a good family. Between them,

the meeting of two worlds plays out: the rich and the poor. Aida believes she will be saved by the love of this pure young man, but she is persuaded to leave, so as not to jeopardize the boy's future. ... She finally opens the envelope he gave her before she left him. With the excitement of a young girl, she rushes to grab a love letter. Inside, there is only money. She has lost everything.

Cardinale remained friends with Zurlini until his untimely death at 56 in 1982.

Visconti, the scion of an aristocratic Italian family who joined the Communist Party, had an immense impact on Cardinale's life and career. She said of him, "He was mad about history, literature, and music." She describes the famed director as "an absolute master, tyrannical, cruel, but also generous, passionate, tender, and astonishingly intelligent. Visconti, the greatest director of actors of the twentieth century." She may well be right.

The most important role she played for Visconti was Angelica, the daughter of the nouveau riche Don Calógero Sedàra (Paolo Stoppa), a wealthy businessman and landowner, in *The Leopard*. The film traces the process by which the old Italian aristocracy allies itself with the bourgeoisie during the period of Italian unification in the 1860s, strangling the movement of the oppressed in the process. As we wrote in the WWSW:

*The Leopard* is the tale of Don Fabrizio Corbera, the charismatic Prince of Salina (Burt Lancaster), who witnesses with philosophical resignation the passing of the feudal era as the Italian peninsula is united for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire. ...

The prince soon learns that his beloved nephew Tancredi (Alain Delon) [whom Cardinale's character marries] is fighting with Garibaldi's forces. If the nobility refuses to accept the Kingdom of Italy, insists the young man, "They will foist a republic on us." He goes on, "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." This is a central concern of the film, highlighting the aborted, ultimately anti-popular nature of Italian unification, with all sorts of implications for subsequent Italian history.

Cardinale, Lancaster and Delon were brilliant in the film. In her memoir, she explains that the intense, historically insightful work had a powerful personal impact.

Delon, Lancaster, and I were so influenced by *The Leopard* that a bond was formed between us, only interrupted by Burt's death in 1994, and which continues to this day between Alain and me. No one can guess why we only need to look at each other to understand each other, why we are of the same mind, why we cry sometimes too.

Visconti said this about Cardinale: "Claudia looks like a feline letting itself be petted on the living room sofa. But be careful, the cat can turn into a tigress. She'll tear the tamer's hand to shreds."

The same year that Cardinale appeared in *The Leopard*, remarkable year!, she also featured in Fellini's *8 1/2*, about a renowned film director (Mastroianni, standing in for Fellini) in crisis. Guido Anselmi suffers from "writer's block," his involvements with various women, including fantasy ones, are complex and generally painful, and no one seems able to help. How does he go on? At one point, he considers suicide, before he

becomes more accepting of his life and its contradictions.

Cardinale explains that Fellini's methods were the opposite of Visconti's:

Visconti filmed according to a script in which every detail was mastered, Fellini filmed without a script. He took little scraps of paper out of his pockets and gave them to us at the last second. The actors who, to calm their anxiety, had worked on a text obtained with great difficulty the day before, were the most unhappy. In the morning, everything had to be redone. So, Fellini began by improvising. To show me how to play a scene, he would sit opposite me, in Mastroianni's place, who at the time of filming would in turn be Fellini. ...

She recalls further:

Fellini randomly proposed associations and slips of the tongue. Like the surrealists, he enjoyed working with the most bizarre, the most inappropriate images, the raw material of the unconscious. Events followed one another according to a logic that escaped us. He filmed, threw it away, and started again. What was he looking for? No one could say. "It's a work that oscillates between a psychoanalysis session and an examination of conscience," he said one day. In his pocket, however, he kept a small piece of paper: "Remember that you're making a comedy film."

Summarizing, she writes about the directors and others she met as a developing actress:

I was lucky enough to meet brilliant men, but also attentive, full of intuition, and who knew how to find the right words to help me understand roles too subtle for my age. A director cannot be reduced to a mere technician; he must demonstrate great human depth. We actors use our emotions like a muscle, and just as an overused muscle weakens, this emotionality weakens us. The director is the only one who can give us strength, help us take risks.

The telling and semi-tragic feature of Cardinale's career is that after the 1960s and early 1970s, which also included her performances in Edwards' *The Pink Panther* (1963), a fascinating pairing with Rita Hayworth (and John Wayne) in Hathaway's *Circus World*, two more Visconti films—*Sandra* (1965) and *Conversation Piece* (1974), Brooks' *The Professionals* (1966), Mackendrick's *Don't Make Waves* (1967) and, of course, Leone's memorable *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), alongside Henry Fonda, Jason Robards and Charles Bronson—there is almost nothing, unless one wants to make something perhaps out of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) or Marco Bellocchio's *Henry IV* (1984).

The falling off in the European cinema generally and in Italy in particular has been seismic. The historic betrayals of the Italian Communist Party and its broken-off fragments are primarily responsible. The discouragement and disorientation of the artists and intelligentsia, the turn away from social problems and the conditions of the working class, has been intense. Cardinale was not especially left-wing, but she was the beneficiary of a tide of anti-establishment sentiment and artistic

expression. The current mass movements in Italy against the Gaza genocide and the fascists in power must produce a cultural renewal, along with everything else.

In any event, Claudia Cardinale remains a great presence in world cinema. She rejected the slightest nostalgia in her memoir and claimed to love, as she should have, “the present more than any other time,” but she could not help remarking that

I would have many reasons to look back; the past has been glorious. I still receive letters from young people, dazzled by a role, a character, and who ask for my address, as if I were the young actress who moved them. I take their tribute for what it is, an expression of their admiration for a cinema that is no more and that they miss.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**