

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE ECLIPSE (L'ECLISSE) 1962

Michelangelo Antonioni

### OVERVIEW

*The Eclipse* was the third in Antonioni's trilogy of films to dissect the existential dismay that haunted post-war Europe, and Italy in particular. It won the Special Jury Prize and was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1963. The unforgettable scenes of the stock exchange were actually shot on location in the Rome exchange, adding a level of authenticity to what is often seen as a poetical film rather than a social documentary. It is regularly listed among the 100 best films ever made.

### SYNOPSIS

The story follows a few days in the life of Vittoria, an attractive young woman after she breaks up with her fiancé, Riccardo, and meets a handsome stock broker, Piero. Their desultory relationship develops, but never really flowers, in the arid landscape of the suburbs with its brutal modernist architecture. As the non-love affair moves through the gears, the story takes in the mad frenzy of the stock exchange in Rome, the theft of a car, an impersonated African dance and a flight in a private plane. The engaged couple break up, the market slumps, the car crashes and so does the half-hearted love affair between the absent woman and the frivolous man. An air of paralysis hangs over everything.

### PEOPLE

Vittoria	Vittoria, a young woman, is a literary translator.
Riccardo	Riccardo, a writer, is her fiancé.
Piero	Piero, a broker at the stock exchange, becomes Vittoria's lover.
Marta	Marta is one of Vittoria's neighbours.
Anita	Anita is also her neighbour.

### SCENES

*Break-up* Vittoria and Riccardo are in his modern apartment in a new industrial estate on the outskirts of Rome. She is a literary translator and he is a writer. After a long night of unresolved arguments, she decides to leave him. Riccardo is hurt and wants to know why she is going, but she repeatedly says that she doesn't know. She doesn't have another man, but she is no longer happy.

*Final goodbye* She walks through a deserted landscape of concrete buildings and water towers, until Riccardo catches up with her in his car. He accompanies her through a wooded section that leads to her own apartment, where they exchange final goodbyes.

*Stock exchange* Later that morning, Vittoria takes a taxi to the Stock Exchange in order to find her mother. In contrast, to the quiet land around her apartment, this place is frantic with gesticulating and shouting men. Vittoria watches her mother invests money as recommended by a young stock broker, named Piero, who rushes around buying stocks after getting inside tips and selling them for a higher price. After the raucous crowd reluctantly observes a minute of silence for a deceased colleague, the huge hall erupts into its normal pandemonium. Piero chats with Vittoria, whom he knows as his client's daughter but has never met.

*Neighbours* When Vittoria and her mother leave, the mother is too preoccupied with her morning's profits to hear about her daughter's breaking up with her fiancé. Vittoria goes back to her apartment outside town, where she is visited by her neighbour, Anita, to whom she unburdens herself about her decision to leave Riccardo. As they talk, another neighbour, Marta, invites them to her apartment.

Marta spent a lot of time in Kenya, where her husband is at the moment, and tells her visitors about the landscape and animals in that east African country.

*African dance* Vittoria puts on a record of African drumming, dresses up in African clothes and dances with a spear. Anita joins in, but Marta tells them to stop 'playing like Negroes'. Vittoria comments that maybe life in Africa is less confusing. 'Here it's so complicated,' she says. 'Even love.'

*Dogs and wind* When Marta's dog escapes from the apartment, the women chase it into the dark landscape. Vittoria remarks that black and white dogs are the same, and then listens to the clinking sound of the wind blowing through tall metal poles. When Vittoria reaches her apartment, Riccardo calls to her from the street below her window, but she refuses to respond.

*Clouds and space* The following day, Vittoria, Anita and Anita's boyfriend fly to Verona in a private plane. During the short flight, Vittoria is fascinated by the clouds, and at the airport she watches planes streak overhead with the glee of a child. At a café, she locks eyes with a young black man but doesn't speak. Relaxing outside the café, with open space all around her, she feels briefly happy.

*Collapse* Back at the stock exchange, Piero is dashing around making deals. When a particular stock opens at a low price, he makes calls to Milan and engages in rapid sales. Vittoria's mother arrives in the midst of the frenzied wheeling-dealing, as Piero passes on tips obtained by phone. Tempers fray, faces crumple and Vittoria's mother loses a lot of money, blaming it on the Socialists. She is also angry with Vittoria for leaving Riccardo, who had a good salary. Vittoria watches in despair as her mother joins a demonstration against the insidious 'plot of the exploiters.'

*Losing money* Piero tells Vittoria that, while her mother lost money, others lost much more and points to a badly-dressed man. 'He lost 50 million lire,' he says. Vittoria follows the man to a cafe and watches as he drinks mineral water and doodles on a piece of paper. Later, she runs into Piero, who explains that losing money on the stock market is only on paper. 'The money doesn't really go anywhere,' he says.

*Parent's home* He drives Vittoria in his fancy sports car to her mother's apartment, where she shows him photographs of her family, especially her dead father. When she shows him her childhood room and lies on the bed, he makes a pass at her, but she rebuffs him.

*Clients* Back at his office in the investment company, Piero has to clean up the mess left by the losses that morning. He criticises clients for blaming him when things go bad and for not showing gratitude when they make big profits.

*Change of mind* After work, he meets a girl he had arranged to spend the evening with, but when he notices that she's changed her hair colour, he drives to Vittoria's apartment. Standing on the street below her window, he calls to her. While they are flirting, a drunk steals his fancy car and their possible encounter is delayed.

*Car crash* Vittoria and Piero meet at the side of a lake where his stolen car and a dead body are being dragged out of the water. They walk through a park and enjoy each other's company. Near her apartment building, Vittoria unties a balloon from a pram and challenges her neighbour Marta to shoot it (she had boasted of shooting animals in Kenya).

*Frustration* Piero tells her that he will kiss her when they reach her building, but when he kisses early, she does not respond. At home, she calls Piero, but he is busy chatting to someone else. When she does get through, she falls silent, prompting Piero to think it's a prank call. He screams into the receiver and slams it down.

*Love-making* The following morning, she walks through the barren landscape of the construction site to meet Piero, who tells her he bought a new car to replace his ruined one. She agrees to go with him to his parents' apartment, where they have a meandering, seemingly pointless conversation. After more ambiguous talk, she kisses him but stops when he becomes too passionate. She wanders into a bedroom, where Piero joins her and, finally, they make love.

*The future* The next day, Piero and Vittoria are lying down in the countryside and discuss a possible future together. He says, that he feels like he's in a 'foreign country,' and she says that how he makes her feel. They talk about marriage and conclude that they don't understand each other. Talking about Riccardo, her ex-fiancé, she says, 'When we were in love, there was nothing to understand. There was just love.' Piero doubts that they can be happy together, and she says, 'I wish I didn't love you or that I loved you more.'

*No show* Next day, in his office, Vittoria and Piero embrace and kiss on a couch, but more playfully than passionately. They agree to meet at 8pm that evening, at the 'usual place,' near her apartment. Neither one shows up.

## THEMES

### 1. Psychology

*alienation* The central theme of this dispiriting film is the alienation that the film-maker witnessed in the industrialised society of Italy after the Second World War. Throughout the film, we notice the absence of emotional bonds, or any kind of attachment, between people as well as between people and their environment. Even inside the apartments, there is a cold detachment from objects and people. As in other Antonioni's films, there is also the alienation of landscape and architecture. Most of *The Eclipse* is shot in a lunar-like landscape of an industrial estate with modernist concrete structures, such as water towers and apartment complexes, and also empty lots. People drift through this bleak setting, silently, almost ghost-like, and only seem to come to life when they enter an apartment, with its walls and art objects. This is desolation is shown in the opening section when Vittoria leaves Riccardo and walks across the industrial estate. She drifts, apparently without destination, because she is someone who loves without passion and who forms no meaningful relationship with anyone.

*greed* Another major psychological strand in the story is greed, which is illustrated in the famous, extended shot of the Stock Market Exchange in central Rome. It is a large space with the traders and brokers surrounded by a crowd of investors, journalists and curious bystanders. Protected by a wooden railings, the traders and brokers run around like crazed actors, shouting and gesticulating as millions of lire change hands. Here, people are pressed close together, but without any communication except in numbers and share prices. It is the only kind of passion depicted in this bleak film, a money madness that animates the would-be lover Piero. And when he tries to explain what happens when someone loses money, he has to admit that the loss is only on paper. The 'lost' money doesn't go anywhere. It's baffling, a vacuous phrase, devoid of meaning, like nearly everything in the film.

### 2. Society

*colonialism* Although Antonioni famously said that he 'detested' over messages in film, there is a clear condemnation of colonialism in *The Eclipse*. Britain and France are well-known for their colonies, but from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Italy also took over parts of north Africa and eastern Africa, notably Ethiopia and Somalia. Although all these colonies had become independent by 1960, Italians, like Marta's husband, still retained business link in the continent. This scourge of post-war Italy is vividly dramatised in one long scene in Marta's apartment, where Vittoria and Anita have been invited. Marta, who has lived in Kenya for many years, and whose husband is in Africa at the time, has surrounded herself with African art objects and photographs of 'natives.' When Vittoria dresses up and dances around like an African woman, Marta tells them to stop. She explains that all Africans are 'monkeys', except the four or five who got educated at Oxford. 'They all have guns,' she says. 'Six million coloureds want to get rid of 60,000 whites.' Later, we discover that Marta herself has a gun, which she uses to shoot down a balloon after Vittoria asks her to.

*racism* In Italy itself, which is often the bridge for Africans to enter Europe, racism has a historical presence. The film depicts this unconscious racism in a brief but telling scene, when Vittoria and her friends have flown in a private plane to Verona. At the airport, Vittoria drifts around and walks toward a café, where she sees two African men sitting outside. At first, she doesn't notice them, as if they were standing plants. Then, she glances at them and they at her. A few minutes later, her friend Anita passes those men as she approaches Vittoria, and this time the white woman doesn't look at them at all. All four of them—two Italian women and two African men—are in the same place, but occupy

separate worlds.

### 3. Friendship

*female conversation* While the male-female relationships are troubled, the film includes a long scene that illustrates close female friendship. Vittoria has two neighbours, Anita and Marta. After Vittoria's break-up with her fiancé, she is visited by Anita, and the two friends talk about the failed engagement. Unlike her conversations with men, Vittoria is able to speak with more clarity and candour with Anita and comes close to explaining her complex feelings. When the sexual frisson is removed, it seems that the two people can relax and express their problems more freely.

*dancing* Female friendship in the film becomes more intense in the scene that follows the conversation. Marta, another neighbour, invites both Vittoria and Anita to her apartment, which is full of objects and photographs from Africa. As soon as Vittoria hears a record of African drumming, she dresses in a tunic that barely conceals her curvaceous body and dances around with erotic body movements, jumping on a bed and raising a spear as if on a hunt. The whole scene uses backlighting to make her costume transparent and her fine figure visible. There is no sexual action, although Marta does later recline on Vittoria's half-clothed body, and there is no male audience for Vittoria's display of sensuality. Still, the effervescence of her dance and the eroticism of her near-naked body illustrate the desire that lies within her. It is striking that she can express her sexuality more openly in front of other women.

### 4. Love

#### *Vittoria and Riccardo*

*break-up* When the film opens, Vittoria tries to explain to Riccardo why she wants to break off their engagement. It is a painful and frustrating scene for both, but more for Riccardo since Vittoria is unable to explain her reasons for wanting to leave him. The scene is convincing in dramatising the ambiguity of love, its origins and its demise.

*final good-bye* The breaking up scene is then followed by another, in which Riccardo tries to hang on to Vittoria. He follows her in his car and walks with her across the desolate open land near their apartment block. But there is nothing he can do to make Vittoria change her mind. When they part for the last time, he tries to make it inconclusive, suggesting that they will call each other. He is unable to accept the finality of their break-up.

*aftermath* Vittoria performs a sort of post-mortem on her failed love affair with Riccardo when she has a long talk with her friend, Anita. Her comments are reflective of the 'sickness of Eros' (the malaise of sexual desire) that pervades many of the director's films. 'We spent the whole night talking,' Vittoria says with a sigh, 'and for what?' Vittoria adds that she is not only depressed but also 'disgusted,' which is an odd word to use to describe the loss of love. Then, she gazes out a window and, in one of the film's most quotable lines, says, 'At times, a piece of cloth, a needle, a book... or a man, it's the same thing.' Sexual desire, the animating pulse of life, is equated with the most mundane objects in a woman's life. Eros, the classical god of sensual love, has no place in the dreary world of money-making and modernist buildings. Vittoria has been infected by the malaise that poisons the air.

#### *Vittoria and Piero*

While the film includes some sexual scenes, even they cannot escape the pervading sense of alienation. The budding attraction between Piero and Vittoria goes through several phases and ends up in consummation, but the dominant tone is playful rather than passionate. Piero's sexuality is somewhat ambiguous in the first place, and Vittoria can never shake off the weariness that weighs on her.

*flirting stage 1* Piero tells Vittoria that his only passion is for the stock exchange and he displays a peculiar kind of sexual ennui in their first quasi-sex scene. After the two young people have met at the stock exchange, she invites him to her mother's apartment. Inside, they wander through various rooms, in close proximity, exchanging light comments about her past. He keeps a close watch on her face and mood, as if trailing a prey. When she lies down on a bed in her old childhood bedroom, he senses his opportunity and sits down beside her. Smiling down, he lowers himself to kiss her, but she pulls away and stands up. He wears a resigned expression of 'Ah well, bad luck.' It is a non-event in

a relationship without lust or romance. As we look at Piero's face, we sense that he is just going through the motions without any emotional investment. These are two attractive and unattached young people. There should be a spark, but the fires have been put out or were never lit.

*flirting stage 2* Piero, the charming and confident young man, cannot help but flirt with the sexy-looking Vittoria. After her rejection in the scene described above, he does not give up. Having arranged to meet a call-girl, he thinks of Vittoria and drives to her apartment building and parks. It is dark as he approaches her building and finds the gate locked. He looks up at her windows lit from the inside. Another, young and curvaceous woman walks past him, arousing whatever desire he has. The scene, so far wordless, is reminiscent of noir thrillers with a sexual predator on the prowl. When she hides behind the curtains, he steps out of view and walks a few paces down the pavement. It is a cat and mouse game, until he asks what she's doing. She says translating Spanish and he replies with a flirtatious remark about coming up to see her. She laughs and he says, 'I don't understand why we should waste our time like this.' Again, she smiles and we think they are finally going to be lovers, but his car is stolen and his priorities dictate that he must consider his possession before any love interest. Up to that point, though, Piero has played the flirt to perfection.

*flirting stage 3* A central feature of Piero's sexuality is his androgyny. He is a man who shows some sexual interest in women, but it is muted. He has a feminine air as he pirouettes around the stock exchange and he has a graceful walk. This ambiguity about his sexuality is illustrated in the penultimate scene, the one that follows directly after the only scene in which he and Vittoria make love. From a low camera angle, we see them half-hidden, lying on a couch in his office. They are all arms and legs, and it is difficult to say which limb belongs to whom. As they squirm around, they laugh about there being 'too many arms.' One of them wiggles their fingers, but we can't be sure whose they are. Unable to stop giggling, they begin to parody the 'love-dovey' actions of other couples they saw earlier that day. Piero plays the role of the girls convincingly. Altogether, the scene between the two 'lovers' is more like a little boy and girl playing girls games. Piero is an aggressive figure on the floor of the stock exchange, but in matters of love he is passive, shy and even girlish. This is what draws Vittoria to him, in contrast with the more testosterone-driven Riccardo, her ex-fiancé. Piero's sexuality is ambiguous, part male, part female, which mirrors the murky drift of the story itself.

*making love* The scene in which the two 'lovers' finally make love is a brilliant illustration of Vittoria's peculiar sexuality. After having met and flirted more than once, Vittoria goes to Piero's family home. They are alone as they pass through silent rooms, both knowing that they should make love, but neither one making the first move. Vittoria moves to a window, where she sees nuns coming down the street. She sits down, smooths her skirt, tosses her head and asks questions. She smiles, pats the couch and tells Piero to sit beside her. She makes sexual innuendos about call-girls and his 'passion' for the stock exchange. When Piero wants to know why she asks so many questions, she gives an enigmatic answer: 'I don't think people should get to know each other well if they want to fall in love. Maybe they shouldn't fall in love at all.' She then sits at a desk and pretends to play a card game. When she stands up, her body is inches from his; she hesitates and moves away. Then she kisses him, which arouses him, but she pulls away, causing her blouse to rip and expose one breast. Still she wanders through the house and ends up in the bedroom, the inevitable final destination, where she takes off her necklace and her dress, but then stops, looks out the window and again sees the nuns. When Piero embraces her, she hesitates for a split-second before giving in to her submerged desire. It is a long scene, with little dialogue, which reveals the different elements of Vittoria's sexuality. She is restless, she is inquisitive, she is hesitant but she is also possessed by a raw desire. The ripped blouse is symbolic of her exposed passion, as if a barrier has been torn down and the pent-up energy released.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Piero** Piero is a young, enthusiastic and handsome man, who works as a broker in the Rome stock exchange. Although he is dedicated to his job, he is self-absorbed and shallow and acts like an overgrown adolescent.' He can be charming and playful, but he lacks any empathy. When Vittoria comments that he 'never stands still,' he replies, 'Why should I?'

**Materialistic** Piero is driven by his desire for making money at the stock exchange, a job at which he seems to excel. We see him flying around the floor of the exchange like a person possessed, but an even more telling illustration of his mercenary character occurs outside the world of high finance. His car, a fancy Alpha Romeo, has been stolen by a drunk, while Piero is trying to get Vittoria to invite him into her apartment. The expensive vehicle is driven away at great speed and, the next day, is

dragged out of the river. The man who drove it is dead, but Piero is not too upset because, as he says, 'there aren't many dents it [the car].' Vittoria is shocked by his lack of empathy for the dead man and asks if he is only thinking of the dents. 'No,' he says, having completely misunderstood her question. 'I'm also thinking about the motor and the money.' He goes on to explain how much it cost and how much he can get for it and how much a new car might cost. It is a chilling example of the soulless, alienated capitalist society that Antonioni skewers in the film.

**Rude** Piero often behaves like a spoiled teenager, or a narcissistic adult, who can't see further than his own interests. A good example of this characteristic occurs in the middle of the film, when there is a morning of devastating losses for many of his clients. After his boss criticises his investment choices, he takes out his anger on a secretary and then, without skipping a beat, picks up the telephone and makes a date to meet a prostitute later that day. He is rude to the secretary and then to another client, who comes into his office. 'How many times do I have to tell you?' he says to the woman. 'You have your troubles. I have mine. Too bad.' He throws her out and berates a male client about taking up too much of his time. Piero can only understand his own situation, whether he's made money or not. Other people, his clients upon whose investments he depends, are no more human than a column of numbers on a sheet of paper. Petulant, bossy and short-tempered, Piero is rude to them all.

**Vittoria** Vittoria is a young, attractive and cosmopolitan woman, a translator from Italian into German and Spanish. She has a strange, Sphinx-like beauty, pretty and yet morose. Most of the time she wears a sultry expression, as if her sexual desire has burnt out and left a mark. She is searching for love and can be flirtatious without even trying. She is often withdrawn but can also burst out into laughter. She is also a curious person, enquiring both about money and love, although she has no answers to either. She is hesitant about having sex with men, not from any moral primness, but from an underlying disquiet with the world. Her fluctuating, unpredictable moods dominate the film, which is told from her point of view.

**Incommunicative** Vittoria's character is well illustrated in the first scene of the movie. She and her fiancé, Riccardo, are in his apartment. It is early morning, after a long discussion about their relationship and future. She handles various objects on a table, abstracted, unsure and hesitant. She stands at the window, draws back the curtains and retreats to a sofa, where she curls up into a ball like a little girl. He wants to know what she is thinking, and she says that she has made up her mind. She doesn't disclose what her decision is; rather, she picks up two coffee cups and takes them into the kitchen. She goes back, looks in a mirror, starts to speak but closes her mouth. Three long minutes pass until Riccardo bursts out and wants to know why she is leaving him, but she is inarticulate, unable to explain her feelings. 'It's not another man, she says, and he is perplexed. 'Are you leaving because you don't love me or because you don't want to marry me?' he asks. 'I don't know,' is her answer, a phrase that she repeats several times in this scene. As she leaves him, she hands back a manuscript of his novel and says, 'Sorry, but I can't do this German translation for you.' The translator can't communicate her own feeling in her native Italian.

**Playful** Perhaps Vittoria's only endearing trait is her playfulness, which is enacted in several scenes. She has an imagination that seems to be stifled by the austere landscape around her apartment building and Riccardo's cold modernist apartment. The most vivid illustration of her ability to play act comes when she and a friend visit Marta, whose apartment is filled with objects and photographs from Africa. After Vittoria puts on a record of African drumming, she dresses up in a tunic, puts rings around her neck and thick bracelets on her wrists. Holding a spear, she prances around the flat in an imitation of an African dancer. Vittoria has completely transformed herself from the phlegmatic and static person into a woman of electric energy and startling movements. She is play acting, taking on the part of another personality. It is significant, also, that she does not speak during the scene—she only moves her body in tune with the music.

**Curious** Although, or perhaps because, Vittoria is not communicative, she is curious. She is an observer rather than a talker. She finds things 'complicated' and is rendered passive by that complexity, but she still wants to understand herself and others. The best, if somewhat bizarre, illustration of her curiosity comes when she follows a man out of the stock exchange. Piero has just told her that the aging man, who is shabbily dressed, has just lost 50 million lire. Curious, she follows him out onto the street and watches, like a sleuth, as he stops at a café to drink mineral water. When he leaves his chair, she furtively slides over and picks up the piece of paper he's been writing on. Turning it around and around, she sees that he has drawn a number of flowers. She is fascinated by this flower-doodling old man who has just had a terrible shock. It is all very Hitchcockian, the silent

observer of a man seated at a café, the secret writing and the unexplained mystery of it all. Again, it is noteworthy, that throughout this scene, Vittoria does not utter a word.

**Riccardo** Riccardo is a kind of 'fall guy' in the story. He is a nice-looking, educated, normal sort of man, who cannot understand why his fiancé wants to break off their engagement. He doesn't like ambiguity or unexplained actions. He represents a masculine need for affirmation, and is the odd man out in a triangle that includes the androgynous Piero and the inquisitive Vittoria.

**Rational** Riccardo, the writer, is a man who wants answers and dislikes confusion. This characteristic is illustrated in the very first scene, when Vittoria breaks off their engagement. He sits in a chair in the centre of the room, like an inquisitor, and questions her about her motives. When she cannot explain her decision, he says firmly: 'But there has to be a reason. There must be a reason.' After more vague statements from Vittoria, he rises and hits out at a table in frustration, breaking a ceramic object. 'Tell me what you want me to do,' he shouts. 'Tell me and I'll do it.' He thinks there is a solution to their lack of love, a rational explanation for her decision to leave him. Find the cause and remedy it—problem over. But it isn't like that in an Antonioni film. There are no simple answers.

**Denial** Riccardo is blind to the situation with Vittoria and cannot accept that she will leave him forever. In denial of this fact, he chases after her in his car and tells her to stop. When she tells him to leave her alone, he parks the car, gets out and accompanies her across the bleak landscape of the industrial estate. 'Why do you walk with me?' she asks and he says that he does it every morning. He takes her hand and leads her across a grassy area, commenting that they can walk together like they always do. When the walk ends at her apartment building, he doesn't want to accept the finality of their parting. When they say goodbye, he adds, 'Let's not say final goodbyes. We'll call each other.' Even when the end is obvious, he chooses not to see it.



(Piero and Vittoria have fun together on the couch)