

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE PASSENGER 1975

Michelangelo Antonioni

OVERVIEW

The last of Antonioni's three English-language films made under contract with Italian producer Carlo Ponti, *The Passenger* is as beautiful as *Zabriskie Point* and as mysterious as *Blow Up*. With its slow pace, visual precision and focus on emptiness, the film possesses all of the director's trademarks. With sequences in north Africa, Barcelona and rural Spain and London, the film also moves around a lot, as suggested by its title (although a working title was 'Profession: Journalist'). The story has many of the standard features of an international spy thriller—forged passports, gun-running, rebel armies and government agents—but that is a smokescreen for a typical Antonioni exploration of the human condition. Ambiguity of purpose, lack of direction, perpetual motion, serendipitous love and, above all, a sense of doom.

PEOPLE

David Robertson	David Locke is a British television reporter.
Rachel	David Robertson is a South African arms dealer.
Martin	Rachel is David Locke's wife.
girl	Martin is David Locke's colleague in London.
	The unnamed girl is an architecture student.

SYNOPSIS

On assignment in north Africa, journalist David Locke gets lost in the desert and returns dispirited to his rundown hotel, where he discovers Mr Robertson dead in the next room. Switching identity with the dead man and following the appointments listed in his diary, David gets involved in Robertson's arms sale to a rebel group. Finding himself in danger from the country threatened by the rebels, he is also pursued by Spanish police who are acting on behalf of David's wife in London. On the run, he enlists the help of a young woman who then becomes his lover. He is finally tracked down by both the police, but the hitmen arrive first and he is killed.

SCENES

Lost David Locke, a television journalist, drives his battered jeep into a small town on the edge of the Sahara Desert. He needs directions but can't communicate with the locals until a young boy hops in and points to the left. After a mile or two, the boy tells him to stop in the middle of the desert, gets down and walks away. Not knowing which way to turn, David watches a man pass by on a camel and finds a guide, who speaks English and leads him on long trek over high rocky dunes toward a 'sort of military camp.' David is interested because he wants to interview rebel fighters as part of a documentary he's making about politics in post-colonial Africa. They see armed men on camels but, for some unknown reason, turn back. When David's jeep gets stuck in the sand, he abandons the vehicle and walks all the way back to the town in the blistering heat.

Identity switch Inside his hotel, David goes to the room of a man named Robertson whom he had met earlier and finds the man lying dead on his bed. There is no blood or signs of violence, suggesting that he died of a heart attack. Looking through his things, he finds a passport, an airline ticket and a gun. A moment later, he decides to switch identities with Robertson. The two men are about the same age and height, with similar faces. David drags the corpse into his own room, lays him on his bed, switches their clothes and reports his own death to the hotel staff, who identify their foreign guests only by their clothes and their room number.

Tape recording As David cuts the photograph out of Robertson's passport and inserts his own, he plays a tape recording of a conversation he had with the dead man only a day or two before. From

the tape, we learn that Robertson is also a world-traveller, a man who sells merchandise and is on his way to Munich.

London Back in London, David's wife, Rachel, watches the TV news about her husband's death. She feels guilty because she's been having an affair and contacts Martin, one of David's colleagues, to help her find Mr Robertson in order to learn more about how David died. She says that, for some strange reason, she now wants to find out about David.

Munich David flies to Munich, on Robertson's ticket, where he opens a locker and retrieves the dead man's documents, which concern a large consignment of arms. He drives around the city and wanders into a church wedding, which triggers memories (shown in flashback) of his own failed marriage.

Arms sale His reminiscences are interrupted by two men who had observed him in the airport and assumed that he is Robertson. One of them, an African, thanks him for his support to his rebel army. Dumbfounded, David manages to recover and hand them the documents about the firearms. The two men are pleased with what they read and give him a large amount of cash as the first instalment. From their comments, David realises that the arms are intended for the same rebel group that he wanted to contact in Africa. One of the men warns David that, because of his support for the rebels, the government might try to harm him. Later, agents for the government kidnap one of the men and beat him badly.

Barcelona According to Robertson's diary, David's next meeting with the rebels is in Barcelona. He waits at the pre-arraigned place and time, but no one shows up. Walking along a street, he notices Martin, his London friend who has arrived in Barcelona searching for Mr Robertson, as requested by Rachel. David evades Martin by ducking into a building, where he meets a young female architecture student. After they part, he gets a message from Martin saying he wants to meet him (Robertson) at his hotel.

Escape Needing help to escape Barcelona, David tracks down the architecture student and asks her to collect his things at the hotel, put them in his car and pick him up at a nearby bar. She collects his suitcases and is about to drive away when Martin emerges from the hotel and asks if she knows Mr Robertson. She tells him to follow her in a taxi, which she eludes in the city traffic.

Revelations Safely away from the city, David tells her about switching identities with Robertson and selling arms to a rebel group in Africa. She then tells him about Martin talking to her when she left the hotel in Barcelona. Having shared secrets, they end up making love in a hotel. Looking at Robertson's diary, they see that he has had many meetings with 'Daisy,' who David thinks is a man.

London After losing Robertson, Martin returns to London and suggests that Rachel should enquire at the African country's embassy, where David's possessions have been sent. The embassy official tells Rachel that Mr Robertson is an illegal arms trafficker. When she gets home and looks through David's things, she is shocked to see that the photo in the passport is not David. She travels to Barcelona and approaches the police, warning them that Robertson might be in danger.

Police Even though he is unable to deliver the arms, David faithfully goes to the meeting places noted in Robertson's diary. Again, no one shows up. He and the girl enjoy nice hotels and good food, until a Spanish patrol officer arrives looking for Robertson. The girl manages to satisfy him that they don't know the man.

Noose tightens Followed by a police car, David goes cross-country and damages the car. They walk to the nearest town and locate a mechanic. Meanwhile, the police and Rachel begin to close in. David tells the girl to go to Tangiers and wait for him. He will get the car fixed, show up at Robertson's final appointment and meet her in two or three days.

Final rendezvous Waiting for the mechanic, David sees a police car pull into the town and flees in a taxi, which drops him at the hotel, which is the final meeting place in Robertson's diary. On arrival, he discovers that 'Mrs Robertson' has already booked two adjoining rooms. Happy to see the girl, he is nevertheless anxious and says that she should leave. She agrees and goes into the adjoining room but cannot bring herself to leave him alone.

Assassination David lies down and waits for the contact. Through his window, we see a car arrive and the girl walk around a large open space. Two men get out of the car. One of them, an African, enters the hotel. The police arrive and tell the girl and others to stand back. Rachel arrives in another

police car. She goes into the room and finds Robertson (David) dead. 'Is this Mr Robertson?' the police ask. She kneels by the bed and looks. 'Do you recognise him?' they ask. 'I never knew him,' she says. The girl says she knows him. Unnoticed, the assassin gets into the car and leaves.

THEMES

1. Reality vs Appearance

journalism A major theme of the film is the conflict between image and reality, or between invention and truth. Just as in *Blow Up*, where a photographer tries to establish what happened in the park, in *The Passenger* a journalist wants to uncover the reality of the political situation in Africa. In fact, the original title of the film was *Profession: Reporter*, which highlights the job of truth-telling. But David discovers that political propaganda can obscure reality, while at the same time, we watch him attempt to invent a new image for himself.

political propaganda One of the experiences that leads to David's disillusionment with 'telling the truth' is an interview with an African president. The interview is an old one, in black-and-white, archived on VHS tape, and seen by Rachel in London. A lean man, in khaki uniform and glasses, sits facing the camera with his fingertips touching. 'Mr President,' David begins, 'Can you comment on the report of foreign nationals supplying arms to the rebels?' Speaking slowly and deliberately, the President explains that 'the matter is in the hands of the courts. The law will make its comment.' David then asks if the rebels control any territory, and the Presidency says calmly, 'For once, the official terminology corresponds with the actual facts. And the facts are these: this is no longer a problem. There is no opposition. This is a unified country.' David, and we the viewers, know that the president has misrepresented the actual political situation. Rachel, who was present at the actual interview, also knows it. 'Why didn't you tell that man that he's a liar?' she asks with exasperation. 'Those are the rules,' David says, referring to the necessity for impartiality by journalists. Here is one source for David's growing frustration with his job and life in general. The truth is distorted by politicians who want to present an image, and that distorted image is then reflected by journalists.

public expectations David's cynicism becomes self-destructive because he himself is part of the process that produces false images. Again, this is revealed in a tape conversation that he has with Robertson. 'Wouldn't it be better if we could just forget everything that happens and just throw it all away,' David is heard saying on tape. 'People will believe what I write, and why? Because it conforms to their expectations, and mine as well, which is worse.' Here, David explains that distorted images are not created only by politicians and other powerful individuals. The public and the media are also complicit in the production and consumption of untruths. His awareness of the closed loop of distorted images, the inability of us all to know the truth because we see only what we want to see, is dispiriting.

identity change This theme of reality versus appearance is also dramatised in the core event of the story: David tries to escape from himself, by changing his identity. David is constantly on the move, often by car, but often he doesn't know and doesn't care where he is headed. All he wants is to leave his real identity behind and take on a new one, a different self-image that might hold the promise of fulfilment. Trapped in this web of self-invention, David is doomed to fail because nothing really changes. At the beginning of the story, he wants to interview the rebels, and Robertson wants to sell them guns. When David takes Robertson's identity, he abandons his own plan without entirely following through on Robertson's. Nothing changes, fate is recycled.

personal narratives One of the techniques suggested in the film for escaping our identity is to construct a new personal narrative. 'Who are you?' the girl asks him when they first meet in Barcelona. 'I used to be somebody else, but I traded him in,' is David's succinct answer. When he asks what kind of impression she makes when entering a room, she says 'nothing mysterious.' Moments later, David suggests various characters he could become in order to escape from the police, including a waiter in Gibraltar, a novelist in Cairo and a gun-runner. He knows, and we know, that he has, in fact, become an arms dealer, but the point of the scene is to highlight our desire to construct alternative images for ourselves in an attempt to escape our true selves.

2. Quest

David The film can also be read as a personal quest by David. He is searching for the truth about the political situation in north Africa, but this is a convenient pretext for his more personal quest for a new identity. As a journalist, he travels a great distance, from his home in London to the Sahara

Desert, in order to discover and report on the complex politics in an unnamed country in north Africa. He drives a utility vehicle to an isolated desert town. He records interviews with political leaders. And makes notes. But none of this satisfies him anymore, so he changes his identity. Maybe, he thinks, I can find what I'm looking for if I'm someone else.

3. Love

David and the girl

While this is not a love story the relationship between David and the girl does develop into something very close to love. Both of them are lonely, without partners or even friends, which makes it easier to bond with each other. They are also both reckless and bold. Together, they face danger from unknown sources, which brings them closer, if only in the mutual recognition of their shared fate.

meeting An important phase in the budding love between David and the girl occurs in a lush setting in southern Spain. Having just been frustrated once more by going to a rendezvous spot and waiting for someone who doesn't show up, David is sleeping on thick grass in a grove of lemon trees. The girl picks a ripe fruit and kneels down beside him. Sensing her, he wakes and says, groggily, 'What the fuck are you doing here with me?' She hesitates before asking, 'Which me?' He makes a downbeat comment about himself and suggests they get something to eat. She stares at him and says she won't come because she is not 'interested in giving up [on life].' She leaves him, saying, 'I hope you make it' and catches a ride in a passing vehicle. When David follows in his car, the vehicle stops; she gets out and into his car. All this occurs without a single word being spoken. It is apparent that he needs her and that she wants to help him. They have quarrelled and made up, a reconciliation that shows, if not love, a strong mutual bond.

separation By the end of the story, this strange relationship, between a man with two identities and a girl with none, develops into love. After sending her off to Tangiers, where he says he will join her in a few days, David goes to the hotel for his last rendezvous. When he arrives, he finds she is there, unwilling to be separated from him. As they lie together, fully clothed, side by side on a bed, David tells her a sad story, reflecting his own hopelessness. She comforts him with an embrace, which he returns. He asks why she stays with him and, instead of answering, she kisses him. He whispers that she should go and she nods. Both are reluctant to end their intimacy. They are in love. Minutes later, he is dead.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

David David is a journalist who has lost faith in his ability to report the truth, especially regarding the political situation in north Africa. He has abandoned his wife and a child in London and tried to escape into the desert, but he soon discovers that he still has habits that he cannot slough off. Although disenchanted with the world and himself, he shows brief moments of joy with the girl.

Lost The opening sequence of the film illustrates David's condition of being lost and exasperated. He drives his Land Rover into a village on the edge of the Sahara Desert hoping to meet rebel fighters but has no idea where to go. He can't speak the local language and his only interaction with villagers is to offer them cigarettes. A boy wordlessly guides him out of town and points to the left. A mile or two down a sandy tract, the boy leaves him. A man appears and takes him on a short trek, during which glimpses rebels travelling on camels, but they elude him. He returns alone to his vehicle, which then gets stuck in the sand. When he tries to dig it out with a shovel and fails, he angrily bangs the shovel against the jeep. He is lost, a man at the end of his tether.

Carefree Although David is gloomy and cynical during most the film, there are one or two moments that reveal a lighter side to his character. One of these occurs when he and the girl have escaped from Barcelona and are cruising along a tree-lined road in the countryside. The sun is shining and David, for once, is smiling. 'What are you running away from?' she asks. 'Turn around,' he says by way of an answer, and when she does, all she sees is the road receding behind her. She smiles and stretches out her arms to enjoy the freedom of fleeing from everything. He turns back, sees her pleasure and smiles, too. Flight and escape, of course, are fantasies, but this is a wonderful, if brief, moment of happiness.

Defeated When the film enters its concluding section, though, David is plunged back into despair. He expresses his awareness of his condition in the final sequence, when he is in the hotel with the girl, only minutes from his death by an as yet unseen assassin. Somehow, though, he senses that the

end is near and tells her a story about a blind man he once knew who regained his sight in middle-age. 'At first he was elated,' he says. 'Faces colours, landscapes. But then everything began to change. The world was much poorer than he'd imagined. So much ugliness ...he began to live in darkness, never left his room. After three years, he killed himself.' It is clear that this is a version of his own story, a man who has lost faith in himself and the world and submitted to defeat.

Girl The girl has no name, no backstory and no future. She is a companion and a witness. She is elf-like in her spontaneity, her sly smile and her wispy hair. Unbound, she seems to float above the problems that David suffers from. She is also fiercely loyal to David.

Adventurous We first have a sense of her character when David asks for her help in escaping from Barcelona. She is wandering around one of the famous Gaudi buildings when David tracks her down and explains that he needs to leave town in order to escape from someone who is following him. 'I need someone to get my things from the hotel,' he says. 'That sounds easy,' she says with an encouraging smile. 'Except he's probably waiting for me there,' David says. She hesitates and says, 'So, you want me to get the jewels and the secret documents,' she says with a mischievous smile. Her love of intrigue seals the deal. She has agreed to retrieve the belongings of a total stranger, drive away with them and meet him in another part of town. David has fortunately met a woman with a similarly adventurous spirit.

Practical Despite her carefree spirit, she can also be extremely practical. More than once in their Bonny and Clyde-like escapades, she offers him good advice. A clear example occurs toward the end of the story when, while escaping from the police, David's car breaks down in a rural part of southern Spain. (It reminds us of the breakdown of his Land Rover in the desert, but now he has a companion.) He doesn't know what to do and tells her the problem is 'a hole in the pan.' Although that means nothing to her, she is quick to give him instructions. 'Reach the first place, find a mechanic and fix the car.' One, two, three. Clear, simple and practical. She has proved herself to be a valuable travelling companion to a man who is forever lost.

Insightful At the end of the film, she also demonstrates her insight into the troubled waters of David's character. The car has been fixed, but another car, driven by police, has appeared in the town. With no escape route, he wants to put her out of danger and tells her to go to Tangiers, where he will join her. She shakes her head and says, 'Listen. You can't be like that. Just escaping.' She puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder and insists that he go through with his plan to keep the appointment. He protests that no one will be there, but she points out that Robertson made the appointment because 'he believed in something and that's what you want.' 'He's dead,' David says dismissively. She looks him square in the face and replies, 'But you're not.' She has understood what he is trying to do, to find an identity and a role in life that he can be proud of. She urges him to complete the project and, in doing so, shows wisdom far beyond her young years.



(A rare moment of intimacy)