

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI (1912 – 2007)

LIFE

Michelangelo Antonioni was born into a middle-class family in northern Italy just before the First World War. Both his parents were working-class in origin, but his father became a prosperous landowner. He claimed that his parents allowed him great freedom when growing up, and he developed keen interests in tennis (see *Blow Up*), drawing and music. He was an accomplished violinist and gave his first concert at age nine. In his teens, though, he began his life-long love affair with films. In 1931, he entered the nearby University of Bologna, became involved in student theatre and graduated with a degree in economics four years later. His first job was as a bank teller, during which time he wrote essays on film for a local newspaper.

By 1940, he had moved to Rome and attempted to make a documentary in a mental asylum, but shooting was discontinued when the inmates reacted badly to the bright lights. He also began working for a cinema magazine edited by Vittorio Mussolini (son of dictator Benito Mussolini), but he was fired after a few months. His next move was to study film at the National School for Cinema in Rome but, again, he left after a matter of months. When WWII reached Italy, he served in the army and then joined the Italian resistance to German occupation after the Armistice between Italy and the Allies in 1943.

During the war years, he somehow also managed to work on films and completed his first documentary (*Gente del Po, People of the Po River*) in 1943, which was released four years later. After the war, he continued to make documentaries, which were well received and entered at Cannes. Having earned a modest name for himself, he received enough backing to direct and write the screenplay for his first feature film in 1950 (*The Story of a Love Affair*). That film won a prestigious award in Italy, and he never looked back.

The first three years of the 1960s saw him direct and write his famous trilogy (*The Adventure, The Night and The Eclipse*) that catapulted him into international fame. That was the zenith of Antonioni's career. Later, another set of three films (*Blow Up, Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger*) marked his first English-language productions and his entry into Hollywood. But *Blow Up* was not a critical success, *Zabriskie Point* was a financial failure, and *The Passenger* would not be released for cinema screenings until the new millennium. His final films were not in the same class as his earlier ones, and he suffered a serious stroke in 1985. He died in 2007, at the age of 94.

Considered one of the greatest directors of the mid-twentieth century, he is known as the chronicler of middle-class loneliness and boredom (*ennui*). His best films have all the features of so-called 'art-house' cinema: slow pace, vague narrative, elusive characters and inconclusive endings. He himself put it this way, in an interview in 1962: 'I detest films that have a message. I simply try to tell, or, more precisely, show, certain vicissitudes that take place...Life is not always happy, and one must have the courage to look at it from all sides.'

He married Letizia Balboni in 1942, but they divorced in 1954. During the height of his fame in the 1960s, his partner was Monica Vitti, who starred in several of his most influential films. Antonioni married a second time in 1985, to Enrica Fico. He had no children.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Michelangelo Antonioni won virtually every major prize in the film industry, including an Academy award for lifetime achievement in 1995. A list of just his major awards would include: the Festival Award in Locarno in 1957 for *The Cry*, the Golden Bear in Berlin in 1961 for *The Night*, the Golden Lion in Venice in 1964 for *Red Desert* and the Palme d'Or in Cannes in 1967 for *Blow Up*.

FILMOGRAPHY (feature films only)

Story of a Love Affair (Cronaca di un amore), 1950
The Lady without Camelias (La Signora senza camellie), 1953
The Vanquished (I Vinti), 1953
The Girlfriends (Le Amiche), 1955
The Cry (Il Grido), 1957
The Adventure (L'Avventura), 1960
The Night (La Notte), 1961
The Eclipse (L'Eclisse), 1962
Red Desert (Il Deserto rosso), 1964
Blow-Up, 1966
Zabriskie Point, 1970
The Passenger, 1975
The Oberwald Mystery (Il Mistero di Obwerwald), 1980
The Identification of a Woman (Identificazione di una donna), 1982
Beyond the Clouds (Al di là delle nuvole), 1995, co-directed with Wim Wenders

THEMES

1. Love

overview Love, or the failure of love, is a persistent theme in Antonioni's films. Some relationships are doomed by the past, some are plagued by social factors (class, gender inequality) and some are the victim of a pervading sense of isolation and alienation. Even those that promise a future are cut short by death. In all this director's films, there is only one relationship (Nenne and Lorenzo in *The Girlfriends*) that seems to survive the last scene, but we are not sure that even they will last.

The Adventure Sandro and Claudia, the main characters in this film, are trapped in a doomed love affair. Claudia feels guilty for starting an affair with Sandro, her best friend's fiancé (who she thinks might be dead). She knows it's 'not right,' but she cannot help but enjoy herself, throwing off her usual morose expression to smile and laugh. In the end, she, too, is betrayed by Sandro. The other two relationships in the film are marked by decadence (Patrizia and Raimondo) and infidelity (Guilia and Corrado).

The Cry Ill-fated love also dogs Aldo, the protagonist of *The Cry*. Once he loses his secure relationship with Irma (she has fallen in love with another man), he takes to the road seeking human comfort but only gets into a series of partial and disappointing encounters with women. His only consolation is his daughter, Rossina, but he loses her, as well. His suicide at the end is a cry for love.

The Story of a Love Affair The theme of doomed love pervades this film, too. Although Paola and Guido embark on a passionate illicit love affair, they cannot escape the shared guilt they feel for the death of a friend many years before. After they renew their liaison, they bicker about the future, Paola gets jealous and Guido is frustrated they cannot break free of Paola's husband. By the end, they are blaming each other for the friend's death, and their plan to murder the husband reveals their deep gulf. In the final scene, like other lovers in Antonioni's films, they separate without words.

The Eclipse Vittoria, the main character in *The Eclipse*, is similarly unable to find satisfaction in romance. For some unknown reason, she breaks off her engagement with Riccardo, and then falls into something like a love affair with Piero, the energetic stock broker. Although they enjoy each other's company, and make love, it is more like children at play than passionate love. At one point, Vittoria says, 'I wish I didn't love you. Or that I didn't love you at all.' In the final scene, they agree to meet up the next day, but neither of them shows up.

The Girlfriends While fate and boredom (*ennui*) ruin the relationships in many of Antonioni's films, it is class difference that prevents the lovers in *Girlfriends* from finding happiness. Clelia is a sophisticated woman who manages a fashionable clothes shop, which Carlo is employed as a workman. Despite that gap, Clelia finds him refreshing and reliable, while Carlo is struck by her beauty and kindness. In the end, she tells him, painfully, that they would never be happy because she couldn't conform to the expectations of a housewife. The other key relationship in the film (the love affair between Lorenzo and Rosetta) is more tragic and ends in her suicide. Nenne has a sincere love for Lorenzo, which appears strong enough to endure after the story ends, but given Lorenzo's

arrogance and weak-ego, we cannot be sure.

The Lady without Camelias In this film, the love relationship breaks down because the husband (Gianni) manipulates his wife (Clara), a famous actress whom he 'discovered.' Their relationship is flawed from the beginning since he, and the rest of the male-dominated film industry, controls her: bringing her to the screen, directing her and choosing her roles, etc. When their marriage falls apart, Clara seeks support in an ill-judged love affair with Rusconi, who abandons her. Clara, once a glamorous star, is left loveless in the end.

Red Desert Giuliana, the main character in *Red Desert*, is one of Antonioni's great suffering heroines. Her hysterical psychological state baffles her husband and herself. She finds temporary rapport with Corrado, but even he cannot help her. She even feels deceived by her own son, who was the only support in her troubled life. She wants people to 'form a wall around' her, but her severe sense of alienation drives them away. In the end, she drifts away from everyone, although there is a glimmer of hope with her son.

The Vanquished The young lovers portrayed in *The Vanquished* display both juvenile emotions, such as jealousy and vanity, and the more admirable bond of loyalty. Andre suffers from Simone's cruel indifference toward him, while Marina sticks by Claudio even after he has killed someone and is chased by the police. As with other Antonioni films (*Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger*), their young love had, at least, a chance at success, until it is cut off by death.

The Passenger and Zabriskie Point The love that develops in both these films is affecting but ultimately transient. Both involve people who meet while in transit, moving from one place to another and (in the case of *The Passenger*) from one identity to another. David, the journalist in *The Passenger*, meets the unnamed girl in Barcelona, where he is following the trail of the man whose identity he has assumed. The girl is similarly in transition, without a fixed identity and history. But, again, as in so much of this director's films, their strong attraction and then love, is doomed by events beyond their control. A similar story is told in *Zabriskie Point*, although the love that briefly flowers between Mark and Daria is promising at first. Expressing the spirit of the 1960s, they are free and experimental, revelling in the authenticity of the California desert. Once again, though, Mark's violent death eliminates any future for them.

2. Marriage

The Night The theme of marriage is most fully explored in *The Night*, a film dominated by the relationship between Lidia and Giovanni. The partners are miles apart from the beginning, when Giovanni has casual sex with a woman in a hospital and then shows no sexual desire for his naked wife at home. Both he and Lidia are drawn to strangers during a night-long party at an expensive villa, but even those flirtations lack any real passion. Their loss of love is dramatised in no uncertain terms at the end of the film, when Lidia explains why she married him in the first place. Unable to comprehend, Giovanni makes a half-hearted attempt to win her back, but the gulf between them is already too great.

The Story of a Love Affair Another dysfunctional marriage is portrayed in this film. Paulo married Enrico for his money, while he only values her beauty. Neither really loves the other. Paulo embarks on an adulterous affair with a man she knew in secondary school, while Enrico becomes jealous of her independence and wants to possess her, like another one of his assets. Wealth and distrust poison their marriage, and the story concludes with his death and her loneliness.

3. Psychology

Loneliness A primary theme of the director's work is loneliness. 'Often my characters are isolated,' he said in 1969. 'They are individuals looking for social institutions that will support them, for personal relationships that will absorb them. But most often they find little to sustain them. They are looking for a home.' Beginning with his early films (the famous trilogy in the 1950s) and continuing right up to his last major film (*The Passenger* in 1975), his main characters, whether men or women, whether wealthy or working class, are loners, socially isolated and emotionally empty. Critics have used the French term *ennui* (with its connotations of bored or jaded) to describe this state of alienation of the characters. They may appear to have everything (such as Giuliana in *Red Desert*, Lidia in *The Night*, Vittoria in *The Eclipse* and Rosetta in *The Girlfriends*), but Antonioni reveals their inner disorientation and sometimes their total loss of identity. In order to highlight this state of loneliness, many of

Antonioni's films focus on frivolous group pursuits. All-night parties (*The Night*), vacations (*The Adventure*), the fashion world (*The Girlfriends*) or indeed the film industry itself (*The Lady Without Camelias*) display the vanity and affluence that the films puncture in order to expose the loneliness behind the façade. Looking at the long arc of his work, we notice that his primary theme of internal loss and isolation reaches its apogee in his final masterpiece, *The Passenger*, in which the journalist David Locke actually abandons his identity and assumes that of another man. But, even this drastic attempt, to escape from alienation fails. Knowing that the director's aim is an intense psychological exploration of the human condition helps us to understand the films as a whole, whose characters are usually drifting in plots that are often elusive.

Loss of Sexuality A key symptom of loneliness in his films is the passionless sexuality of many of the main characters, especially the women. Given that sexual desire is a natural instinct, in the fractured society of post-war Italy, it is depicted as abnormal. The film-maker himself has called this condition 'sick Eros' (*malattia dei sentimenti*). In film after film, sexuality is reduced to casual seduction or the quiet desperation of joyless sex. Examples include Giovanni's encounter with a mentally unstable woman in *The Night* and Giuliana's copulation with Corrado in *Red Desert*. However, an even more poignant illustration of this malaise is the character of Vittoria in *The Eclipse*. She separates from her fiancé Riccardo for no apparent reason, at least she is unable to articulate one. 'I don't know' she repeatedly says in answer to his question about what she wants; her lack of self-awareness is itself a symptom of disorientation. Her morose sexuality dominates the film, nowhere more explicitly than when she talks with her neighbour Anita, who also wants to know why she left Riccardo. 'We spent the whole night talking,' Vittoria says with a sigh, 'and for what?' Gazing out a window, she 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 'sick desire' that poisons society.

4. Society

Youth Culture

The Vanquished The common link between the separate episodes in this film is the youth culture that underlies them. As the prologue explains, these young people came of age during the war and the years immediately after. No wonder they have contempt for their parents, disdain responsibility and just want to live their lives as freely as possible. Their pointless crimes are all caused by their desperate desire to escape, to get out, go anywhere and find happiness. The cause of the murders cannot be found in social deprivation or broken homes, but rather in the warped minds of the characters themselves. They are the vanquished.

Zabriskie Point Shooting for this film began in 1968, at the height of the 1960's protest culture, which included the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Black Liberation movement and the pacifist Hippie movement. The film features all three of these cultural strands, with the two lead characters embodying the first and last. Whatever the limitations of the film, it cannot be faulted for its depiction of this critical moment in American cultural history. It is a memorable depiction of American youth culture at its zenith, including radical student politics, hippie love and a disdain for conventional values.

Upper Class

Consumerism As a man on the left of politics, one of Antonioni's targets in his work is the debilitating effects of post-war consumerism. He began to make films immediately after the war, when Italy was rebuilding itself by casting off old cultural habits and adopting the more capitalist spirit of northern Europe and America. Indeed, it is difficult to point to any man of wealth in his fifteen major feature films who is presented sympathetically. Counter examples are multiple. Just looking at his famous trilogy, we see frivolous rich elites in *The Adventure*, a wealthy vain patron in *The Night*, and the crazy stock-market investors in *The Eclipse*. Two later films linked the evils of consumerism to environmental despoliation. In *Red Desert*, it is impossible to forget the bright orange flames of the petrochemical plant surrounded by polluted marshland and rivers. And an even more sensational image concludes *Zabriskie Point* when the executives planning a land development project in the ancient desert are blown up in a ball of fire. Antonioni once said that his films are 'political but not about politics.' His fierce critique of consumer capitalism, without attacking any particular political party, makes his point.

*The Adventure*__ The main social theme in this film is its critique of a decadent wealthy elite, represented by Patrizia, Raimondo and Corrado. This fashionable, crass and narcissistic crowd, who take them on the cruise and whose party they attend at the end. Husbands belittle wives, wives cheat on husbands and no one gives a damn about anything other than themselves, except their pet dog. A luxurious villa, a fancy yacht and an expensive car define these people, the new elite and new generation of professional men and women who run the country. But the vacuity of life is found not just among the wealthy. Cameo appearances by a journalist, a chemist and his wife, and ordinary men on the street reveal the existential absence at every level of society. It is not just Anna who has disappeared—it is a whole civilisation.

The Eclipse Although Antonioni famously said that he 'detested' over messages in film, there is a clear condemnation of colonialism in *The Eclipse*. 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. There is also racism directed toward Africans sitting outside a café at an airfield.

Girlfriends This film makes a similar critique of upper-crust society, its frivolous pursuits and its indifference to the suffering of others. This indictment of the social elite is articulated by Clelia, who blasts the customers in her own clothing salon when she hears news of Rosetta's suicide.

The Lady without Camelias The social critique in this film is aimed at the film industry itself, which is shown to be riddled with gender inequality, male manipulation and an unhealthy concern with the box office. By focusing on cinema, the film also reveals the double standard: scenes of passion are permissible on screen but not in real life. Like other films about the film industry (for example, Chaplin's *Behind the Screen*, Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, Altman's *The Player*, Fellini's *8 & 1/2* and Godard's *Le Mepris*), this film depicts both the glamour and the despair that actors, directors and producers experience. In the end, the glittering celluloid images not only mask but actually increase the personal tragedy that befalls Clara, the star. The film is also a scathing attack on the commercialism of the Italian movie business, which ignores serious cinema while manipulating people and eroding their self-worth.

The Night Here the director's sharp eye is turned on the conflict between art and materialism is depicted in the film is portrayed in small increments throughout the long, overnight party. The most succinct statement, though, comes in a short conversation between Giovanni and his patron, the host of the party. The man sits Giovanni down and expatiates on the present condition of his country. 'It's absurd to talk about wealth now,' he says. 'No one's wealthy.' This is itself an absurd comment coming from a man who owns the mansion, where they are seated, with its enormous swimming pool and surrounding golf course. He goes on to claim that Giovanni is not motivated by profit, but the writer says, 'Isn't writing is an irrepressible but antiquated instinct? A lonely craftsman putting one word after another. The task can't be mechanised... You [the patron] have the advantage of real people. You create real houses, real cities.' Later, the patron offers Giovanni a high-paid position as an executive overseeing a 'cultural initiative' for his employees. To explain what he means, he sketches a new management structure, with a press corps, public relations and advertising departments. His drawing is the only piece of creative activity in the film (excepting the erased tape recording of Valentina's poetical writing). Art has been replaced by corporate structures.

Zabriskie Point This film is a full-scale attack on bourgeois, racist, gun-loving and corporate America. Mark and Daria are two free-thinkers who confront the evils of their society but eventually withdraw to the desert rather than take up political activism. The final scene, when Lee's mansion is blown up, is one of the iconic images in Antonioni's work.

Leisure

Blow Up The leisure-time activities shown in this iconic film of the 1960s include a drugs party, a rock concert strolling in the park and tennis playing. Thomas, the photographer, is a dedicated professional, but he finds time, often as part of his job, to engage in these leisure sports.

Girlfriends One of great set-pieces in this complex film is the outing that takes the five girlfriends and their male companions to the sea coast. In that cold, windy and sandy location, we see the main characters interact and reveal their various idiosyncrasies. The 'friends' turn on each other, bicker, quibble and insult one another. In this way, the outing enables the film-maker to give us insight each of the many characters. Another important leisure is going to a fashion show, but the setting couldn't be more different. Now, the girlfriends and other clients are in their finest clothes, sitting on plush chairs and watching young women display the latest fashions. The idleness and affluence of the scene is then destroyed by the news of Rosetta's suicide.

5. Quest

Blow Up Thomas is never without his camera. He is forever in search of photographs, of homeless men, of lovers in the park, of anything that he finds interesting. He has a vision of a photography book, which he discusses with his agent over lunch. He thinks that the 'lovely' photos of the lovers in the park will make a good contrast with the gritty images of the desperate men he spent the night with in a doss house. His 'day job' of taking fashion photos does not hold any real interest for him, aside from making money. Thomas is a serious photographer with a clear vision.

The Cry The heart of this sad story is Aldo's unsuccessful search for stability and love. When he is forced to leave Irma, he leaves behind seven years of a near-marital, loving relationship. In each stage of his journey, he attempts to recreate that original strong bond, and each time he fails because there is no love. He has sex with two of the women, but that is not sufficient. He needs to re-establish a home, which would include his daughter. Rosina is especially important because she is the only surviving part of his former happiness with Irma. His long journey is a quest for something that he has lost, a search that brings him back to where he began.

Girlfriends Three characters have a quest in this film. Clelia's aim is to manage (and later to own) a successful fashion salon. From the moment she arrives on screen, her determination to make a success of her business trumps any other concerns. In the end, it is what prevents her from continuing her romance with Carlo: their marriage would fail because she would always prioritise her business. Nene's ambition is to be a successful ceramic artist. By the end of the film, she gets a big break when an art dealer in New York organises an exhibition of her work in that American city. Lastly, Lorenzo is driven by an ambition to become a great painter, similar to Clelia's determination in business. But there the similarity ends because Lorenzo is a self-pitying, weak-minded artist who is quick to offence. He is lucky that he has the kind Nene as a fiancé.

The Lady without Camelias Clara, the star of this film in every sense of the word, has an ambition to become a successful actress. When that dream is derailed by marriage, she is frustrated and later takes acting lessons. The tragic ending shows her unable to land a part except in an inferior film. Her ambition is matched by her husband's desire to make 'great films.' At one point, Gianni makes a speech to Clara about his next movie being made with his 'own blood.' His ambition is so strong that it blinds him to popular appeal and ruins the career of his actress-wife.

The Passenger The film can 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.

6. Environment

Red Desert Antonioni's concern for the environment is depicted in *Red Desert*, which reflects Italy's economic recovery after WWII. A large contribution to that progress was the petrochemical industry, which had two large plants around Ravenna, where the film was shot. Those factories, which are actually those shown on screen, caused considerable pollution of the riverine estuary near that city, which again is part of the film. Other scenes concern deserted wasteland around the factories and the threat of pollution to birdlife.

7. Reality vs Appearance

Image and Truth A somewhat less sociological and more conceptual theme concerns the fluctuating nature of reality and the difficulty of perceiving the truth. As someone in love with the moving image, Antonioni often inserts a puzzle into the story in order to drive the narrative forward. How did Anna disappear in *The Adventure*? Why did Rosetta attempt to kill herself in *The Girlfriends*? What really happened when a young girl fell down an elevator shaft in *The Story of a Love Affair*? Four other films present this theme in terms of image-making. The drama in *The Lady without Camelias* rests on the tension between Clara's screen image and her social reality as a wife. *The Girlfriends* also exposes a surface glamour concealing a hidden tragedy. Similarly, *Blow Up* is about a photographer who uses his images to try to understand what 'really happened.' And *The Passenger* is about a journalist who has lost faith in his ability to report the truth. Overall, Antonioni is concerned with the instability of reality, the distortions of image and our inability to know what we see. All of this, of course, feeds into the theme of alienation, which is his primary concern.

Blow Up One of the key themes of this film is the confusion between reality and photographic image. Thomas learns that he cannot rely on his photographs to present what is true. Other people appear and disappear, often wearing some kind of disguise. We also have deception in the form of the wrong roll of film given by Thomas to the woman and the false telephone number that she gives him. The world of fashion photography, which Thomas inhabits, is all about surface distortion and fake emotion. Photography and fashion equate to a doubly deceptive profession for Thomas. Maybe, he, too is unreliable. Maybe he did not, after all, witness a murder in the park. Many characters in the film also wear disguises of one sort or another, from models to hippie protestors.

The Passenger A major theme in this 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 also distorts reality, as do the personal narratives that David and the girl invent for themselves.

CHARACTERS

1. Open

Mark, in *Zabriskie Point*, is one of most open characters in all Antonioni's films. He is a confident is a confident young man who shares the ideals of the radical movement but is too much of an individual to join it. He is surly, sarcastic and reckless, but also fun-loving, affectionate and serious, all at the same time.

Daria Mark's free spirit is perfectly matched with that of Daria in the same film. She is a spirited is a spirited and optimistic young woman, who embodies the values of the hippie movement of the times. She is vivacious, playful and sympathetic, but not naïve. She has a strong sense of herself, expresses her ideas clearly and, above all, responds to the peacefulness of the landscape at Zabriskie Point

The Girl Like Daria, the unnamed girl in *The Passenger* is young and carefree, but also wise beyond her years and offers David help and advice. She 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.

Thomas, the photographer in *Blow Up*, also possesses a fun-loving spirit, although he is less counter-culture and more establishment. He character is, in fact, based on a real-life fashion photographer in the Swinging 60s in London.

Claudia (*The Adventure*) is a good friend to Anna and a loyal lover to Sandro; unfortunately, those two roles conflict. Although she is confused and torn by that conflict, compared to the narcissism and decadence of the other characters, she appears as a genuine and sympathetic person. Unlike them, she is capable of spontaneity and ruthless honesty. When asked to explain what she meant by saying that her childhood was 'sensible,' she answers, 'I mean, without money.'

Adreina (The Cry) is another survivor in the fast-moving world depicted in the film. Of all the women, she is least bound by family or history, the most open and free. She is also the lowest in the social hierarchy, working as a call-girl when necessary. She is spunky and spirited, but lives on her own and welcomes Aldo's companionship.

Clara (The Lady without Camelias) is the star of the story, a dazzling beauty who is launched overnight into a romantic leading lady. Coming from a working-class background, she is overwhelmed and manipulated by others. Slowly, she gains self-confidence, but it is too late. Throughout the story she is kind and considerate, though also passive and conciliatory.

Corrado (Red Desert) is a young man who is planning a big mining project in south America. He is thoughtful and ambitious, with a watchful face that suggests he is always considering something. Although he is restless, he has the ability to understand Giuliana. And yet, something is left unexplained in his vague plans and eyes that search for a place to settle.

Paola (The Story of a Love Affair) is also a person with strong ambitions and a sense of herself. She married a boring rich man and lives her luxurious life as if she deserves it. Unsatisfied in marriage, she seizes the chance when Guido reappears in her life, unleashing a powerful desire to love and be happy. As with the marriage, however, she manipulates her love affair and guides it toward disaster. If she has a virtue, it might be that she is clear-eyed and practical, though even that quality is useful when she wants to get her way.

2. Closed

Aldo (The Cry) is a nice-looking, working-class man with traditional values and little else. He is taciturn and gloomy, yearning for something he doesn't know and can't define, as if a mysterious inner destiny is moving inexorably toward an end he cannot see. Although he is broody and occasionally strikes someone, his basic nature is kind and compassionate.

Lorenzo Although he comes from a different social milieu, another man with a weak ego is Lorenzo in *The Girlfriends*. 'Oh, the artist!' exclaims one of the men when Lorenzo blows his top at the dinner following the opening of Clelia's shop. It is an apt comment that sums up troubled Lorenzo. Although he is engaged to sensible Nene, he feels inferior as an artist and thus turns to naïve Rosetta for comfort. Even he describes himself as 'weak', and that appraisal could be seen as another example of his self-pity.

Guido (Story of a Love Affair) is closer to Aldo in social background and morose temperament. Like Aldo, he suffers from an inability to form a romantic relationship that will last, and, like Aldo, he lacks self-confidence.

David (The Passenger) appears to be a successful journalist, but he reveals his weakness when he attempts to change his entire identity and fails. Throughout the film, he is frustrated, confused and loses his way, both psychologically and geographically.

Riccardo (The Eclipse) 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.

Giovanni (The Night) is similar to David in that he appears to be successful on the outside but is a failure inside. Like the 'passenger', he is a dead man walking, one of the sleepwalkers in the Broch novel that is mentioned more than once in the film. He is a writer who no longer writes, and a lover who can no longer love. Despite his unsympathetic character, his selfishness and bored banter, he is still charming. He has the desolate ambiguity of alienation seen in many Antonioni male leads—dashing yet pathetic.

Aubrey Hallan (The Vanquished) is another weak character. Confident and happy-go-lucky, a nice-looking man who writes poetry, he could be a charmer. But he is asocial, completely self-absorbed and vain, so much so that he commits a murder simply to prove that he can devise a perfect crime.

Claudio (The Vanquished) is the son of a wealthy father and doting mother, a good student and sincere boyfriend, he is a victim of the *zeitgeist* that sweeps him into the world of petty crime. The action that dooms him—shooting a man on a bridge—is spontaneous, unlike the other murders in the film, which are premeditated. Claudio's crime is a moment of madness that leads to his own sad end

Anna (*The Adventure*) is one of many Antonioni heroines who, like David, is lost, closed and morose. In sharp contrast to her friend Claudia, she is dark, closed and troubled. Her turmoil over Sandro casts a shadow over her appearances in the first third of the story, before she disappears. She is querulous, short-tempered and rash.

Vittoria (*The Eclipse*) is a similar character from a similar background: young, attractive and cosmopolitan. 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.

Lidia (*The Night*) is another closed female lead character. Like Vittoria, she is unhappy in her romantic relationship (a marriage to Giovanni). Although she is perceptive, she is passive, almost inert and suffers from regret about her past.

Giuliana Perhaps the most closed character of all is Giuliana (*Red Desert*), who is a young mother and wife of a factory manager. From the first scene, she is disturbed, fearful and possibly psychotic, and it is later revealed that she tried to commit suicide. She has little or no support from her husband and gravitates toward Corrado, who shows an ability to understand her. Throughout the story, she is erratic and impulsive, though briefly happy and able to laugh. She is alone, without love and without the ability to love.

3. Conscientious

Sandro in *The Adventure* is a typical man, yet his character is anything but simplistic. He is a successful, wealthy man who owns two houses. He is also handsome and dynamic. In fact, he is a man who, as he admits, never sleeps. That restless energy, however, conceals a deep-lying disappointment of failing to become an architect. His inner conflict is that he has failed to express his creative energy. That failure imbues his character with a sadness that sometimes emerges from beneath the otherwise content surface.

Guido (*The Story of a Love Affair*) appears to be normal guy. He served in the war, he played rugby and now he tries to sell cars. His head is turned by the glamorous Paola, and her presence dredges up long-buried memories that burden him with guilt. Once that process begins, his sunny smile is replaced by a dark brooding expression. Throughout the story, he acts with dignity and kindness.

4. Disagreeable

Patrizia (*The Adventure*) is a rich, aristocratic and bored woman who loves only her dog. She is a minor character, but she and her lover enact a sexual scene (described above) that illustrates the decadence of the elite class put under the microscope in this film. She also embodies their frivolity and emptiness.

Irma (*The Cry*) is the most important of the four women in Aldo's life. She is also the most traditional, except that she has fallen in love with someone else, not because she is promiscuous or unfaithful, but only because that is what happened. Although she tries to break the news to him gently, it is a cruel and unexpected betrayal that ruins Aldo's life.

Gianni (*The Lady without Camelias*) is a middle-aged movie executive, infatuated with his job and his ability to make a 'great' movie. In pursuit of his goals, he is controlling and insensitive toward others, especially Clara, his wife. His self-belief leads to marital and financial disaster, although by the end of the film, we see a more mature and detached man.

Count Rusconi (*The Lady without Camelias*), a diplomat married to a rich man's daughter, is the villain of the piece. Slim, slick-haired and mustachioed, he has the looks of a matinee idol. Unfortunately, he is the real-life admirer of Clara and deceives her about his intentions. Ultimately, he shows himself to be vacuous and self-absorbed.

Georges (*The Vanquished*) is one of those young men who 'act big.' Given that the story is punctuated with references to crime movies, it's not unreasonable to suppose that he models himself after an American gangster actor of the 1950s, like Edward G. Robinson. Georges likes being in

control of the somewhat anarchic gang, but he shows his true colours at the end when he disowns any responsibility for the murder of Pierre.

Simone (The Vanquished) is a shallow but pretty girl, who embodies many of the negative character traits identified in the prologue as defining the 'burnt-out generation.' She has only contempt for her hard-working father, brags about her loss of sexual innocence and coolly goes about seducing Pierre as part of the plan to murder him.

Thomas (Blow Up) is a professional photographer, mainly making money as a fashion photographer but also producing a book of art photos. Young, selfish, shallow and arrogant, he stands for the amoral and rudderless generation of the Swinging Sixties in London. He treats his models with contempt and others with mild disinterest. Bored and fed up with life, he appears to have no interest in anyone or anything.

Momina (The Girlfriends) is the most cynical of a cynical group of women. She is the embodiment of the newly affluent class in 1950s Italy, who lived not only in Rome and Milan, but also in smaller cities, like Turin. From beginning to end, Momina is selfish, mocking and callous. It is an irony that while no one in this film ends up happy, cynical Momina perhaps comes closest precisely because she doesn't care.

5. Rational

Piero (The Eclipse) 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. On the job in the stock exchange, he is a skilful and ambitious man, who knows how to play the game.

Clelia (The Girlfriends) is the outsider, the newcomer, which gives her a different perspective on the 'girlfriends.' But irrespective of that viewpoint, she is also clearly the only one with a set of principles, in both business and personal affairs. She is consistently sensitive to everyone, especially to Rosetta and also to Carlo, with whom she (sort of) falls in love. She is hardworking but not arrogant, business-like but not driven by money. Happy, well-adjusted and principled, she is rare among Antonioni's female lead characters.

Ercole Unlike the lean, hawk-faced Gianni, the producer *Ercole (The Lady without Camelias)* is a corpulent and fleshy man. Like Gianni, though, he is obsessed with making movies and sometimes goes berserk on the set. Still, he is always affable, practical and instinctively kind to others, particularly to Clara, whose career he has helped to create. In her hour of need, he is there to support her.

Ugo (Red Desert) is a businessman first, a father second and a husband last. He is dedicated to his job running the factory, he enjoys playing with his son and he is quick to blame his wife for her 'mistakes.' His bland face suggests a man untroubled by questions of conscience.

Enrico (The Story of a Love Affair) doesn't have a care in the world. He's rich, very rich, and married to a beautiful wife. His materialist brain doesn't understand that she needs more than fur coats, and his possessiveness sparks a fit of jealousy that results in his death.

6. Emotional

Rosetta (The Girlfriends) is a character in sharp contrast to Clelia. Although she is nice-looking, she suffers from the *ennui* that afflicts many women in Antonioni's films. She is disillusioned by the social milieu in which she lives, the selfish and supercilious girlfriends of the title. But her malaise also has a second and more specific cause: her unfulfilled love for equally depressed artist Lorenzo. Despite her disappointment, she is capable of showing compassion to her rival, Nene.

David (The Passenger) 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 disenchanting with the world and himself, he shows brief moments of joy with the girl.



(Antonioni with Monica Vitti, during the shooting of *Red Desert*)



(Antonioni with the camera in the 1960s)