

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE CRY (aka The Outcry) (Il Grido) 1957

Michelangelo Antonioni

### OVERVIEW

*The Cry*, which was Antonioni's fifth feature film, is now seen as a key transitional work, the bridge that took him from neo-realism into his experimental productions with their exploration of emptiness and isolation. *The Cry* is also different in its social milieu, the earlier films having featured middle-class, intellectuals and wealthy people. Thematically, as well as with its focus on landscape, it shares a great deal with later classics (especially *The Passenger* and *Red Desert*), while the structure of *The Cry* into separate yet linked episodes recalls *The Vanquished*. The film also glances at social and political issues, such as environmental destruction, authoritarian police and migrant labour. Finally, the film is filled with mobility and machinery, the hallmarks of modernity. There are cars, lorries, a petrol station, speedboats, a dredger and a factory, while the protagonist is a mechanic. As always, Antonioni captures the modern world, with its mobility and its discontents.

### PEOPLE

Aldo	Aldo is a mechanic, who has been living with Irma.
Irma	Irma is a dressmaker, who becomes a widow.
Rosina	Rosina is their young daughter.
Elvia	Elvia is Aldo's former girlfriend.
Virginia	Virginia is a widow, who runs a petrol station.
Adreina	Adreina is young woman who sometimes works as a prostitute.

### SYNOPSIS

When Irma is told that her husband has died in Australia, her lover, Aldo, asks her to marry him. Irma not only refuses but leaves him for another man. Aldo is distraught and takes to the road with Rosina, their young daughter. Drifting over the desolate landscape of the Po River valley, in northern Italy, Aldo takes up with three other women, each time finding that the relationship doesn't work and moving on. One woman convinces him to send his daughter back to her mother. When, after about two years, he hears that Irma sent him a postcard, he returns and finds she has another child. Disoriented, with all hope vanished, he falls from a tall tower and dies.

### SCENES

**Dead husband** On a wintery and foggy day in the Po Valley, a middle-aged woman named Irma walks into a government office and is informed that her husband has died in Australia. Showing no grief, Irma tells the official that she does not want his possessions to be sent back to her. She has, in fact, been living for many years with Aldo, a construction worker, and has a daughter, Rosina, by him. When she drops off his lunch that day without stopping, Aldo is concerned and hurries home. When she tells him the news, he is overjoyed at the prospect of them finally getting properly married, but she keeps mysteriously silent.

**Break-up** In the morning, she explains to Aldo that she doesn't love him as she used to. She also says she is leaving him for another man. Shocked and hurt, Aldo is about to hit her when there is a knock at the door. He reminds her of her duty to her child, but she won't listen. Desperate, he takes her into a shop and offers to buy an expensive belt that she once wanted. But now she isn't interested.

**Public humiliation** Irma goes to her sister for solace but can only blame herself, knowing that she'll lose her daughter, Rosina. Aldo visits his mother, who accuses him of making a mistake in the first place by taking up with a married woman. 'Irma is a bad woman,' she says. 'First her husband, then you and now another man.' When she suggests that there must be a way to bring back her feelings, he agrees. Finding her in the street, he repeatedly slaps her hard with a crowd watching. 'Now,' Irma

tells him, 'its really finished.'

*Elvia* Taking his daughter with him, Aldo goes to another town, where he takes up with Elvia, an old flame whom he had left to live with Irma. Elvia immediately welcomes him and his daughter, and he makes a good impression on everyone by fixing a boat before a big race. Weeks later, when Irma shows up, bringing some of Aldo's things and looking for Rosina, Elvia is hurt to discover that Aldo has come to her on the rebound. When Elvia confronts him with this, he doesn't deny it and they agree that their relationship won't work. He is more confused when he finds himself attracted to Elvia's younger sister and leaves the next morning without a word.

*Virginia* On the road, he has no luck looking for a good job and little Rosina also misses her mother. After working temporarily as a manual labourer, he hitches a ride on a lorry and meets Virginia, a young widow who runs a gas station. She gives him a place to sleep until the morning when he expects to catch another lift. When she is away from the place for a short time, he fills in and serves customers. Responding to Virginia's flirting and offer of a job, he decides to stay on and does not argue when she also offers herself to him.

*Rosina* While the two adults carry on a furtive love affair, Rosina strikes up a friendship with Virginia's senile father. The lovers are happy for a while until Virginia decides she has to put her increasingly accident-prone father in a care home. Tensions also exist over Rosina, who Virginia views as a burden. The breaking point comes when the little girl sees her father and Virginia making love and runs away. Virginia convinces Aldo to send Rosina back to her mother, but the parting is so upsetting that Aldo leaves Virginia and hits the road again.

*Adreina* Walking along the river bank, Aldo meets the owner of a dredger, who hires him as a mechanic. The owner is a large man who entertains his workers, including Aldo, with tales of his adventures abroad. His imagination fired by those stories, Aldo thinks about emigrating to Venezuela but abandons the plan. Soon, he meets Adreina, a lively girl who works as a prostitute, and looks after her when she is ill. After he compels an unwilling doctor to examine her, the doctor sends the police after him and he hides away in a migrant workers' camp. Adreina finds him and moves in with him. Again, they are happy, although they have little money. Soon she gets fed up with their situation and decides to make a little cash from her old profession. When he sees what she is up to, he feels sad and leaves

*Finale* More than a year later, Aldo is still on the road, riding in the back of lorries. When he passes Virginia's gas station, she mentions that someone named Irma sent him a postcard. It said that Rosina was well and sent him best wishes. Filled with hope, he returns to his old town, where he finds the main road patrolled by guards. Approaching the town, he sees that the whole area has been expropriated in order to build a military base. Aldo breaks through the police cordon and, amid the turmoil of protest, sees Rosina enter a building. Looking through a window, he sees Irma with a new baby and turns away. Irma rushes after him but catches up only when he has climbed to the top of a tower at his old factory. When she calls out of him, he seems to go into a trance, rocks back and forth, and falls to his death.

## THEMES

### 1. Love

*Irma* Of all the women in Aldo's life, Irma is the most important: he lived with her for seven years and she is the mother of his child. The depth of his love for her is revealed in an early scene that takes place in their house, shortly after Irma has been informed that her husband in Australia is dead. When she tells Aldo, he breaks out in a broad smile and goes to embrace her, knowing that the path is finally open for them to get married and live as a proper couple. 'We've been waiting for seven years,' he says. 'Seven long years.' When she tells him that she is leaving him for another man, he is stunned into silence. He'd had no idea and now his world is turned upside down. He strikes her, but his action is born of the fear of losing her rather than of anger. Love must, in some measure, include need and his need is desperate.

*Elvia* Aldo's overwhelming need for stability is expressed in geographical and emotional terms. Once he is thrown out of his sheltered life with Irma and takes to the road, his psychological disorientation grows day by day. But then, when he drifts back to Elvia, he experiences a brief burst of familiarity that makes him happy. Although he's been travelling, as soon as he enters her house,

he wears a contented smile and clean clothes. He looks a million bucks and is warmly welcomed by a surprised Elvia. He paces around the room like a king in his castle and says, 'Alright. Everything thing's the same here. Even you, Elvia, you haven't changed.' For a moment, a cloud crosses his brow and he asks if she is married. She isn't and he is relieved. Everything is as it was before he left Elvia for Irma, and now he has come back after his stability has been shattered. He is looking for shelter, somewhere to ride out the storm.

*Virginia*\_\_Like many of Antonioni's female characters, Virginia is a survivor. In the upheaval of the post-war years, she understands that one must move with the times. Her ability to adapt is illustrated in a sequence beginning with a scene of her father protesting against the cutting down of trees on the land that his daughter sold. The new owner screams that he bought the land, the house and the barn for a huge amount of money. Next, we see Virginia and Aldo in post-coital conversation. 'Since my husband died,' she says, 'I've needed people to help me. How could a woman run a farm on her own? So, when we were offered this gas station, I sold the land and took it.' She also mentions that she'd like to travel, to see new places and people. Unlike Aldo, she has been able to change her life to fit the new mobile world of the 1950s.

*Adreina* Aldo's principal weakness is that he is unable to change himself to fit a new situation. After Irma leaves him and he takes to the road, he struggles to adapt to the new life of mobility and flux. The paradox is that every time he leaves a woman in order to seek stability, he throws himself back onto the road of instability. A vivid illustration of his problem with adaptation comes during his relationship with Adreina, who is the most erratic and unpredictable of his women. When the winter rain begins and neither of them has a job, Aldo and she start to go hungry. She tries to push him to do 'something,' but he remains silent and walks away, depressed. He wants stability in the form of a traditional family, but everywhere he turns, he finds that modern values and economic change prevent him from achieving it. Like the trees on the land Virginia sold, Aldo has been uprooted.

*Rossina* Amidst these temporary affairs with women, there is one constant in Aldo's life: his love for his daughter, Rossina. When he hits the road after Irma leaves him, his daughter is the only constancy in his increasingly itinerant and unstable life. He scolds her and even slaps her once, but we see that he is always attentive, affectionate and protective. One of most moving scenes in the film is their separation. When Virginia convinces him that Rosina must be sent back to her mother, Aldo puts her on a bus and speaks to her through the window. 'When will you come see me, papa?' the little girl asks. Now the bus has started, and Aldo runs beside it, crying out, 'Rosina, don't tell them your dad is unhappy because he's not with you. I'm always thinking of you...Your dad loves you, Rosina. He'll always love you.' He never speaks to her again, and only once glimpses her through a window before his death. Aldo is a flawed man, but his love for his daughter is unwavering. The scene is heart-wrenching.

## 2. Psychology

*loss* The narrative arc of the film is Aldo's loss of a familiar world, being thrown into confusion and being unable to regain the stability he enjoyed with Irma. At the beginning, he stands like a stout tree, and in the end he falls. All through the film, we see other signs of instability: the trees on Virginia's family farm are felled; the river is dredged; the land around Irma's town is expropriated; and the factory is to be demolished.

*disorientation* The 'cry' of the title (or 'outcry,' as it is sometimes translated) refers to both Irma's scream when Aldo falls from the tower and to the smaller cries of pain that accompany Aldo on his hopeless journey. The cries come from a society that is undergoing rapid social and economic change. As in most of Antonioni's films, some people adapt to the disorientating flux and some do not. That ability to change with the times is crucial in defining the characters. Even his death is illustrative of his psychological state. Standing on top of the tower, he hears Irma's familiar voice from below. It is too much. He feels dizzy and falls. He does not jump—that would be too assertive for the disoriented Aldo. Instead, he just succumbs and falls.

*nostalgia* Aldo's slide from his stable world ends with nostalgia, as he stands on the tower. That high spot is a familiar place, where he used to work while living with Irma. When he reaches the top, he looks out at the landscape, which was once familiar but is now being changed by the construction of a huge military air base. The factory, too, is scheduled for demolition. The scene from the top is

significant because much earlier in the story he had described his former life as seen from that vantage point. 'I had a steady job,' he said. 'From my workplace [the tower], I could see the river, my house, my daughter coming back from school.' His world, as seen from the tower, was stable, each thing and every person in the right place. It is a comforting sense of familiarity.

### 3. Quest

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.

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Aldo** Aldo 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.

**Proud** When the big crisis comes in Aldo's life—the news that Irma is leaving him for another man—he reacts with disbelief, shock and then anger. Unable to control his emotions, he would have struck her inside the house but was interrupted by a knock at the door. Later, though, he confronts Irma in the street and slaps her hard, knocking her against a wall. She staggers out into a square, where, with a crowd watching, he strikes her again and again, a dozen times. When he's finished, he commands her to go home. She walks away and he shouts, 'Did you hear me?' Aldo's pride has been wounded. He has been rejected by the woman he loves and everyone in the town will soon know it. The only way he knows to restore his pride, and his public image, is to humiliate Irma in front of others.

**Passive** One of the casual remarks that Aldo makes reveals another key aspect of his character. He has just met Virginia, who runs the petrol station, and she is flirting with him, asking if he's made up his mind about leaving in the morning. He shrugs, lights a cigarette and says that it depends on many things: 'money, willingness and a job.' Winking at him, she asks which of those three he lacks the most. Without hesitation, he says it's willingness (*voglia*, also translated as 'desire' and 'wish'). He does sometimes get work and he sometimes has money, but what he can never gain is the desire to make something of his life. Losing Irma has knocked the stuffing out of him, leaving him limp and passive.

**Inconclusive** Another curious conversation, this time with Adreina, illustrates a related quality, his inability to finish anything. He is walking with Adreina along a vast stretch of dry land, empty, desolate and grey. All of a sudden, with no preamble, he tells her a story about the past. 'I was with a girl name Irma,' he says, 'Everyone wanted to go dancing. But she said let's go the museum instead. So we went there.' Like us, Adreina wants to know what happened next. 'And then?' she prompts. 'Nothing,' he says. 'We went to the museum.' 'What kind of a story is that?' she cries in exasperation. 'How does it end?' He doesn't reply because he doesn't understand that his story is inconclusive. Like his whole life, it drifts aimlessly, without a destination.

**Compassionate** For all his flaws, Aldo is a compassionate person. In his interactions with people (all four women, his daughter and many others), he is ready to give support when needed. That innate quality is what first brings him into contact with Adreina. He is drifting along on the river bank when he sees her trying to put a distress flag on the roof of her shack to indicate that she is ill. Immediately, he goes to her, guides her inside and makes her go to bed. She refuses to be treated like a patient, but he persists and puts up the flag. A doctor stops but is too busy to examine her and only asks question from the road above the house. Not satisfied with this cursory treatment, burly Aldo drags him down the slope and into her house. It turns out that she has malaria. She is fortunate that Aldo happened to cross her path.

**Irma** Irma 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. Otherwise, she seems perfectly suited to be Aldo's wife. She says she still loves him but not as she used to. Breaking the news to him is painful and she does it gently.

**Contrite** Irma is not a flighty woman and she is not mean-spirited, either. Instead, she is genuinely contrite when she breaks the terrible news to Aldo. She takes no pleasure in telling him that she has fallen in love with another man and, in fact, she blames herself for not telling him earlier. Throughout the long scene of her confession, she speaks softly and brings out the story incrementally in order to cushion the blow. The most revealing dialogue occurs at the end when she says to him, 'Going on like this is humiliating to us both. I'm so upset I can hardly talk. What can I do about it? It's like something I can't control.' Although that final sentence is not intended to absolve her of blame, it does explain to us (if not to Aldo, who is too upset to understand) what happened. She did not and does not want to hurt Aldo. It is out of her control.

**Virginia** Virginia is, in some ways, a female Aldo. Like him, she has been in a long-term relationship (she's a widow), and she has a dependent (her senile father). But she is completely different in her reaction to her life-situation. She sold the family farm and bought a petrol station, which she runs all on her own. Her desire for independence means that she is reluctant to accept Aldo's little daughter as part of their relationship.

**Assertive** Virginia is nobody's fool. She runs her own business and looks after herself, never shrinking from a challenge from the men she encounters in her petrol station, which is open to everyone. One particular incident defines her well. A man arrives on a motorbike and asks for two litres of petrol, which Virginia duly gives him. 'How much is that?' he asks when she is putting the nozzle back in the pump. '350 lira,' she says. 'No, madam,' he says impudently, 'this much!' He gives her the 'up yours' gesture and speeds off. Within seconds, though, she stops a car, jumps in and five minutes later returns in another vehicle, waving the 350 lira like a winning lottery ticket. 'He even had to thank me!' she calls out in triumph.

**Adreina** Adreina 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.

**Practical** The decisive moment in the Adreina chapter occurs when Aldo and she run out of money and food. She returns from a local store empty-handed because they refused her credit. Even as she is turned out, she snatches a ball of candy, pops it in her mouth and sashays out the door. Back in the shack, though, the rain is coming through the roof and she asks Aldo what they should do. When he says 'nothing,' she makes up her mind. 'Ok,' she says, putting on her coat, 'I see that I'll have to arrange something.' She finds a client willing to pay her for sex. When Aldo follows her and criticises her, she says, 'I'm doing it because I'm hungry. And because you're hungry, too.' In contrast with the passive Aldo, Adreina takes the initiative. The need to earn money and eat take precedence over any concerns with public morality.



(Aldo and Virginia)



(Aldo and Rosina)