

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Giovanni (in Antonioni's *La Notte*) emotional/dissatisfied

Overview Michelangelo Antonioni created *La Notte (Night)* as the second panel in a trilogy of films: *L'avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'eclisse* (1962). Like the other two films, *La Notte* targets the dominant malaise of Antonioni's time, the difficulty of love and communication in an inhuman society. The protagonist is this time a successful writer, whose just published novel is the trigger for parties and book signings that make up the chief external action of the film. The internal action is the playing out of the corroding relationship between the writer and his wife; their interaction with other people only the more boldly brings out the couple's mutual intolerance for each other.

Character Giovanni, the writer, is a handsome, dark, reserved and ironic observer of his own cultural scene. When he visits a dying friend, at the opening of the film, he is partially seduced, on the way out of the hospital, by a neurotic and sexually devouring female patient—and to a significant degree he yields. His 'dissatisfaction' with the quality of his life, and with what he has to offer, makes him susceptible to erotic distractions, as the course of the present film will show; distractions which, we are made to see, bring their victim nothing but unhappiness. By film's end, we feel we are dealing with a 'successful' man who is deeply in need of peace and self-mastery.

Parallels One of the most telling examinations of marital breakdown, in American fiction, is John Williams' *Stoner* (1965), a fastidious study of marital life on an American University campus. Stoner and his wife and child are a close package until the very simple course of life overwhelms them, a girlfriend enters the picture, and the careful structures of love collapse. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966, marvelously played by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor) brings into the open the seething resentments of a marriage, resentments Lidia waits until the end of our film to download on Giovanni. Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973) aired first as a TV miniseries, was then picked up as a full length film. This unsparing look at marital collapse borrows heavily from Bergman's own (five times married) experience. Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives* (1992) tracks the intricate in and out relationships of two couples, who cannot get along either with or without each other.

Illustrative moments

Dissatisfaction The film opens on the visit of Giovanni and Lidia, to a friend dying in the hospital. On the way into the hospital corridor, Giovanni is accosted by a female patient, whom he blows off. But upon his exit—his wife Lidia has gone out before him—his attention is once again attracted by the lady patient, whose room he enters, at her insistence, and with whom he permits sexual play. Nothing conclusive occurs, but Giovanni is disturbed by the episode, which he tries to diminish by admitting it to his—seemingly unresponsive—wife.

Listless After the failed seduction scene, Giovanni and Lidia make their ways together to the book signing party, which is to be the high spot of the day for the writer. However it is boring to both of them, too much idle chit chat, and they decide to go to a nightclub, and relax. Giovanni seems dissatisfied and indifferent, both to his wife's conversation, and to the show. Right by his table a black dude and a sexy chick strip down to the minimum, and dance many not subtle simulations of intercourse, while Giovanni looks on tired, as though the dancers were reading the morning paper to him. This day of honor, for Giovanni, has lost its life. His life is draining away from him.

Embarrassed At a night club party, later in the evening, Giovanni and Lidia walks aimlessly among the guests. Eventually Lidia, off by herself, invents a game by which she is able to slide

her compact across the black and white checkered floor of the nightclub, with the aim of sliding it into the last row in the tile design. Giovanni, to humor her, tries his own luck, is quite the star, and many of the other guests gather around Lidia and especially Giovanni as they compete in this game. Giovanni is at first pleased with the attention, but then realizes that the night club onlookers are making fun of him and his wife's game. The crowd's seeming high spirits are in fact nothing more than envy and humor at Giovanni's expense. He slinks away.

Resigned At the end of the long and shapeless nightclub party, Giovanni and Lidia wander away on the lawns and golf course of the club. Lidia tells Giovanni that she absolutely does not love him, but he cannot accept this perspective—even though he himself has pretty completely lost interest in his wife. While they are half-talking, half searching for light, Giovanni begins to make out with Lidia, and in his clumsy attempts to screw her, there in the sand on the edge of a golf club bunker, he and Lidia slide clumsily down toward the green. This rather grotesque scene takes us away from the film, wrapping nothing up as it goes, but leaving us with the messy tag ends of a marriage which has dissolved.

Discussion questions

La Notte is the second film in an Antonioni trilogy. What connections do you see between this film and *L'avventura*, which we looked at earlier? Do you see something like an Antonioni trademark touching both of these films?

What kind of malaise besieges Giovanni? What does he mean when he says he is a person of memories, but no future?

Does literary success give Giovanni pleasure? Is he proud of his work and achievement? How does he react in the presence of the Italian Nobel Prize Winner?