

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE NIGHT (La Notte) 1961

Michelangelo Antonioni

### OVERVIEW

*The Night* is the second instalment in Antonioni's trilogy of films dissecting the illness that afflicted Italian society after World War Two. It first created controversy when, on release, it was criticised for several explicitly sexual scenes, for example, the mentally-ill woman seducing Giovanni in the hospital. Antonioni revealed that the inspiration for his film came from his experience at a bourgeois party, where he observed several of the behaviours he put in his screenplay. A second, more literary, source for film was a novel by Thomas Mann (*On Marriage*), which gave him the idea of a wife's steadfast fidelity to an egotistical husband. And a third source is *The Sleepwalkers (Die Schlafwandler)*, published in 1932 by the Austrian novelist Broch. Although the film did not go down particularly well with Italian audiences upon release, it did win the Golden Bear (for best film) at the Berlin Film Festival in 1961.

### SYNOPSIS

*The Night* opens with a death in a hospital and ends, only hours later, with a loveless couple attempting to renew their relationship. In between these two key scenes, we follow the life of Giovanni, a successful but troubled writer, and his wife, Lidia, a sophisticated and (once) talented woman. A major section of the story takes place at the party of Giovanni's wealthy patron, where, amid the superficial guests, both Giovanni and Lidia are tempted to betray the other. By the end of the titular night, they are exhausted by their own self-doubts and fed up with the inanities of the guests. When the disillusioned writer and the embittered wife depart, the band is still playing cool jazz, but no one is listening.

### PEOPLE

Giovanni	Giovanni is a writer.
Lidia	Lidia is his wife.
Tommaso	Tommaso, also a writer, is their friend.
Gherardini	Gherardini is Giovanni's wealthy patron.
Valentina	Valentina is his young daughter.

### SCENES

*Tommaso* The film opens with a long tracking shot down the outside of a glass-fronted building in the centre of Milan. Suddenly, we are inside a hospital, where writer Tommaso lies severely ill in a bed. His friend Giovanni (another writer) and Lidia, Giovanni's wife, visit him and learn that his illness is fatal. Drugged with morphine, Tommaso manages to flatter Giovanni about his new book and also express regret about his own life. Unable to bear the sight of her dying friend, Lidia declines to join them and says she must go.

*Seduction* As Giovanni leaves Tommaso, he is stopped in the corridor by a mentally unstable woman. After she drags him into her room, he lets her seduce him, but their love-making is interrupted by nurses. Outside the hospital, he finds Lidia in tears. When he mentions the 'unpleasant' incident with the 'girl in the corridor,' Lidia says he disgusts her with his attempt to disown responsibility for what happened.

*Wandering* Lidia and Giovanni go to a reception in honour of his new book. As her husband receives adulation, Lidia gets bored and leaves. Wandering the streets of Milan, she sees poor people and demolished buildings, gleaming modern structures and smartly dressed women. She

takes a taxi to the area where she first lived with Giovanni and where, now, she witnesses a brutal beating of a young man. She stops the fighting but is frightened by the attacker and runs away.

*Alone* Meanwhile, Giovanni has returned home and found that Lidia is not there. Unable to settle, he fusses around his office and takes a nap. When he wakes, he is annoyed that Lidia has still not returned home. Finally, she calls him and asks him to pick her up. When he arrives, they reminisce about their old neighbourhood. Back in their apartment, she notices that he is emotionally distant and shows no interest in her sexually. Rather than go to a party by Giovanni's wealthy patron, she says she wants to go to a nightclub so she can be alone with him. At the nightclub, they watch a seductive dance by a black woman and exchange cryptic remarks about themselves.

*Party* Later, they go to the party, where Giovanni is feted by everyone and Lidia wanders around. Husband and wife come together briefly to listen to the rich patron claim that he does not 'obsess' about money and that he views his business as an 'art.'

*Flirting* Later, Lidia is admired by a stranger, while Giovanni finds the patron's pretty daughter, Valentina, playing a strange version of checkers. He joins her and they exchange flirtatious banter. Later, when they are alone but observed by Lidia, Giovanni kisses Valentina.

*Death and money* Lidia calls the hospital and is told that Tommaso had died only ten minutes earlier. Giovanni's patron offers him an executive position in his company to oversee 'cultural relations' and write its history. Giovanni says he'll think it over. Giovanni and Lidia meet on a deserted balcony, but she doesn't mention the death and he doesn't mention the job offer.

*Rain and chaos* Roberto, the man who has been admiring Lidia, asks her to dance but they are interrupted by a sudden downpour, which sparks pandemonium among the guests. Some jump into the pool, some strip to their underwear, some are pushed in and many splash around with child-like pleasure. When Lidia is about to leap off the diving board, Roberto tells her to get down and takes her to his car.

*Refusals* They drive a short distance and then park, with the rain still pouring down, making their conversation inaudible. Lidia seems to enjoy his company, but when he tries to kiss her, she apologises and says she can't. At the party, Giovanni finds Valentina alone, but she tells him to go back to his wife.

*Personal crisis* Giovanni tells Valentina that he's going through a personal paralysis: he doesn't how to write any more. She plays a tape recording of her own creative writing, which is very good. He declares that he 'needs' her and she seems willing to accept him, but then they see Lidia and Roberto coming in from the rain.

*Secrets* Valentina takes Lidia to her room and helps her dry her hair. They share secrets, Lidia's being that she has thought of killing herself. Giovanni overhears this and comes into the room. Lidia tells Valentina that she isn't jealous about her flirting with her husband. 'That's the problem,' she adds.

*Party over* The married couple leave the house in the early morning, with the band playing soft jazz music. Walking across the patron's private golf course, Giovanni says he won't take up the job offer, and Lidia tells him about Tommaso's death. She explains how important he was to her when she was young, encouraging and believing in her intelligence. She married Giovanni, she says, because he talked only about himself and because she loved him. But now she feels like dying because she doesn't love him anymore. He admits that he has been self-centred but wants to 'hang on to something' and is sure he still loves her. She reads him a love letter that he wrote to her when they were young. He kisses her, but she resists, saying that their love is dead. He won't accept her verdict and presses on with his love-making.

## THEMES

### 1. Psychology

*loss* The dominant psychological theme in this film is that of loss. Loss of life and of love, talent, art, sexual desire and the will to live. The main characters, Giovanni and Lidia, walk around in a miasma of bourgeois *ennui*, wandering through the streets of Milan or the rooms of the all-night party. They are sleepwalking, as suggested by the several references to a book by that name, written by Broch in 1932. Giovanni seems permanently on the verge of falling asleep, cold, distant and unresponsive. His sexual passion can only be aroused through random, secret encounters with young women. Erotic pleasure may be possible, but love is dead. Lidia drifts through the film, too, especially in her walk through the streets. But she, at least, tries to connect emotionally with her husband. Love, as someone later says, has been killed by 'the apathy of habit.' Valentia, the jaded 22-year-old, sums up the problem, when she says, 'When I try to communicate, love disappears.'

*sadness* The most overt moment of loss is the hospital scene that opens the story. Tommaso, a writer and friend of the married couple, is dying. Tommaso appears at first to be in good spirits, commenting with enthusiasm on Giovanni's new book, but he also shows remorse and pain in his final days of living. 'There are times,' he says, 'when you don't want to pretend anymore.' He feels he lacked the courage to be a bold writer, or just wasn't clever enough. His end-of-life candour contrasts with the understandably light-hearted but still arid comments by Giovanni. 'The advantage of a premature death,' Giovanni says, 'is that you escape success.' Listening to this is Lidia, who later reveals that she contemplated suicide. When Tommaso cries out in pain, it is too much for Lidia, who leaves. Tommaso holds her hand when he says goodbye. 'See you tomorrow,' she says, not knowing that he will die that night. Even the champagne rolled in by the nurse and consumed by the patient and his friends does nothing but underscore the brutal fact of mortality. This opening scene sets the melancholic tone for the rest of the story.

*compassion* One powerful scene, which counters the emotional emptiness in the story, involves Lidia. While strolling around her old neighbourhood, she witnesses a group of young men fighting near a construction site. The violence appears senseless, staged for the onlookers, but is clearly dangerous. At first Lidia turns away with disgust but then runs over and screams, 'Stop it! Stop it!' Suddenly, the attacker raises his head and ceases to pummel the body lying under him on the ground. That man gets up and puts on his shirt with a wordless stare at this older yet attractive and spirited woman. She turns and he follows her, with obvious intent, but she escapes. It is a singular display of moral concern for others.

### 2. Society

*decadence* The loss and sadness in the film are correlated with a cultural decadence, which the filmmaker perceives in post-war Italy. Giovanni, the writer, is paralysed, unable to write, leaving the field of cultural patronage open to capitalists like his patron. Even that crass materialist laments the passing of craft, when things were built to last. The dreary decadence of the film is only briefly dispelled by the dance at the nightclub, an insertion of psycho-erotic energy by a black woman into the soulless world inhabited by modern Italians. There is also a momentary injection of life when the sudden rain shower turns everyone into frolicking nymphs and satyrs. In the final scene, Giovanni and Lidia engage in something that looks like 'real sex' in a bunker on a golf course. But even this possibly hopeful final message is undercut by the sterility of the sand 'trap', with its implication of failure.

*Art vs Materialism* 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. 'If anyone thinks about becoming rich, my advice is don't obsess about money,' he advises. 'I've always looked on my businesses as works of art. The important thing is to create something that lasts.' 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.

### 3. Marriage

*absence of marital desire* The key moment illustrating the absence of male sexual desire occurs after Lidia comes home from her wandering around Milan. Giovanni has been upset that she had been gone for so long, but when she arrives, he seems nonplussed. Lidia is naked in the bath and asks him to give her a sponge, which he does but without the slightest interest in her body or any thought of sponging her himself. The same withdrawn coldness is shown when, a moment later, she stands naked beside him with a towel. And when she struts past him in her new, revealing dress and turns to receive his admiring glance, she sees only the same phlegmatic man, distracted with his own thoughts. This scene is essential in establishing the dominant theme of loss through the absence of sexual arousal within marriage.

*desire with strangers* The lack of sexual desire toward his wife stands in sharp contrast with Giovanni's arousal with strangers. There are two such scenes. First, he is 'seduced' by a mentally-ill woman in the hospital. While he does not initiate the sexual encounter, neither does he discourage it. His arousal by this unstable woman hints at the broader dysfunction of his sexuality: he is uninterested in his attractive wife but turned on by a wild stranger. Later, during the all-night party, Giovanni is also attracted to Valentina, another comparable stranger, but much more like him in her coy and witty conversation. Again, Giovanni is entering exciting sexual territory because it is unconventional.

*flirting* Giovanni's flirting with Valentina is matched by Lidia's flirtation with a man at the party. Although, like her husband, she does not initiate the contact, she does permit herself to be drawn into a relationship that verges on infidelity. The fact that neither husband nor wife actually has sex with another person at the party isn't the point. It is enough that both of them have contemplated such an act.

*end of love* The final scene of the film dramatises the dead end of marital love. Throughout the film, we have noticed the emotional and physical distance between Giovanni and Lidia, and now it all comes to the fore in words. As they walk away from the party and across the golf course, Lidia tells Giovanni that she feels only pity for him because she no longer loves him, and he doesn't love her. When Giovanni protests, Lidia pulls out an old love letter and reads it to him. 'Who wrote that?' he asks. 'You did,' she informs him. Giovanni has lost any memory of their early love, but moved by the sentiment of his written words, he kisses her. It is a desperate attempt to rekindle a dead fire, as futile as the hope that Tommaso might live another day.

### 4. Friendship

*Lidia and Valentina* While marriage and sexual relationships in the film are characterised by failure and dysfunction, there are two instances of a meaningful friendship. One involves Lidia and Valentina, who appear to be different in age and temperament. However, they are similar in that their talents and intelligence have been suppressed by a male domination. They should be enemies since Valentina seems to be competing with Lidia for her husband's attention. It turns out, though, that they are too savvy to allow any interest in Giovanni to spoil their instinctual female rapport. Their understanding about men is demonstrated when Lidia comes in from the rain, having rejected the kiss of an admirer, and finds Valentina with Giovanni. Lidia has watched them throughout the night and is aware of their flirtation, but she is not jealous. Over a glass of whisky, the two women open up to each other, Lidia sharing her death-wish and Valentina confessing that she has vices but can't perform them. Giovanni comes into the room, and the three of them say goodbye. He touches Valentina's cheek, a tender gesture, but Lidia kisses her and gives her a conspiratorial smile. Giovanni thinks he has won this little game, but the ladies know better.

*Lidia and Tommaso* An equally strong friendship exists between Lidia and Tommaso, the writer who dies in the hospital. In that opening scene, they greet each with more than words, and Lidia is so moved by his condition that she has to leave the room. After she learns of his death, she is weighed down by a heaviness that never leaves her. And in the final scene, with Giovanni, Lidia describes how central Tommaso was to her before she married. He believed in her talent and encourages her to express herself. Why didn't they marry? we ask ourselves. Lidia supplies the answer: she wanted to get away from the intensity of self-exploration (with Tommaso) and lose herself in someone (like Giovanni) who only thought of himself. A strange but believable motivation.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Lidia** Although many critics believe that the film is focused on Giovanni, the suffering writer, it is the wise but inert Lidia who dominates the story. She is an observer, a good judge of character and capable at times of genuine emotion, unlike most of the others. However, she, too, is suffering, from regret and a failed marriage.

*Watchful* Throughout the film, Lidia observes others around her, on the streets, at the party and in her own apartment. It is not a passive gaze, though. Rather, she watches with an intensity, registering and understanding but rarely engaging in what she sees. A memorable sequence occurs at the beginning when she leaves the dying Tommaso in the hospital and wanders around Milan. She looks at a workman, who mistakes her for a prostitute. She comforts a little girl, but only for a second. She looks up at modernist buildings, at demolition sites and at unused railway lines. She is detached from what she sees, and we see her at a distance, never in a close up. Having just left her dying friend, she is pained by her own mortality and her crumbling marriage. Lidia can only look. She's even incapable of infidelity, preferring instead to regard her husband with disdain.

*Embittered* Even from a distance, though, Lidia is acutely aware of her husband's philandering. And it makes her bitter. This quality of quiet contempt is displayed in a conversation that the estranged couple have in the car after leaving the hospital. Driving home, he says that he has to tell her something that may upset her. 'Do you have to?' she asks with exasperation, presumably guessing what's to come. He goes on to narrate his 'unpleasant' experience of being seduced by the mad woman in the hospital. She listens carefully to his description of him getting 'carried away' by her wildness. She expresses her anger in a mocking statement that 'it's good material for a novel.' When he asks if that is all she has to say, she replies, 'What should I say? That you did something vile? That you disgust me?' She puts an end to the conversation, fed up with his failure to accept responsibility for the encounter.

*Regretful* At the very end of the film, Lidia finally explains the regret that we feel lies buried beneath her cool exterior. Tommaso has died, and she describes to Giovanni how important he was to her when she was younger, before she married. Reflecting back, she says, 'He convinced me, despite myself, that I was cleverer than I am.' He wanted her to study harder and harder, but she was only concerned with her personal problems. He never spoke about himself and was fully focused on her realising her potential. But she didn't appreciate it at the time and it drove her mad. That's why she married Giovanni. He talked only about himself, relieving the pressure she had felt with Tommaso. But now she realises that it was Tommaso, and not Giovanni, who loved her. In a final statement, she says, 'I feel like dying, because I no longer love you...I wish I no longer existed because I can't love you.' Her pain is intense. She gave up the man who truly loved her and now is dead.

**Giovanni** Giovanni 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.

*Self-doubt* Giovanni has just published a book that looks like it will make his name in the literary world, but he suffers from a lack of confidence. That self-doubt is on display in the opening scene, when he and Lidia visit the dying Tommaso in hospital. Giovanni shows genuine concern for his friend, although they talk mainly of literary affairs. Giovanni has brought him a copy of his new novel, which Tommaso has begun to read. He thinks it is very good, but Giovanni dismisses this praise as 'due to the morphine.' Again, and again, the writer deflects Tommaso's positive evaluation of his book, making coy and self-deprecating comments. Then, in a moment of silence, he looks at his friend and says in a different tone of voice, 'Do you really think it's good?' When he is assured that he

will become a success, he replies, 'Yes, and I'll come to a sticky end.' Giovanni may be self-absorbed and emotionally distant, but he is not arrogant.

*Restless* Giovanni is also a restless person, as illustrated in the section when he is at home and Lidia is still wandering around Milan. He just cannot settle without her. In parallel with her meandering, he drifts from room to room, picking up papers and books, sitting down, trying to read, getting up and staring out the window. He goes out onto a balcony and is confronted by the brutal concrete architecture of huge apartment buildings. He sees a man silhouetted in a window, staring at him. Giovanni tries to look away, but he is drawn back. Finally, the telephone rings and it is Lidia. This scene dramatises the nervous energy running through Giovanni, his search for meaning and his inability to communicate. Relief comes when Lidia calls on the telephone, but it is telling that they are connected by an instrument and do not speak face to face.

*Resigned* Giovanni's resignation in the game of life is revealed in the scene when he and Lidia watch a dance performance in a nightclub. Both are absorbed by the mesmerising and erotic movements of the black woman. When it's over, both clap politely, and he says, 'Life would be tolerably agreeable if it weren't for its amusements.' Lidia greets this (Oscar Wildean) comment, typical of the sophisticated malaise that afflicts them both, by asking if it is an inspiration. Giovanni smiles and says, 'No. I no longer have inspirations, only recollections.' It is a devastating self-appraisal for a writer or any artist. Life is over, it suggests, and I'm living on the fumes from the afterburners.



(Lidia and Giovanni)



(Giovanni and Valentina)