

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## STORY OF A LOVE AFFAIR (CRONACA DI UN AMORE) 1950

Michelangelo Antonioni

### OVERVIEW

*The Story of a Love Affair* is Antonioni's unjustly overlooked debut. Although it is not a masterpiece, its luminous cinematography and complex psychological plot presage those features in his later films. Borrowing from both American film noir (especially *Double Indemnity*) and Italian neo-realism, it is a film filled with black cars, shadowy streets and mystery. The 'love story' is a love affair, an illicit one that is doomed from the start because of its roots in a tragedy that occurred seven years earlier. Along the way, there is a scathing depiction of Italy's pretentious wealthy elite, which would also become one of the film-maker's signature themes. There are actually two storylines: the investigator discovering clues about Paola's past and the developing bond between Paola and Guido. The two storylines create a tension, one complicating the other, until they merge into a single strand that ends in tragedy. It may be melodrama, but it is melodrama of the highest calibre.

### SYNOPSIS

Stunningly beautiful Paolo is married to a money-obsessed industrialist in Milan, who hires a detective to look into her past. His investigation, ironically, brings Paola back into contact with her former lover Guido. When they renew their amorous relations, they are overcome with guilt about their responsibility for the death of a friend seven years before. Hunted by the detective and haunted by their memory, the two lovers plot to kill the husband and live together. Nothing goes to plan, however, and the end is bleak.

### PEOPLE

Paola	Paola is the wife of Enrico Fontana.
Enrico	Enrico Fontana is a wealthy businessman.
Guido	Guido is a struggling car salesman who knew Paola when they were younger.
Carloni	Detective Carloni is hired by Enrico to investigate Paola's past.
Matilde	Matilde is one of Paola's friends from school.
Giovanna	Giovanna (who never appears) was also a school friend, who died when she fell down an elevator shaft.

### SCENES

**Paola Fontana** In the office of a detective agency in Milan, two men look through the photos of a young woman, Paola Fontana, wife of a wealthy businessman, Enrico Fontana. 'She's 27,' one man informs the other. 'Father was a professor. She married in 1943, during the war.' After finding these photos seven years later, her husband wants to know who she really is.

**Investigation** Detective Carloni starts his investigation at the school Paola attended in Ferrara, where he is told that she had a new boyfriend every month. Carloni also learns that she had two close girl friends at school. One of them, Giovanna, is dead, while the other, Matilde, is struggling.

**Guido** At Matilde's flat, Carloni finds out that Paola had a special boyfriend named Guido, who was engaged to Giovanna and that Paolo tried to steal away from Giovanna but failed. Two days before the wedding, though, Giovanna fell down an elevator shaft and died. After Carloni leaves the flat, Matilde writes a letter to Guido warning him about a suspicious man looking into their past.

**Meeting** Draped in a fur coat, Paolo and her rich friends chat outside the opera house in Milan. She sees Guido across the street and is shocked. That night, she receives a call from Guido and agrees to meet him the next day. When he shows her Matilde's letter, Paolo is afraid that the police are making enquiries or that Matilde will bribe them. Guido is less suspicious but agrees to see Matilde in Ferrara.

*Details* Back in Ferrara, Carloni examines the site of the elevator accident and learns details from a woman who was there at the time. For example, neither Paola nor Guido rushed down to see if Giovanna was still alive. Speaking to Paola's husband in Milan, the detective also learns that Paola left Ferrara right after the accident and never told him about it.

*Love affair* Paola meets Guido on the sly and is afraid when he tells her that the detective is asking more questions. Guido reassures her that they 'did nothing.' Drawn together, they renew their love affair. Paola tries to help Guido with money, but her plan for him to act as a broker in selling her husband a car is a failure. She also becomes jealous of a model who flirts with Guido. Paola avoids the detective and meets Guido in rented rooms, where they make love.

*Troubles* Before long, Guido is haunted by their responsibility for Giovanna's death. It is clear that they could have saved her but didn't because they wanted her 'out of the way.' As they argue, Guido says they can never be together while Paola is married. Paola tricks him into contacting her again, by putting lots of money into his wallet that he returns to her. Next day, Paola tells Guido that it is her husband who has hired the detective, out of jealousy when he found the old photos. Guido is alarmed, but she tells him that her husband has halted the detective's investigation. Again, he is upset when she says that her husband won't leave her alone and forced himself on her.

*The solution* When Guido and Paola meet again in secret, she is adamant that they can't just run away together because they have no money. Subtly, she appeals to his pride in order to convince him that there is only one solution: kill her husband. He is shocked but eventually agrees.

*The plan* Paola meets Guido on the bridge that her husband must cross on his way home. When the car slows down, Guido says he will shoot him. Paola wonders if they should abandon the idea, but he reminds her that there is no other solution. Again, they argue about who was responsible for Giovanna's death. 'You saw that the elevator wasn't there,' Paola says. 'You saw it but you didn't say anything. You killed her!'

*Car crash* When Paola's husband receives Carloni's report, he is disturbed by what he has discovered about his wife. Speeding home, he heads toward the bridge where Guido is waiting in the dark. Guido hears what sounds like a car crash and hurries to the spot, where he sees a burning car and the dead body of Paola's husband.

*Departure* When the police arrive to inform Paola of her husband's death, she flees from the house thinking she will be arrested for murder. Taking a taxi, she finds Guido, who tells her what happened. 'It's his fault,' he says. But he also says that they can't go on. When he takes her home, she declares her love for him and makes him promise to call her in the morning. Guido climbs into the taxi and tells the driver to go to the train station.

## THEMES

### 1. Psychology

*guilt* This is the story of a doomed love affair, strangled by the guilt that clings to the lovers years after a tragic accident for which they bear responsibility. It is ironic, in hindsight, to note that the two old lovers are brought together not because one desires the other, but because the wife's husband initiates an investigation into her past. The detective's snooping around creates fear in Paola, which propels her to Guido, and thus their old love is rekindled. But from the beginning, their love affair is controlled by the past, by the accident of their friend who fell down an elevator shaft. Paola and Guido could have saved her, but they didn't and even seven years later are unable to free themselves from that awful sense of complicity in her death. They meet, make love, fall out and meet again, as if they are in control of their lives, but all the time they are manipulated by some invisible logic, a psychological mechanism that, like the elevator which appears and reappears, grinds them down. If one of them has second thoughts about their plan to murder the husband, the other one blocks their exit. There is no other solution; they must kill him or suffer for the rest of their lives. Detective Carloni sums it up: 'There was something then, and there's something now. Ride a tiger and you can't get off.'

*fear* A second psychological element in the story is the fear that grips the doomed lovers. Their inability to escape the past is dramatised in one of the most affecting scenes in the film, when they meet secretly inside a building. Paola's husband's car is parked nearby, and they are afraid of being recognised. To avoid being seen by anyone in the building, they walk up the staircase that winds

upward around the exposed elevator. As they ascend, Paola tells Guido that her husband hired the detective and is following her. Hunted, they seek refuge on these stairs with the black, metal-grilled elevator car rising and falling only inches away. The clanking of the machinery and the friction of the thick cables provides a soundtrack for Paola's information that her husband won't leave her alone. When she cries, 'I hate him,' the camera angle shifts. Now, we see them side by side, staring down the long elevator shaft. They are silent as the mechanical roar grows louder, but not loud enough to drown out their fear and guilt. For this is just how they stood when they let their friend, Giovanna, fall to her death.

*suspicion* A third psychological element in the story is suspicion, especially on the part of Enrico Fontana, the wealthy husband of Paola. As a man who likes to be in control, he is distrustful of Paola's past. All he knows is that she came to Milan from Ferrara as a young woman and that he married her. Now, when he comes across some photographs from her early life, he hires a detective to investigate her past. Normally, a husband would simply show the photos to his wife and ask, but Enrico is a suspicious man.

## 2. Love

### *Paola and Guido*

The 'love affair' of the title refers to the relationship between Paola and Guido, which evolves through various stages, each dominated by different emotions. First comes their pure joy at being able to love each other after a long passage of time. That is followed by doubts and fear and finally by a sense of doom. Somewhat unusually in an Antonioni film, the passion is genuine, but so are the emotions that later destroy their love affair.

*reunion* After clandestine telephone calls and furtive meetings, Paola and Guido finally give in to the passion that has been rekindled within them. This reigniting of passion occurs as Paola's husband is test driving a car that Guido wants to sell him. As soon as the Maserati roars past them with masculine testosterone, Guido and Paola begin to kiss in the backseat of her husband's parked car. As they become more and more energetic, Paola confesses that she has always loved him. Guido has one eye on the car testing, but he is engulfed by desire and returns her passion with his own. They do not undress or have intercourse, but that is only because of the constrained situation. What is clear is that these two are now locked back into the love affair that the elevator accident had halted seven years before. Indeed, after that long interval, their pent-up passion has been released with increased fury.

*intimacy* Paola and Guido now meet in rented rooms to carry on their love affair. In one scene, after they have just made love, she lies on the bed in her slip, while he stands half-dressed. She beckons for him to join her and cuddles him when he sits on the bed. 'Stay close, like this,' she says lovingly. Guido is worried about the detective finding out about the elevator accident, but Paola soothes his nerves by saying that neither of them did anything to prevent it. 'Now you're free. You're mine. We didn't save her and now we can love each other.'

*conscience* Guido harks back to the accident and says that it will always ruin their relationship. 'Now, comes the worst moment,' Paola says, 'It's time to get dressed. I wish I could put it off forever.' In this post-coital scene, the love affair is haunted by their memory of the accident, especially by Guido's conscience. Paola, on the other hand, revels in her love-making with Guido. She doesn't want the moment to end, but Guido feels that their love affair is already poisoned.

*jealousy* The love affair suffers a further setback when Paola becomes jealous. Guido, Paola, her husband and their rich friends have gathered to watch a fashion model present a dress for auction. When the model openly flirts with Guido while dancing, Paola gets jealous. Watching them have fun on the dance floor, her eyes burn with hatred. And later, when the model appears in the fabulous gown for sale and parades in front of everyone, Paola has to bite her lip to prevent her from screaming.

*trapped* The love affair is doomed because Guido and Paola cannot escape their past. Their entrapment is illustrated when they plan to murder Paola's husband. It's simple, they agree. The husband will slow down on the bridge, and Guido will shoot. Can't miss. But Paola, who has been the prime mover in getting them to this point, begins to waver. 'Why don't we forget it?' she asks, in a tremulous voice. 'You said we can't go on like this [as lovers],' he reminds her. A second later, he admits that he doesn't like the idea. 'Don't do it, then,' she says, and he says, 'You know very well I

will. For you.' She drags them back to the elevator accident, screaming, 'You killed her!' He slaps her and reminds her that she was there, too, and could have stopped the death. He walks away, turns back and says, 'And we'll be together tonight, too [to kill her husband].' The scene ends as they walk down the bridge, separated from each other, surrounded by desolate countryside. It is clear that they are trapped by their feelings of guilt.

### 3. Marriage

**dysfunctional marriage** The marriage of Paulo and Enrico is a classic example of a broken marriage. She married him for his money, and he married her for her beauty. Neither really loves the other.

**money** Their marriage, and the entire film, is soaked in wealth. Enrico Fortuna, the industrialist, is worth a fortune. His wife, Paola, wears sumptuous mink coats and their friends just laugh about the money they spend. They all drive fancy cars and talk about flying to New York (extremely expensive in 1950). Money controls everything, even sex, love and marriage. Paola marries for money; she says that love itself needs money; and others speak of buying sex.

**buying sex** After the opening shot outside the opera house, Paola and her husband are alone in their bedroom at home. She sits in front of her mirror, getting ready for bed. Her husband strolls around, smoking and chatting to her. As she puts cream on her face, he says, casually, 'Luciani [a friend who admires Paola] made me a business proposition. He offered me 300 million lire for you.' Still applying night cream, Paola says, 'Only 300? You know what an Eastern prince would have said? You can have my wife for free. Then I'll kill you.' Her husband says, 'Maybe, but not a Milanese industrialist. He'd say, "Give me the money, you can have her." Then he'd kill her. He avenges the insult, earns the money and gets rid of his wife.' He laughs at his own joke and compliments Paola on her beauty. 'All eyes were on you tonight.' He has sex on his mind, but Paola's cool reply is, 'You know the secret of staying beautiful? Sleep, sleep and more sleep.' In this scene, we have many of the film's key elements in microcosm. Sex can be bought, but someone gets killed in the transaction. A rich husband desires his wife, but she preserves her beauty for others.

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Paola** Paola is 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.

**Haughty** Paola rarely shows kindness to anyone, excepting Guido. Her condescending attitude is illustrated, as usual, in her first scene, when she emerges from La Scala, the opera house in Milan. Swaddled in glittering white furs, she chats with her friends and then turns to her husband, who has arrived to pick her up. He looks chagrined and apologises, saying that the show ended earlier than usual. Paola glances at her watch and says, 'You're still in time. By two seconds.' He is confused and she enlightens him. 'I'm 27,' she says. 'At this very moment.' When he asks what she wants for a birthday present, she says 'I'll think about it.' This is Paola, supremely confident, in control, and treating her husband with contempt.

**Calculating** Beautiful Paola is also cold-hearted when she needs to be. That calculating part of her character is revealed in one of her scenes with Guido after they have renewed their love affair. He speaks about them running away together, going abroad, and being free. She, however, pours cold water on his 'romanticism' and makes him face the uncomfortable reality that they'd have no money. Slowly, Paolo reveals her thinking. 'Let's think about how it would be if we are free,' she says. 'If he died.' Guido won't countenance such an idea, but she continues to wear down his defences. 'Just think,' she says. 'Bang. And it's all over.' When he expresses doubts, she says, 'You fought in the war. It's just a matter of the right opportunity.' Throughout this scene, she paces around the room, with a grim expression on her face. When Guido is shocked, she says, slyly, 'Can't you take a joke' and rushes into his arms. But it is not a joke. She has planted the idea in his mind and knows that he will act, eventually. It is a chilling illustration of her devious nature.

**Practical** Paola can also calculate dollars and cents, as shown in the long scene when she makes Guido face the reality that they are trapped. When Guido dreams of them going abroad and making

money, she is quick to point out that it will be only more rented rooms and cheap cigarettes. Guido is hurt by her reference to his poverty, but she continues her argument, saying, 'Money is everything in love... We leave, we get somewhere and then what? We come back and it's all over.' He is upset, so she soothes his pride, saying, 'Dear, these things have to be said. Money is stupid. Between you and Enrico [her husband], it chooses him.' Guido cannot deny that Paola is right. She is the practical one, the one who faces up to the reality of their situation, the one who suggests killing her husband.

**Guido** Guido appears to be a 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.

**Naïve** Guido is not as cunning as Paola, which makes him malleable in her hands. A good example of his open-heartedness comes in the first scene when he talks with Paola after seven years. She is married, and he is struggling to make ends meet. As she drives him in her nice car to a lake, he looks her over and says, 'You look stunning. How did you get like this?' She wants to know what he means, and he says, 'I don't know. You have class.' At the lake, he shows her the letter informing him of the detective. Immediately, she is afraid, but he is relaxed. 'It's so vague,' he says. She says it must be the police, and he is sure that it isn't. He says that he came to see her just because he was passing through. She wants to take action, but he is optimistic that nothing will happen to them. This scene establishes Guido's character. He is trusting, relaxed and, as it turns out, naïve.

**Guilt-ridden** Eventually, though, the memory of the accident gnaws away at his conscience and destroys his *sangfroid*. Halfway through the film, during one of their love-making assignations, they lie on the bed. Guido props himself up, sighs and says, 'I think about Giovanna. I ask myself: why didn't we save her? It only needed a second or two. But at that moment we wanted her dead. We really wanted it. I wonder if that's a crime.' Paola tries to assuage his guilt, but his doubt about his complicity in the death is deeply rooted in his mind. He loves Paola but meeting her after seven years has only served to dig up that painful memory. Now, he will carry the burden of that guilt until the end.

**Enrico** Enrico 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.

**Obsessed** No matter where he is, Enrico never loses sight of his business. From the beginning, we know he has money on his mind, and toward the end we see that he is obsessed with a particular business deal. In the latter scene, he and his friends are gathered in a fancy bar. They comment that they haven't seen him for a while, and he explains that he's been busy. It is announced that one of the society ladies has arranged for a party at her house that evening, but Enrico shows no interest. 'Don't spoil the party,' he is told. 'Another board meeting?' a man asks. Called to account, he explains that he has to meet two customers from Holland at his factory. 'Get rid of them,' a friend suggests. 'Can't, it's too important,' he says. When Paola offers to drive him, he declines, saying that he'd be too preoccupied with thinking about the Dutchmen. Enrico is too absorbed with his business affairs to pay much attention to his wife.

**Possessive** That preoccupation does not, however, prevent him from taking a proprietary attitude toward Paola. We know that he initiated the detective's investigation after seeing old photos that made him wonder about his wife's past. Now, in a scene near the end, he reads the man's report, flicking through the pages with increasing anger. On the last page, he learns that his wife is 'intimate' with Guido. He will not tolerate that. She is his property, his possession. Driven by a need to protect his asset, he races off in a car to confront her but dies in a car accident.



(Paola and Guido)



(The lovers looking down an elevator shaft)