

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE SHELTERING SKY 1990

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

The Last Emperor was a hard act to follow. If *The Sheltering Sky* (which followed it) did not possess the dramatic historical content of the Chinese epic, it does at least match it in its spectacular photography (which recalls the desert of *Lawrence of Arabia*). *The Sheltering Sky* was adapted from a 1949 novel of the same name by Paul Bowles that charts the misadventures of an American couple in the north African desert. Their existential despair in the desert resembles that of the characters in Antonioni's *The Passenger*. When *The Sheltering Sky* was released, critics were divided between those who felt the storyline was too thin and those who enthused about the setting. However, the film did win several awards for its cinematography and musical score, and, over the decades, it has gained more critical acclaim.

PEOPLE

Port	Port is an American travelling in north Africa.
Kit	Kit is his wife.
George	George is their travelling companion.
Mrs Lyle	Mrs Lyle is a travel writer whom they meet.
Eric	Eric is her son.

SYNOPSIS

Port and Kit, a composer and playwright from New York, go travelling in the Sahara as an escape from their idle life and their fractured marriage. After dabbling in the local tribal culture, Port contracts typhoid fever and dies, leaving Kit to fend for herself. She becomes attached to a leader of a camel caravan and eventually assimilates into Tuareg culture as one of his wives. But the cultural shock is too great and she has a mental breakdown, from which she never fully recovers.

SCENES

Travellers Opening historical footage shows 1940s New York City and a massive ocean liner sailing out into the Atlantic. Later, three Americans reach Algeria, where they squint in the fierce sun. They are Port and Kit Moresby and their friend George. When naïve George says they're probably the first tourists the country's seen since the war, Kit corrects him. 'We're not tourists,' she says, 'We're travellers.' Asked the difference, Port says that tourists think about going home the moment they arrive, and Kit adds that travellers might never go home. Using butchered French and Arabic, Port organises a horde of urchins to carry their luggage. When Port tells the customs official that he and his wife plan to stay for 'a year or two,' the man gasps in disbelief.

Adventures Later, in their hotel room, Port and Kit talk about their friend, the wealthy George, whom Kit doesn't trust. Port asks what she means, but she refuses to explain. Port leaves in a huff and goes for a walk in the town, where he meets a man, who takes him to a prostitute in a Berber encampment outside the town. While having sex, she tries to steal his wallet, which he retrieves but is chased from the camp by an angry mob.

Jealousies When Kit wakes in the morning and sees that Port's adjoining room is empty, she lies to George that her husband went out early. 'Do you two ever share a room?' George asks. 'Not when we're travelling for weeks,' she says. 'Besides, the first rule of marriage is never to confused sex with sleep.' When Port comes back dishevelled, he doesn't explain why and is suspicious that George is with Kit so early.

Three's a crowd Also staying in their hotel is Mrs Lyle, a travel writer, and her adult but imbecilic son, Eric. They offer the three others a ride in their car, which would save them a long train journey

into the desert. However, they can only take two. Not a problem for Port, but Kit refuses to leave George alone, which makes Port even more suspicious. In the end up, Port goes alone in the Lyle's car, while Kit and George take the train. Expectations are confounded, though, when champagne and good food are available on the train, and Port has to endure the bickering of mother and son as their old car lumbers along on dusty roads.

Unfulfilled When the car and train journeys meet up, George has a one-night stand with Kit. Port doesn't find out but is even more suspicious just the same. A happy husband and wife cycle out into the mesmerising landscape of the high desert. Lying on a blanket, in the dying sunset, they make love. In the middle of the act, Port begins to talk about the 'sheltering sky,' which leads to a conversation about why they are incompatible. The love-making ends without orgasm and Port in tears.

Deceit Now, the threesome travel together by local bus and stop in a small market town where the accommodation and food are less than hygienic. The Lyles also arrive, and Port cleverly arranges for them to take George to the next destination. He tells George that he and Kit will meet up with him later, but he has no intention of doing that.

Happy Alone with Kit for the first time, Port is happy as they take a bus to another town. Once there, though, he discovers that his passport is missing and realises that Eric must have taken it. Wandering through the town, Port witnesses a ceremony of women dancing while possessed by local spirits. After a few days, Port decides to move on in order to avoid meeting up with George.

Typhoid On the bus journey, he shivers with cold and it is clear that he has contracted typhoid fever. When they arrive in El Gah, the 'most beautiful town in the Sahara,' the only hotel won't give them a room because of fear of infection. Kit manages to find a lorry that takes them to another town with an office of the French Foreign Legion, where there is medicine but no doctor. Given a barren room with no bed or chair, she nurses him with increasing fear for his life. They sleep together on the hard-earth floor, sharing a single blanket. His condition worsens and he dies.

Going native Kit leaves his body and wanders off in the desert, alone and dazed. When she sees a passing caravan, she asks them to carry her suitcase and accepts a ride on the back of the leader's camel. As the caravan travels through the desert, she becomes accepted as the leader's wife/mistress, though they do not share any language. After days and weeks, she adapts to the itinerant life and when the caravan reaches a town of mud-brick houses, she is dressed in long robes and turban like a native.

One of the family The leader is greeted by his wife and family, while Kit, clutching her suitcase, is given a separate room on the roof. After the leader bathes her tenderly, they make love. On his repeated visits, some of the children and women of the house sneak a look and snigger. After staying inside by herself for many days, she is brought outside by the leader's wife, where all the women and children have gathered. From their celebratory singing, it seems that she has been accepted as one of the leader's wives.

Mental breakdown One day in the market, she tries to make a vendor accept her money but is refused, leading to confusion and panic. In the next scene, she is crouching on a hospital bed like a frightened animal. When a lady from the American Embassy arrives to take her home, she does not speak. The lady brings her back to the hotel in the port, where the whole story began and where George is waiting to receive Kit. When the lady goes in to fetch him, Kit leaves the car and wanders into the restaurant where they had eaten at the start of their adventure. A man asks if she is lost, and she says 'yes.'

THEMES

1. Marriage

overview The main lens through we watch the couple's tragedy unfold is their marriage, a ten-year relationship without children and, it seems, much happiness. Although Port and Kit snap at each other, they are sometimes gentle and caring. That is the tragedy of the story: despite their best efforts, they don't seem to know how to love each other.

loneliness The film, like its source novel, is pervaded by a sense of loneliness and loss. Port and Kit, educated and intelligent people from New York, share the alienation of The 'Lost Generation,' a term used to describe writers and artists in America in the 1920s and 1930s. The American married

couple try to escape the emptiness of interwar America by seeking liberation in the primitive culture of the Saharan tribes. But as they flee, they confront their own flaws.

aimlessness We are introduced to the loneliness of the characters upon their arrival at the port in Algeria. When the Customs Officers asks how long they intend to stay in his country, Port says 'a year or two.' When he asked for his profession, he says, 'None that I'm aware of.' A minute later, looking over maps and train timetables, George says that he and Kit will follow Port's plan. To which, Port replies, 'My only plan is that I have no plan.' Here, in this early scene, is the core of the story. These three well-off and sophisticated Americans are travelling without destination. They hope to escape from their meaningless lives in New York, to free themselves from the consumerism back home, but they only end up being lost in the vast desert. As they travel from town to town, becoming more and more remote, they are swallowed up by the sands of the Sahara. They travel but do not stay anywhere, always on the move, driven by a restlessness. Without a destination, they are aimless.

flawed love There is one scene that should be a glorious celebration of the love between Port and Kit. All smiles and clean clothes, they set out on bicycles and ride through the desert to a vantage point that Port has discovered previously. They sit side by side on a blanket and look out as the sun goes down over the flat but beautiful land. He takes off her sunglasses, and she takes off his; he unbuttons her dress, and she does the same with his trousers. Soon they are making love. As he thrusts into her, however, Port begins to talk. He says that the 'sheltering sky' seems to protect them from something. 'Maybe we are both afraid to be alone,' he says, but she says that he does not need her or anyone else. He says that he will never love anyone but her and that maybe they are both 'afraid of loving too much.' This discussion (quite naturally) dampens their passion, and they roll off each other without reaching a climax. He is crying and she is laughing. It is a subtle but vivid illustration of their dysfunctional relationship. Although they seem to love each other, they cannot enjoy that love. Some wall remains between them.

infidelity Kit ends up in George's bed after they have been abandoned by Port and take the train together. On that journey, they drink champagne and enjoy each other's company, in a way that Kit and Port seem unable to do. So, when they reach their destination, they fall into bed in the hotel. In the morning, though, Kit is a little surprised and ashamed. We know she is not happy in her marriage, but she is not a frivolous person either.

husband's illness However flawed it may be, the love between Kit and Port is clearly illustrated when he becomes ill. There are several scenes in which she comforts him, holds him and tries to help him recover, but the most moving occurs in his dying moment. He lies on the floor, and she kneels beside him in the shadows of a bare room, almost like a mythological painting. As he begins to babble, she grows hysterical and keeps trying to make him take some food. 'Swallow, please,' she says. 'Can you try? Please!' She thinks he might be getting better and her voice is a mixture of joy and fear. Then, when he sinks away, she calls out, 'Port! Stay with me! Don't go!' As she sobs, he becomes lucid for a moment and says, 'All those years, Kit. I didn't know it, but now I know it. I lived for you. And now you're going away.' She cries out, 'I'm not going away. I'm here, right here!' The scene ends with her sobbing over his lifeless body. It is perhaps the only truly emotional, even sentimental, scene in the two-hour story. Again, Kit and Port do love each other. Something in life has prevented them from fully bonding, but they are as one in his death.

death of husband Another scene in which loneliness is dramatised is the final stage of Port's slow decline to death. Before he contracts typhoid, he and Kit are fractious, bickering all the time, despite what seems to be an underlying love. Now, though, is seriously ill, lying on the bare floor, without access to medical treatment. He is half conscious as he mumbles his final words to Kit. 'There's a lot of things I want to tell you, but I can't remember them.' Kit asks if he wants more milk, but he only continues to speak in a delirium of memory and pain. 'I'm not here. I'm there. It's so far away. I'm alone. All alone.' Kit screams for him to stay with her, but even if he were to survive, even if he were reunited with Kit, we already know that they are too far apart to be together. Port's dying words reveal the loneliness that pervades the story as a whole.

2. Culture

overview The other dominant theme in the film is the interaction between the Westerners and the tribal people (the Tuareg) of the Sahara. The outsiders sample bits of local culture but are unable to enter inside. The problem seems to be their cultural 'baggage', especially their reliance on words and

writing. Both Port and Kit do eventually merge with local culture, but neither experience is positive.

music Port is a composer, but his words and ideas cause him frustration in his life and prevent him from integrating into local culture of the Tuareg tribe. He and Kit merely observe something of the tribal customs while remaining aloof. Finally, though, Port is able to enter in the host culture through the shared medium of music. The sequence begins with Port in a feverish sweat while the camera focuses on the musical score he has been writing. A jump-cut takes us to a tribal ceremony of women dancing to a whining oboe-like instrument and pounding drums. Port, in a flashback, watches a young woman gyrate with the ecstasy of spirit possession, while the audience, both men and women, utter animal-like cries. Back to the present, Port is delirious himself. He moves his hands in rhythm with the native instruments as they play their mesmerising tunes. This scene makes the important point that Port merges with the tribal culture only when he abandons his verbal communication and uses music.

cross-cultural affair Kit is similarly blocked from any rapport with the Tuareg men and women until she is left entirely on her own and must adapt to local life. After she is rescued by a passing camel caravan, she is adopted by the leader as a wife. She appears passive at first, but he and his family are kind and nurse her back to full health. She cannot establish any kind of understanding with him because they share no language. But, like her dead husband, she uses a non-verbal channel of communication to bond with him. The scene begins with her alone in her room on the rooftop. A turbaned woman enters and bathes her naked body gently, removing the dust of the desert. But when she unwinds the turban, she sees it is the male leader. His big smile prompts her laughter, and they make passionate love. Next day, she is happy, almost joyful, and again they make love with powerful, visceral desire. This primal act appears to be her liberation, the thing she has been searching for, an escape from the sophistication of New York. She, too, has merged with the local culture.

culture clash However, the scene just described concludes with a note of discord. Just as the tribal leader leaves, she says, 'Bye' with a sigh or regret. She knows that he won't understand her even if he heard, but she says it anyway because that is her culture, a deeply ingrained linguistic habit. She then looks at her suitcase and at herself in the mirror. That day, her union with the tribal man is celebrated with singing and clapping, which she can only observe. She is married to him, it seems, but the merger is not a success, as illustrated in the following scene. Kit leaves her separate room and goes out alone into the noisy market. Swathed from head to foot in dark blue cloth, she blends into the milling crowd haggling over ostriches and wild animal parts. Suddenly, she barges through a small knot of people and begins to drink a gruel-like liquid from a large gourd. The other customers are upset and things turn riotous when she throws French francs at the seller, who refuses it. 'Take it,' she cries in English. 'It's real money! Can't you see!' Men in the crowd grab her and lead her away, with what intent is unclear: are they trying to help her or are they going to beat her? She screams in panic and falls on the ground, covering her head with her hands. She has suffered a traumatic shock, from which she only partially recovers by the end of the story. She merged briefly, and only physically, with the local culture before the wide gulf proved unbridgeable. The dream of escape ends in a nightmare of cultural conflict.

trauma The moment of truth arrives when Kit goes mad in the marketplace. A minor misunderstanding with a vegetable seller escalates into confusion and then hysteria as she is unable to comprehend what is happening. She ends up traumatised and doesn't speak for a long time. In time, she recovers on the outside, but the final scene illustrates her continuing instability. She wanders into the restaurant where the whole story began. An old man (the narrator, representing the novelist Bowles) asks if she is lost and she answers yes. After her long ordeal, watching Port die and living as a wife of a Tuareg man, she returns to 'civilisation,' but she is as lonely as she was at the beginning.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Port Port, an American man in his thirties, is a composer from New York. He is self-assured, smug and pretentious. Not unkind, he is reflective but also seems paralyzed by a deep dissatisfaction with himself and with society in general.

Self-absorbed One of Port's most annoying trait is his self-absorption. His witty, ironical remarks seemed to be served up mainly to please himself, as a kind of wall keeping others safely on the outside. A good illustration of his narcissism occurs in an early scene, right after he and Kit and George have arrived in Algeria and are sitting in a restaurant. 'I had a strange dream last night. I just

remembered it,' he begins in his quiet voice. 'I was travelling on a train, which I realised was going to crash into a mountain...' Kit tells him to stop, pointing out that other people's dreams are boring. Port smiles and continues: 'At some point I thought I could stop the crash if I could only open my mouth and scream. And then I realised it was too late because I had reached up and broken off my teeth with my hand as if they were made of plaster. I decided to sob.' As he narrates this truly insipid tale, his eyes are focused inward, not looking at his 'audience.' When Kit leaves in anger, he dismisses her fury by telling George that she is always looking for some obscure meaning in things. The truth is that she was right: his dream-tale was boring, but that did not prevent him from indulging his own pleasure in telling it.

Self-reflective One potential virtue of self-absorption is the ability to reflect on oneself, and so it is with Port. This introspection is revealed in the curious scene when they make love (or nearly do) on a cliff during a desert sunset. Halfway through the never-to-be-completed sexual act, he says, 'Look at the sky. It's so strange, almost solid, as if it were protecting us from what's behind.' Still looking at the sheltering sky, he continues, 'Maybe we're both afraid of the same thing... Maybe we're both afraid of loving too much.' Aside from giving us a hint of the meaning of the title, Port's little speech demonstrates his insight into the strange habit he and Kit have of being unhappy. They have chosen to come to the desert because its vast sky protects them from themselves. As he says, maybe they are unhappy because they are unable to let go and fully love. This is Port at his most elusive, but it also displays his ability to reflect on his relationship with his wife.

Devious A less admirable aspect of Port's character is his deviousness. From the beginning of their journey, he has been suspicious of Kit's relationship with George, and not without reason. His deception is revealed in a transaction with Eric, the childish adult son of Mrs Lyles. Port gives Eric 300 francs as pocket money, mainly to get rid of the snivelling man. Later, Port uses that gift to manipulate Eric into getting rid of his rival, George. The scene occurs in Port's hotel room. Eric enters and says he is ready to repay the money, but Port sees an opportunity and tells Eric that it was a gift. He makes this generous offer because he knows that Eric and his mother are going to a particular town the next morning. 'Oh, that's just where my friend, George, is going,' Port says untruthfully. What luck! For just 300 francs, Port has found a way to remove George from the journey. In the end, it might have been wiser to keep George with them, but Port has no qualms about lying to him and to Kit.

Kit Kit is an American playwright, seeking to experience a different kind of life. She is sharp-tongued, mostly with Port, but also considerate to him and others. She appears edgy and restless from the beginning, trying to accommodate her husband's vague plans with her own vague desires. Although she has a one-night fling with George, her bond with Port is deep, perhaps too deep.

Accommodating Although Kit is unhappy in her marriage, and is annoyed by her husband's behaviour, she tries to make him happy. A good example of her accommodating nature is when they have reached yet another stop-over on their trek through the desert. She wants to know what his plans are and when they will catch up with George. When he enthuses about a place called El Gah, she laughs with disbelief at his incurable romanticism. As they stroll through a cemetery, she sighs and says, 'Don't you think we should ever stop? Just stay *somewhere*, at least for a while?' He pauses but goes on about El Gah and its reputation as the most the most beautiful place in the desert. Hearing this vague talk, Kit collapses on the ground in exasperation and cries out. 'El Gah! Anywhere! Ok, if you'll be happier, feel better, then we'll go to El Gah.' She mocks his enthusiasm, but the main point is that she is willing to comply with his wishes in order to make peace.

Fractious When they finally get to the famed town of El Gah, though, the other side of Kit's character resurfaces. As they sit in their hotel room, and look out at a bustling market, he puts an arm around her, draws her close and asks if she could be happy in that place. 'Happy? How do you mean?' she asks, perturbed. He says that he only wants to know if she likes it, but she is cross and says, 'How do I know? God, I wish you wouldn't ask me questions like this! Really! I can't answer them. What do you want me to say? That I'll be happy in Africa? I like this place, but I can't tell whether I want to stay for a month or I want to leave tomorrow.' Here, we see Kit's underlying conflict with her husband. When he is restless, she wants to stay. But when he wants to stay, she gets angry with him.

Perceptive After ten years of marriage, Kit has learned to understand most of Port's character. This trait is on display after she and George have a night of drunken sex, and George is terrified that Port will find out. He speaks to her alone in the morning, and asks, 'Do you think Port suspects something?' She pauses, considers and says, 'I think he knows. But he doesn't know that he knows.'

That statement illustrates Kit's understanding of her husband's complex mentality. Even when he 'knows' something at one level, he can block it out on another.

Analytical Kit is an intelligent person, a playwright back in New York, but she suffers from over analysing everything. We hear about this flaw in her character from Port, after one of their many squabbles. When Kit leaves them in anger, Port explains to George that she has a bad habit: 'For her, everything in the world is merely a sign for something else. A white Mercedes can't just simply be a white Mercedes. It must have a secret meaning about the whole of life. Everything is an omen. Nothing can just be what it is.' Coming from Port, we take this comment with a grain of salt, but it does ring true. Like Port, Kit's world is overly dependent on words and thoughts. She is rarely capable of just accepting the world and enjoying it as it is.



(Kit and Port enjoying the sunset)



(Kit dresses in local clothes)