

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Antonioni's Films

Society : Classes

Upper Class Consumerism As a man on the left of politics, one of Antonioni's targets in his work is the debilitating effects of post-war consumerism. He began to make films immediately after the war, when Italy was rebuilding itself by casting off old cultural habits and adopting the more capitalist spirit of northern Europe and America. Indeed, it is difficult to point to any man of wealth in his fifteen major feature films who is presented sympathetically. Counter examples are multiple. Just looking at his famous trilogy, we see frivolous rich elites in *The Adventure*, a wealthy vain patron in *The Night*, and the crazy stock-market investors in *The Eclipse*. Two later films linked the evils of consumerism to environmental despoliation. In *Red Desert*, it is impossible to forget the bright orange flames of the petrochemical plant surrounded by polluted marshland and rivers. And an even more sensational image concludes *Zabriskie Point* when the executives planning a land development project in the ancient desert are blown up in a ball of fire. Antonioni once said that his films are 'political but not about politics.' His fierce critique of consumer capitalism, without attacking any particular political party, makes his point.

The Adventure The main social theme in this film is its critique of a decadent wealthy elite, represented by Patrizia, Raimondo and Corrado. This fashionable, crass and narcissistic crowd, who take them on the cruise and whose party they attend at the end. Husbands belittle wives, wives cheat on husbands and no one gives a damn about anything other than themselves, except their pet dog. A luxurious villa, a fancy yacht and an expensive car define these people, the new elite and new generation of professional men and women who run the country. But the vacuity of life is found not just among the wealthy. Cameo appearances by a journalist, a chemist and his wife, and ordinary men on the street reveal the existential absence at every level of society. It is not just Anna who has disappeared—it is a whole civilisation.

The Eclipse Although Antonioni famously said that he 'detested' over messages in film, there is a clear condemnation of colonialism in *The Eclipse*. This scourge of post-war Italy is vividly dramatised in one long scene in Marta's apartment, where Vittoria and Anita have been invited. Marta, who has lived in Kenya for many years, and whose husband is in Africa at the time, has surrounded herself with African art objects and photographs of 'natives.' When Vittoria dresses up and dances around like an African woman, Marta tells them to stop. She explains that all Africans are 'monkeys', except the four or five who got educated at Oxford. 'They all have guns,' she says. 'Six million coloureds want to get rid of 60,000 whites.' Later, we discover that Marta herself has a gun, which she uses to shoot down a balloon after Vittoria asks her to. There is also racism directed toward Africans sitting outside a café at an airfield.

Girlfriends This film makes a similar critique of upper-crust society, its frivolous pursuits and its indifference to the suffering of others. This indictment of the social elite is articulated by Clelia, who blasts the customers in her own clothing salon when she hears news of Rosetta's suicide.

The Lady without Camelias The social critique in this film is aimed at the film industry itself, which is shown to be riddled with gender inequality, male manipulation and an unhealthy concern with the box office. By focusing on cinema, the film also reveals the double standard: scenes of passion are permissible on screen but not in real life. Like other films about the film industry (for example, Chaplin's *Behind the Screen*, Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, Altman's *The Player*, Fellini's *8 & 1/2* and Godard's *Le Mepris*), this film depicts both the glamour and the despair that actors, directors and producers experience. In the end, the glittering celluloid images not only mask but actually increase the personal tragedy that befalls Clara, the star. The film is also a scathing attack on the commercialism of the Italian movie business, which ignores serious cinema while manipulating people and eroding their self-worth.

The Night Here the director's sharp eye is turned on 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. 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.

Zabriskie Point This film is a full-scale attack on bourgeois, racist, gun-loving and corporate America. Mark and Daria are two free-thinkers who confront the evils of their society but eventually withdraw to the desert rather than take up political activism. The final scene, when Lee's mansion is blown up, is one of the iconic images in Antonioni's work.