

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Antonioni's Films

Appearance vs Reality

Overview A somewhat less sociological and more conceptual theme concerns the fluctuating nature of reality and the difficulty of perceiving the truth. As someone in love with the moving image, Antonioni often inserts a puzzle into the story in order to drive the narrative forward. How did Anna disappear in *The Adventure*? Why did Rosetta attempt to kill herself in *The Girlfriends*? What really happened when a young girl fell down an elevator shaft in *The Story of a Love Affair*? Four other films present this theme in terms image-making. The drama in *The Lady without Camelias* rests on the tension between Clara's screen image and her social reality as a wife. *The Girlfriends* also exposes a surface glamour concealing a hidden tragedy. Similarly, *Blow Up* is about a photographer who uses his images to try to understand what 'really happened.' And *The Passenger* is about a journalist who has lost faith in his ability to report the truth. Overall, Antonioni is concerned with the instability of reality, the distortions of image and our inability to know what we see. All of this, of course, feeds into the theme of alienation, which is his primary concern.

Blow Up One of the key themes of this film is the confusion between reality and photographic image. Thomas learns that he cannot rely on his photographs to present what is true. Other people appear and disappear, often wearing some kind of disguise. We also have deception in the form of the wrong roll of film given by Thomas to the woman and the false telephone number that she gives him. The world of fashion photography, which Thomas inhabits, is all about surface distortion and fake emotion. Photography and fashion equate to a doubly deceptive profession for Thomas. Maybe, he, too is unreliable. Maybe he did not, after all, witness a murder in the park. Many characters in the film also wear disguises of one sort or another, from models to hippie protestors.

The Passenger A major theme in this film is the conflict between image and reality, or between invention and truth. Just as in *Blow Up*, where a photographer tries to establish what happened in the park, in *The Passenger* a journalist wants to uncover the reality of the political situation in Africa. In fact, the original title of the film was *Profession: Reporter*, which highlights the job of truth-telling. But David discovers that political propaganda can obscure reality, while at the same time, we watch him attempt to invent a new image for himself. Political propaganda also distorts reality, as do the personal narratives that David and the girl invent for themselves.