



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# **The Passenger**

## **(Professione: reporter)**

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending.

+ intro by Geoff Andrew, *Programmer-at-Large* (Wednesday 5 April only)

Imaginatively scripted by Mark People and Peter Wollen, Antonioni's last great film centres on a TV reporter (Nicholson) who impulsively decides to exchange identities with a man he finds dead in a north African hotel room – a man, fatefully, whom he barely knows... A wry portrait of a burnt-out case hoping to find a new life for himself, packed with memorable directorial flourishes.

**bfi.org.uk**

Michelangelo Antonioni is, to say the least, not widely recognised as a humorous director. But *The Passenger* (1975) – in which a man hijacks another's identity on impulse, knowing next to nothing about him, then spends the rest of the film trying to work out who he's supposed to be and what he's supposed to be doing – can be read as existential black comedy of the most deadpan kind.

As so often with Antonioni, it's a film that poses far more questions than it answers. And even by this director's standards, it's an austere work. Dialogue is sparse – in the first 20 minutes barely 100 words are spoken – and there's no non-diegetic music until the final credits. His consistent preoccupations are foregrounded: questions of estrangement and identity, a sense of emptiness. Locke (Jack Nicholson), the lead character, at one point says, 'I used to be someone else but I traded him in.' Does the title refer to Locke himself, a passenger in someone else's life, or the nameless young woman (Maria Schneider, credited only as The Girl) who decides to tag along with him?

It's a premise that could play out as farce or melodrama (cf Robert Hamer's *The Scapegoat*, 1958; or Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair*, 1978). But with Antonioni we're in for something cooler and more dispassionate, with his trademark narrative reticence and his camera that always observes, often at a distance, but never identifies with any of the characters.

*The Passenger* was Antonioni's third English language film for MGM, after *Blow-Up* (1967) and *Zabriskie Point* (1970). *Zabriskie Point* in particular has dated, but this one not at all. It includes the first screenwriting credit of film theorist and director Peter Wollen, probably best-known for his 1969 book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Aptly enough, *The Passenger* is full of signs and meanings, though just what the signs mean isn't always so clear.

Jack Nicholson called *The Passenger* 'the biggest adventure in filming that I ever had in my life'. This was around the time he was making *The Last Detail* (1973) and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), but here he gives a downbeat, almost subdued portrayal – far from what we think of as a typical grinning 'Jack the Lad' performance. 'To Antonioni,' he observed, 'actors are moving space.'

The camera repeatedly switches venues – from Africa to London to Spain – without warning, and there's a striking use of slow lateral pans and tilts, often effecting time-shifts within the shot, without cuts or dissolves. All this builds to the riveting penultimate shot: a complex unbroken six-and-a-half-minute take with a constantly moving camera.

As Locke, now passing himself off as Robertson, the dead gun-runner whose identity he purloined, flops on to his bed in a small remote Andalusian hotel, the camera tracks almost imperceptibly towards the barred window, slips through the bars – seamlessly transferred at this point from an overhead wire to a crane – and out into a dusty wasteground. Cars pass; a boy cycles around; men, children and dogs roam about; we see the Girl talking to one man then to another. Two black men (agents of the African rebels Robertson was supplying with guns, or of the government they were fighting against?) approach the hotel. The sound of a car-engine revving camouflages what might be a silenced gunshot.

Now the camera pans left as a police car draws up, then circles slowly rightwards and back towards the hotel. Another police car arrives, police pile out along with Locke's wife (Jenny Runacre), who's been hunting for him. They rush to the hotel, along with the Girl. As the camera continues to watch, tracking laterally past the windows, entry is gained to Locke's room; he lies dead on the bed, murdered or even perhaps a suicide. End of shot.

But before this, another mystery. Arriving at the hotel, Locke's told by the proprietor that 'Mrs Robertson' has already arrived, and that he doesn't need to show his passport – one is enough for both. He meets this supposed wife; it's Schneider. So this young woman, whom he met a day or so previously, seemingly by chance, is travelling with the surname of his alter ego, implying – what, exactly? Once again, we're left to supply the answer.

One last, perhaps frivolous question. Following the sinuous virtuoso take we get a final shot of the corner of the hotel at sunset. It features a dog. And we're in Andalusia. Could this – just possibly – be a sly nod to Buñuel?

**Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, June 2018**

I had not revisited the movie since I reviewed it on its release for a long-forgotten journal called *Monogram*. Thirty-one years is a long time not to have seen something, and it's interesting what sticks in the mind over the passing decades – images, as one might expect, rather than story having the stronger grip. So I remember very clearly certain visual icons: a matched pair of shots that show, first, Nicholson, arms outstretched in a cable car over the bay of Barcelona; and second, Maria Schneider in the back seat of an American convertible throwing out her arms in an identical gesture of freedom as the soon-to-be-lovers speed along a tree-lined avenue, on the run from who knows what to who knows where.

I remember, too, the beginning of the film and the deft skill with which Antonioni establishes the premise of his story. We are somewhere in the desert in northern Africa, and Nicholson – a television journalist called David Locke – is attempting to make contact with a group of rebel fighters. Nothing is spoken in this prologue (the reporter doesn't understand Arabic); specifically memorable among the sign language is the way the scowling go-between signals his demand for payment in cigarettes by bringing his two forefingers truculently to his lips – contempt, not solicitation, being the emotion communicated. And it is this same opening sequence that furnishes

what for me is the most enduring image: the spectacle of Nicholson, spade in hand, whacking the wheels of his Land Rover in pent-up fury after the vehicle has been mired in a sand dune. His cry to the Almighty, which pierces the silence, seems to contain all the futility of the world.

If the beginning of the movie is unforgettable, so is the ending: a seven-minute single take that is one of the great travelling shots in film history. Sam Rohdie in his book on the director (*Antonioni*, 1990) tells us that this shot took 11 days to set up and execute. The weather was foul; the light proved fiendishly difficult to regulate; the ceiling-mounted camera on its rails had to be laboriously fitted with gyroscopes to ensure a smooth transition when it was picked up outside the window by a hook suspended from a 30-metre crane. And so on. All this, of course, the viewer doesn't know about and can't even imagine: the magician's wires and pulleys are invisible. What was stunning on first viewing and remains so is the moment when the camera passes between the window bars and out into the plaza. Even after every explanation, it seems impossible.

Mark Le Fanu, *Sight and Sound*, July 2006

THE PASSENGER (PROFESSIONE: REPORTER)

Director: Michelangelo Antonioni  
©/Production Company: Compagnia Cinematografica Champion  
Production Companies: Films Concordia (Paris), C.I.P.I. Cinematografica  
Presented by: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Executive Producer: Alessandro von Normann  
Producer: Carlo Ponti  
Production Manager: Ennio Onorati  
Assistant Production Managers: Lynn Kamern, Paolo Pettini; Tony Moore, Adriano Magistretti (England); Valentin Panero (Spain); Leonard Gmür (Germany)  
Assistant Directors: Enrico Sannia, Claudio Taddei, Enrica Fico; Hercules Bellville (England); Federico Canudas (Spain); Ina Stritsche (Germany)  
Continuity: Lisa Bellini  
Screenplay: Mark Peploe, Peter Wollen, Michelangelo Antonioni  
From a story by: Mark Peploe  
Director of Photography: Luciano Tovoli  
Camera Operator: Cesare Allione  
Assistant Camera: Michele Picciaredda, Franco Frazzi, Roberto Lombardi Dallamano  
Editors: Franco Arcalli, Michelangelo Antonioni  
Art Director: Piero Poletto  
Set Decorator: Osvaldo Desideri  
Costumes: Louise Stjernsward

Make-up: Franco Freda  
Hairdresser: Adalgisa Favella  
Guitar Solo: Mario Jالenti  
Music Consultant: Ivan Vador  
Sound Recording: Cyril Collick  
Sound Mixer: Fausto Ancillai  
Sound Editor: Franca Silvi

Cast

Jack Nicholson (David Locke)  
Maria Schneider (the girl)  
Jenny Runacre (Rachel Locke)  
Ian Hendry (Martin Knight)  
Stephen Berkoff (Stephen)  
Ambrose Bia (Achebe)  
José Maria Cafarel (hotel keeper)  
James Campbell (witch doctor)  
Mandred Spies (German stranger)  
Jean-Baptiste Tiemele (murderer)  
Angel del Pozo (police inspector)  
Chuck Mulvehill (David Robertson)

Italy/France/Spain/USA 1974©  
129 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Touch of Evil

Mon 27 Mar 20:45; Tue 4 Apr 14:30; Sun 9 Apr 18:30; Fri 28 Apr 20:45

Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Tue 28 Mar 20:50; Wed 12 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 14 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 14:30

To Sleep with Anger + Borom Sarret (The Wagoner)

Wed 29 Mar 18:10 (+ intro); Mon 10 Apr 12:45; Wed 12 Apr 18:00

Rio Bravo

Thu 30 Mar 20:20; Sun 9 Apr 12:50; Fri 21 Apr 20:20

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Fri 31 Mar 21:00; Thu 13 Apr 21:00; Thu 20 Apr 18:15

Last year in Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad)

Sat 1 Apr 12:50; Mon 3 Apr 20:30; Sat 8 Apr 18:20; Tue 18 Apr 20:45

La Grande Illusion

Sat 1 Apr 13:00; Wed 12 Apr 20:40; Sat 15 Apr 18:00; Fri 21 Apr 18:15

The Godfather Part II

Sat 1 Apr 16:00; Sat 22 Apr 18:40; Sun 30 Apr 16:30

Nashville

Sun 2 Apr 17:50; Sat 8 Apr 20:00; Sat 29 Apr 16:30

The Passenger (Professione: reporter)

Wed 5 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 7 Apr 20:20; Sun 16 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 18:10

Pickpocket

Thu 6 Apr 20:45; Tue 11 Apr 14:30; Mon 17 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 20:50

The Portrait of a Lady

Fri 7 Apr 14:30; Wed 19 Apr 17:50 (+ intro); Sat 29 Apr 20:15

Code Unknown (Code inconnu)

Sun 9 Apr 15:45; Wed 26 Apr 18:15

The Lady Eve

Mon 10 Apr 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 12:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:15

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)