BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Passenger

The screening on Saturday 2 December will include a pre-recorded introduction by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences

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

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.

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);* Valentín 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 Jalenti
Music Consultant: Ivan Vandor
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©
126 mins
Digital

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The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)
Fri 1 Dec 14:40; Wed 13 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun 17 Dec 18:45; Wed 20 Dec 20:55
The Passenger
Sat 2 Dec 20:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sun 10 Dec 15:45; Wed 27 Dec 17:50
After Life (Wandafuru Ralfu)
Sun 3 Dec 12:45; Tue 12 Dec 17:15; Wed 27 Dec 14:40; Sat 30 Dec 20:20
My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)
Mon 4 Dec 18:15; Thu 14 Dec 20:50; Thu 28 Dec 18:15
Five Easy Pieces
Tue 5 Dec 14:30; Sat 9 Dec 20:55; Tue 19 Dec 18:15; Fri 29 Dec 18:20
White Material
Wed 6 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by film curator Abiba Coulibaly); Fri 29 Dec 20:45
Boyz N the Hood
Thu 7 Dec 20:35; Sat 16 Dec 18:15; Sat 23 Dec 20:40
Meet Me in St Louis
Fri 8 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by writer Richard Dyer); Wed 20 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 18:10; Sat 23 Dec 11:50
It's a Wonderful Life
Wed 13 Dec 18:10; Sat 16 Dec 20:25; Mon 18 Dec 20:25; Wed 20 Dec 18:10; Fri 22 Dec 14:30, 20:25; Sat 23 Dec 18:10
The Shop around the Corner
Fri 15 Dec 18:20; Mon 18 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 20:45; Sat 30 Dec 12:20
Remember the Night
Sun 17 Dec 12:15; Tue 19 Dec 20:40
Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)
Sat 23 Dec 14:20; Fri 29 Dec 13:30; Sat 30 Dec 13:00

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