The Passenger

Director: Michaelangelo Antonioni
Country: Italy / USA
Date: 1975

A review from the *New York Times:*

Early in "L'Avventura," the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni's 1960 landmark film, one man says to another, "There's nowhere to run." The man is talking about the massive and monstrously inhuman building complexes that are encroaching on the landscape and, by extension, everything with a pulse. But he is also giving voice to one of the modern age's consuming worries, namely that the world as we understood it, the world of infinite horizons and seemingly endless possibilities, no longer exists.

"The Passenger," arguably Mr. Antonioni's greatest film, takes place more than a decade after "L'Avventura," and while it features a new cast of characters passing through different locations, speaking mostly in English, the similarities between the films are more striking than their differences. While the earlier film centers on the search for a missing woman, the later film follows a man, played by Jack Nicholson, who has deliberately gone missing, abandoning his wife, child, friends and job. In essence, "The Passenger" is about a man on the run from himself, as well as a further exploration of a feeling, a mood, that Mr. Antonioni had, in discussing "L'Avventura," described with elegant simplicity: "man is uneasy, something is bothering him."

What exactly is bothering David Locke, the title character in "The Passenger," is the big question. The film opens with Locke, played with a stunning admixture of emotional lethargy and sexual heat by Mr. Nicholson, trying and failing to make a documentary about a guerrilla movement in Africa (with Algeria standing in for Chad). Locke's wheels are spinning, at times literally, as when his jeep gets stuck in a sand dune. Then, one day at his hotel, he discovers that the man in the next room, a man of roughly his same age, weight, height and physiognomy named Robertson, has died. Without explanation, Locke methodically switches identities with this other man, stealing his passport and his life.

"The Passenger" was originally titled "Fatal Exit," after a story written by Mark Peploe, one of the film's three screenwriters along with Mr. Antonioni and the theorist Peter Wollen, best known for that favorite college primer on semiotics, "Signs and Meaning." During production, the film was renamed "The Reporter" and then, "Profession: Reporter," the title under which it was released in Europe. It was called "The Passenger" for the American release, which is too bad because the film turns on what happens to Locke when he abandons the safety of objectivity, which allowed him to keep the world at a distance, with a new, uncharted subjectivity. Locke's escape from himself is predicated on the belief, one of the foundations of modernity, that there is a self from which he can flee.

Whether "The Passenger" affords the keys with which to open Locke is best left to each viewer. Part of what made Mr. Antonioni's work seem so radical is its ambiguity and the director's refusal to furnish us clear signposts. When "L'Avventura" had its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, that ambiguity provoked both catcalls and a special prize; its ambiguity delighted, enraged, bored and confused audiences and helped liberate film from one of the cherished conventions of classic narrative cinema, specifically

that we have to know exactly what happens when a story ends (and why). If that approach no longer seems radical, then consider the last film you watched, specifically the last American film, with an open-ended conclusion that kept the movie playing in your head long after the final credits rolled.

In "L'Avventura," two characters cover countless miles in what turns out to be a futile search. But when the film abruptly ends, it feels as if they haven't budged an inch. In "The Passenger," Locke covers even more ground and basically ends his journey locked in a room that looks like a prison and locked in a self he never manages to escape. When "L'Avventura" was released there was a sense that whatever the story meant there was something distinctly new in the air, something new in cinema. These days, that film's free-floating anomie seems fairly beside the point next to the way Mr. Antonioni throws a frame around the world so that it looks as alien as a distant planet. And, as is also true of "The Passenger," what seems to matter most now is that few filmmakers have revealed so much beauty inside a film frame.

"The Passenger" is being rereleased today in theaters, including Lincoln Plaza and the Sunshine Cinema in Manhattan, for a short time before being released on DVD by Sony Pictures Classics. The film has long been out of view because its rights belong to Mr. Nicholson, who inexplicably chose to keep one of his and Mr. Antonioni's greatest triumphs in limited circulation. In his account of the film's exhibition history, available at cinema-scope.com, the critic Robert Koehler writes that Mr. Nicholson wanted to own a film much as a fine art collector owns a painting: how delightful for Mr. Nicholson and how maddening for the rest of us who, for years, could watch "The Passenger" only on a crummy-looking home video. Like the original American version, the video clocks in at 118 minutes; the rereleased version runs 126 minutes, and it dazzles from first shot to last.

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