

Introduction

Michelangelo Antonioni, who first gained prominence on the international cinema scene in the 1960s, has become the very symbol of that increasingly rare form, the art film, and of all that the cinema has ever sought to achieve beyond mere entertainment. Along with the films of Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, the directors of the French New Wave, and a few others, Antonioni's films were, during the 1960s, absolutely essential to the cultural life of the educated elite around the world. His work, especially, has carried both the cachet and the condemnation of being particularly "artistic" – that is, symbolic, indirect, metaphysical, and even downright confusing.¹

Antonioni's early interpreters saw his films primarily as an expression of "existential angst" or "alienation." (Pierre Leprohon, for example, speaks of "the anguish of existence.")² In the mid-1960s this was undoubtedly the appropriate tack to take toward films that insisted, in what seemed to be an entirely new manner, on dealing overtly with a certain philosophically inflected *Weltanschauung* in a popular, commercial medium.

Now, however, we can see that this manner of regarding Antonioni's films as transhistorical artifacts is itself not transhistorical but is typical of critical response to the art-film milieu of the period. In other words, his films came to be viewed in this way not only because of their own inherent features, but also because of the period's interpretive frame – at least as posited by critics whose primary interest was aesthetic or formal, rather than political. This focus can also be explained historically by the fact that in the late 1950s European existentialist philosophy, as popularized by Jean-Paul Sartre and others after World War II, began to filter down to more popular artistic forms such as the movies.

I am not saying that these themes are *absent* in Antonioni's films. Many

of them are concerned with the essential loneliness of individual human beings and the difficulty of adapting to a relentlessly changing technology that at times seems utterly antihuman. Though these themes are far from irrelevant to the present age, the times now are different, and if the themes of alienation continue to be emphasized to the exclusion of all else, Antonioni's films will quickly become museum pieces, historical artifacts documenting, at best, a certain moment of film and European cultural history. (My students, dumbfounded by this pervasively negative critical attitude, ask me why everybody was so depressed in those days. It is not a bad question.) Therefore the time has come to rethink these films. One way to do that is to examine more closely the errancies of their textual particulars and to pay less attention, at least for a while, to the "big picture." These films continue to be vital precisely because their other themes have more immediate bearing on the present historical situation as the world moves toward the new millennium. Ironically, their relevance becomes clearer when one considers the historical particulars that the "alienation" thesis has tended to overlook.

This rethinking might take several paths. One approach might be to reconsider the rhetorical force of these films' visual metaphors and the way they always exceed whatever rational meaning an audience may attach to them. Another might be to resituate the films in the economic, social, and cultural context in which they arose. We too often forget that directors by and large need to make financially successful films in order to continue their work; the long periods of enforced silence throughout Antonioni's career provide eloquent testimony to this fact of life. Instead of glossing over this commercial and popular context, as is often done in dealing with "art films," we need to explore the precise ways in which such films came to be made in the frame of the Italian film industry and what they "meant" to that industry as an alternative paradigm to more blatantly commercial product.

One might ask how such a challenging, formally demanding film as *L'avventura* (The adventure), could be financed in 1959 and, even more surprisingly, how it managed to break even at the box office in Italy? (*La notte* [The night], which followed in 1961, did even better, showing a substantial profit.) Unfortunately, such questions turn out to be much easier to ask than to answer. Before beginning my research on Antonioni, I knew, from prior experience, that the bulk of Italian film criticism – all of it deeply auteurist – was either formalist, philosophical, or political in nature. But I was taken aback to find that only one slim volume, a book by Vittorio Spinazzola called *Cinema e pubblico: Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945–*

1965 (Cinema and its audience: Film in Italy 1945–1965), published in 1974, even attempted to answer questions similar to those I had begun to pose. Spinazzola’s treatment of Antonioni is also rather skimpy; given the limited scope of the present book, I cannot claim to have gotten much further in providing the sociocultural fact-finding that I now believe is necessary to contextualize the formal and thematic analysis of any film.

In addition, the very necessity of resituating these films historically leads to a whole set of other problems that arise in the context of what has come to be called cultural studies. All too often, cultural critics have, in their desire to establish firm connections between political and social events and cultural products, unconsciously resorted to crude metaphors of “reflection,” as in “this film reflects the governmental crisis of 1960.” But what does it mean to say that a text “reflects” some historical event? What metaphors of seeing and vision are unconsciously at work here, and what is their effect on the analysis?

Even more important, in the rush to establish this relationship between the textual and the supposedly extratextual (that is, History or “the way things really are [or were]”), it is often forgotten that history and even “the real” are themselves texts that must be read, and that the meaning of past events or present reality is never given directly but is always constructed after the fact. This is common knowledge, of course, but sometimes it is more convenient – because more “productive” – to forget it. Above all, cultural critics sometimes tend to forget that the cinematic texts themselves must always be *interpreted*. Reading, in the fullest sense of the word, is a labor that cannot be dispensed with, and thus no matter what political claims, or clandestine truth-claims, are made for or about a text, they will always be situated within a host of limiting, interpretive frames.

I take it to be axiomatic that Antonioni’s films – like *all* films, like all *texts*, for that matter – are by definition impossible to dominate. Their recalcitrant particulars, the gritty, diverse, innumerable, even contradictory, facts of their being refuse to give in gracefully to overpowering master narratives that claim (usually only implicitly) to control or subjugate them. In fact, nothing ever really seems to add up in these films, nothing, that is, beyond a vague sense of uneasiness and alienation, and thus most critics have taken this to be what they are about. Such apparent unanimity, however, is only arrived at by means of a certain violent epistemological gesture of transcendence, a gesture that moves one quickly and painlessly from the supposedly “superficial” (and certainly confusing) level of the film’s particular, material details to a “higher,” more synoptic level where things can be made to cohere.

This hermeneutic operation is probably inevitable in all forms of sense-making, for all works of art, for all books, and, of course, for all films. What is especially interesting about Antonioni's films, however, is that this process is itself often, or even always, foregrounded. In other words, these films seem self-consciously to present such a plethora of particular, unreconcilable textual details that critics are unable to escape a confrontation with the fact, the procedures, and the consequences of interpretation. The emphasis, visual or aural, on which viewers rely in most films to help them locate the "important" textual details is often missing or, what amounts to the same thing, present everywhere. Emblematic for me is the moment at the very beginning of *L'eclisse* (The eclipse, 1962) when Vittoria (Monica Vitti) sits at a table idly looking through some empty picture frames. By so doing, she and the director point to the constant necessity and inevitability of framing, that is, of reading within a context, whether the frame is visible, as here, or invisible, as it is in the rest of the film (though everything one sees is, of course, always "within" a frame, the film frame). The question then becomes, what is the proper, or better, most productive, context for reading these films?³

Antonioni's films continually offer the promise of meaning, like the gaping garment of French theorist Roland Barthes, tantalizing the viewer and yet always withholding any unambiguous signification. The necessity of interpretation is already obvious when the critic confronts such complex films as *L'avventura* (1960), say, or *Il deserto rosso* (Red Desert, 1964), or the other films of this period; later, however, in *Blow-up* (1966) and *The Passenger* (1974), the interpretive operation is itself foregrounded as part of the plot and incident of the films. There, the hermeneutic work of the audience has been introjected into the characters themselves, as the photographer in *Blow-up* and the journalist in *The Passenger* are actively forced to interpret the texts – and the world – that surround them. (Actually, even as early as *L'avventura*, in the search for the missing Anna, the films' narratives replicate this epistemological problem of making or discovering meaning.)

The vast majority of Antonioni's films thus can be seen as collections of signifiers that turn out to have ambiguous signifieds (which is not a bad description of the world, either), and this impetus, this need to interpret, to make sense of experience, occurs even on the level of the shot. Important narrative or even cognitive information is often withheld, and the constant visual mysteries that result also contribute to a certain "hermeneutic pressure" that is always present.

So, too, whatever seemed to remain of the "natural," the "real," and the

“direct” has been evacuated from the world, as Antonioni’s characters learn. All is necessarily offered up to an active interpretation that, both for character and for audience, is a never-ending activity; the films thus rehearse what the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo has described as the “infinite interpretability” of reality.⁴ As cinema historian Gian Piero Brunetta has pointed out, in Antonioni’s films, “things, in their totemic presence, become signs of signs.”⁵ Things thus take on the presence and mystery of the film’s characters, and the characters themselves take on the rigidity, but also the symbolic signifying potential, of things.

One of the consequences of the interpretive operation I have been describing is that the very ambiguity of these films causes them to become vast blackboards on which individual critics scrawl their own desires and obsessions, thinking all the while that they are describing the films, and only that.⁶ (I do not exclude myself from this self-deluding process.) The critic seems earnestly to believe that she or he is attending to the specific particulars of the text, scrupulously avoiding the merely impressionistic, but the exact nature of this negotiation between the critic’s position outside the text and the text’s inside – terms that are easily reversible – is seldom considered. As such, the details of a film come to resemble the elements of Morse code, or better (because that implies something too systematic), a bunch of apparently unrelated visual and aural signifiers that the critic rearranges and reformulates to send her or his own conscious or unconscious message.

This vast uncertainty or undecidability concerning the films’ meanings sometimes leads critics to postpone a close engagement with the particulars of any given film by attempting a comprehensive description of what might be called the *world* of these films. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this Antonionian world, even more obviously than the real world, is always a textual one and thus is subject to the same “incoherence” that is inevitably found in all texts. One localized version of this world-making comes in the insistent treatment of *L’avventura*, *La notte*, and *L’eclisse* as a trilogy – which Antonioni scholar Seymour Chatman and others expand to a tetralogy with the addition of *Red Desert*. Although it is true that these films have much in common, having been derived from the same cultural matrix by the same director, continually lumping them together also has the effect of erasing their considerable differences. In general, it seems productive to efface boundaries between films, or at least to recognize the inevitable permeability of such boundaries by trying to understand the films intertextually. (For example, the character that Monica Vitti plays in *L’avventura* clearly affects the reading of her character in *La notte* and the

other films in which she appears.) In this way, the metaphysical tyranny of the rigid logocentric separation between outside and inside, and thus between discrete texts, can perhaps be rethought and rewritten; there is no logical reason for the individual film to be the sacrosanct, basic unit of interpretation.

But regarding these particular films as a trilogy (or a tetralogy) does not have the effect of rewriting the inside/outside opposition or questioning the notion of boundaries. Rather, such a gesture often merely reconstitutes these cinematic texts *as a larger textual unit*, which in turn leads the critic to attempt to produce a more inclusive, more synoptic reading of *that* text. In other words, the individual films do not become texts whose boundaries are permeable and whose meanings as individual texts are thus forever dispersed because they cannot ever be kept “inside,” but rather they become a kind of megatext that the critic may then proceed to interpret in essentialistic terms, in a more or less conventional manner.

Consider now the kind of misleading exclusions that have resulted from the overinsistence on the themes of alienation and anxiety described earlier. I am thinking here of the specific political content of these films (“political” in the largest sense of the word, that is, including social critique) that most film commentators, especially Anglo-American and French, have systematically repressed. It is all too often forgotten that Antonioni was, like every other artist, responding to specific social, cultural, and moral problems that had arisen as part of *il boom*, Italy’s amazing fifteen-year economic recovery from collapse at the end of World War II. Pierre Leprohon, who, ironically, was a chief architect of the “alienation” thesis, was almost alone among earlier critics of Antonioni in also insisting that both *L’avventura* and Fellini’s *La dolce vita*, which appeared the same year, were “first and foremost testimonies on their period.” He also stressed the “particular social circumstances” behind the “sexual crisis” in Antonioni’s film.⁷ It may be true, in other words, that Antonioni’s characters are alienated, but this alienation seems to be an effect of a specific social organization, rather than a generalized response to the difficulties of something called “modern life.”

Armando Borrelli, in his *Neorealismo e marxismo* (Neorealism and Marxism), published in 1966, provides a good example of the ambiguity with which earlier political critics greeted these films. Borrelli grants that Antonioni is interested in modern Italian reality but believes (along with many others) that he is finally more concerned with the ontological fate of man than with any specific political struggles. Thus Borelli castigates the director for the ambiguity of his social portraits because he allows specta-

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Excerpt

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tors to draw from these films conclusions that are *either* critical and Marxist – in other words, that say it is not life in general that is meaningless, but this particular form of social life under these particular historical conditions – *or* religious, in their emphasis on the inevitability of human unhappiness.⁸ Borrelli's ultimate judgment of Antonioni, though, is a positive one. Although contemporary alienation is not always expressed as concretely as one would like – as it is, say, in *L'eclisse*, Antonioni's most explicit attack on capitalism – Borrelli believes the director has done his part by examining the crisis in this society with scientific precision, leaving it up to the spectator to take from these films a sense of the necessity of creating a different world in which “man makes the decisions that affect his life,” a world in which he is not inherently alienated from reality.⁹

In assessing the political aspect of Antonioni's films, one should also remember that they often contain explicit, detailed depictions of class and class relations. For the most part, the director focuses on the middle class, and the absence of other groups can make viewers forget that they are, in fact, examining the foibles and failings of a particular class of people. The director himself is very conscious of this aspect of his films, once saying in an interview:

Inasmuch as I am the product of a middle-class society, and am pre-occupied with making middle-class dramas, I am not equipped to [give solutions]. The middle class doesn't give me the means with which to resolve any middle class problems. That's why I confine myself to pointing out existing problems without proposing any solutions.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, the director has been attacked by many leftist Italian critics for focusing on the middle class, but film historian Lino Micciché has rightly seen this as one more example of Antonioni's political agenda. Having realized, perhaps unconsciously, that the bourgeoisie had “won” (for example, in the person of Piero, the flamboyant stockbroker of *L'eclisse*), Antonioni “became interested in the ‘winner’ because he wanted to x-ray the ‘disease’ that resulted from the apparent spread of the dominant ideology.”¹¹

The problem is that by investigating the bourgeoisie, the class that, as Barthes explained in *Mythologies*, refuses to name itself in order to appear more natural, it may seem that Antonioni is offering, once again, a “universal” portrayal of Man, when it is actually a particular portrayal of men and women bound to a specific class. Unfortunately, Antonioni's interest in exploring class dynamics is perhaps most overt in earlier films, such as

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Cronaca di un amore (Story of a love affair, 1950), *I vinti* (The vanquished, a controversial, clearly self-conscious social document made in 1952), *Le amiche* (The girlfriends, 1955), films that are rarely seen nowadays, and most important, in *Il grido* (The cry, 1957), whose protagonist is a worker. It is true that this character, Aldo (played by Steve Cochran), suffers from a kind of nebulous melancholy, a psychological depression whose meta-physical roots go beyond the emotional disappointment that motivates the plot, but Antonioni also explores his feelings in the context of a specific possibility of collective political action that he, for reasons that are never made clear, explicitly refuses.

American critic Richard Roud agreed, some thirty-five years ago, that it was important to stress this sociopolitical aspect of Antonioni's films. In a survey of the director's early career, written after the release of *L'avventura*, he said that "throughout all Antonioni's work, one finds unsentimental illustrations of his belief that the emotions are often conditioned by social factors and tastes." In this way, Roud sought to counter the prevailing view that any investigation of emotional life must inherently be a middle-class (and therefore apolitical) project; characteristically, he also felt compelled to add that "whenever Antonioni's social preoccupations gain the upper hand, however, his work seems to suffer."¹²

Another theme that is cast in a different light once one moves beyond the prevailing "existential angst" thesis is Antonioni's resolute focus on women. In this he may have been inspired to some extent by his compatriot Roberto Rossellini's obsessive concentration on his wife Ingrid Bergman in his films of the late 1940s and early 1950s; in any case, the emphasis is unmistakable. This particular interest is often regarded as a function of Antonioni's view that women are "more sensitive" than men, and therefore that they are better exemplars of the alienation that contemporary society has foisted upon *all* human beings. In other words, whatever attention Antonioni pays to women is usually seen as part of a more general critique and not as a specific concern with women as women. He himself has said that "reality can be filtered better through women's psychologies. They are more instinctive, more sincere."¹³ Besides its essentializing of certain so-called feminine characteristics (and its covert, but familiar strategy of associating women with the body or the animal through the use of words such as "instinctive"), Antonioni's statement also implies that this filtered reality is ultimately the same for everyone, irrespective of gender: its essence, he might say, is just better shown by filtering it through women.¹⁴

What this reductive view of the portrayal of women in Antonioni's films misses – in other words, what Antonioni himself misses – is just how prob-

ing their examination of gender dynamics frequently can be. These films not only document the difficulties that attend any emotional relationship, as most critics have pointed out, but they also offer a specific analysis of the situation of women in contemporary Western society of the 1960s, an analysis that presents a sustained attack on the patriarchy (whether consciously or not is not ultimately relevant here), and this attack is surprisingly, for its time, sympathetic toward women as women.¹⁵

Antonioni is concerned in large part with the male way of being in the world. In *L'avventura*, for example, men voraciously watch women from beginning to end. The spectacle of thousands of aroused males following Gloria Perkins (a British prostitute who says she writes in a “trance” and wants to make films) and her torn, slit skirt – an incredibly overt, and thus purposely ridiculous, symbolic exteriorization of female genitalia – is only the most grotesque moment of this scenario. The male obsession with sex is hardly an uncommon theme in Italian cinema (Fellini made a whole career out of it), but here the obsession assumes truly monumental and ugly proportions. Similarly, when in the same film Claudia is momentarily left alone in the Sicilian town of Noto, she is entrapped by a large group of men, who surround her in an intensely threatening manner. It is more than just the supposedly playful “boys will be boys” theme promoted by too many Italian films; Claudia seems truly frightened for her personal safety, in a way familiar at least to American women in the 1990s, and to a degree that can make the “existential anxiety” she supposedly manifests seem remote and almost laughable by comparison. The world here is completely male controlled, in the most physically palpable way, and any slight autonomy that women might have wrested from men in the more sophisticated urban centers by 1960 has evaporated in this Sicilian town. In *Il grido*, the working-class protagonist Aldo beats up his common-law wife, Irma, in front of the entire village, and no one comes to her aid. Later in the film, he is accompanying another woman, Elvira, when she is physically attacked by a group of men. In both of these films, and elsewhere, the patriarchy shows itself in raw, ugly, physically threatening terms.¹⁶

If the films *do* seem to be about the complexities of the heterosexual relationship, this, too, must be seen in a historical perspective. Thus when Leprohon privileges the normative “unity of the couple” that is, according to him, at times assailed in the films and at other times fostered, in hindsight such a putative “unity” will almost always appear asymmetrical, given the power structures that exist in patriarchal society. And given the fact that feminist film theoreticians have elaborated a complex theory concerning the film’s positioning of the male spectator who gazes at the female on screen –



Figure 1. The rapacious Sandro (Gabriele Ferzetti) makes his first amorous moves toward Claudia (Monica Vitti) in *L'avventura*

a theory continually being rewritten over the past twenty years – Antonioni’s films are also enlightening in terms of what has been called his “feminine temperament.” What is the nature of the apparently contradictory relationship between such a temperament and the phallic, penetrating power of Antonioni’s camera, that technological stand-in for the male gaze?

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these films is that this often unnoticed social critique is held in tension with a rigorous formalism that was utterly new to mainstream cinema in 1960. That is, the films depicted interiority (e.g., interior emotional states) externally on the screen, in the form of gestures, expression, and – most important – abstract means such as line and color.¹⁷ Even more radically, in film after film, the audience is led to react to the characters as *graphic expressions* as well as humans with whom they identify emotionally. Psychological realism (“What would a character with such and such a personality say or do in a situation like this?”) is rarely Antonioni’s goal. Rather, his characters can be seen (and to some extent, must be seen, in order to make any sense at all) abstractly as *textual elements*, as much as fictional representations of “real people.”

In this regard, Antonioni’s formalist project is reminiscent of that under-