Antonioni and the Place of Modernity: A Tribute

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Balcony, Viale del Ciclismo, EUR, Rome. *Courtesy of the author.*

Antonioni and the Place of Modernity
A Tribute

Born: September 29, 1912, Ferrara, Emilia-Romagna, Italy
Died: July 30, 2007, Rome, Italy

Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes

Michelangelo Antonioni's death marks the loss of perhaps the last great living embodiment of the heritage of Italian neorealist filmmaking, and of what came after. Like the cinema of Neorealism, Antonioni's was a cinema of observation. However, he practiced a kind of looking so concentrated that it at times seemed to warp things out of familiarity.

Strangely, in the days and weeks following his death, commentators seem to have had difficulty articulating what it was that made his filmmaking important. The best of his films are stylishly beautiful, but never vapid; rigorous, and yet radically open and open-ended. They are grounded in history, the specific history of post–World War II Italy, the Italy of the economic boom. Moreover, they seem as modern and strange today as they did decades ago upon their release.

We accept that it is difficult to talk about Antonioni. In order to memorialize his achievement–one that we, too, find difficult to put into words–we have decided to follow one of his cherished methods: we choose to meditate on the fragment. In what follows we think about two passages from two of his finest realizations, *La notte/The Night* (1960) and *L'eclisse/The Eclipse* (1962); both passages materialize Antonioni's persistent preoccupation with the

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landscape of modernity. We hope that by isolating these moments and their aesthetic and historical operations, we may be able to fumble toward an appreciation of what is one of the most crucial–if gloriously ineffable–bodies of work in modern filmmaking and modern art.

Breda Factory, Milan's Periphery

Although carefully positioned in real, contingent places, which always embody a specific modernity (either because of the modern's overdetermined presence, or its conspicuous absence), Antonioni's bodies never seem at ease with themselves or their surrounds. Sidelined, marginalized, displaced, they "feel" their ways through spaces they do not dominate, and make us feel them too, pressing as they do at all the borders of the screen. While the frame is often static, it is nevertheless traversed by vectors of gazes, which move in significant directions. In Antonioni's cinema sexuality is materialized through the geometrical relationship between body, gaze, and space, just as sexuality itself is a product of the positioning of bodies in society, in gender roles, in everyday practices, in architectures, in power structures. Antonioni does not give us a generic sexuality; rather, as David Forgacs has proposed, he offers one of "a specific moment in Italian society, in artistic culture and the history of sexuality and representation."[1]

Summer of 1960, Milan, the peak of the economic boom: *La Notte.* Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) gets out of a taxi and looks around. A specific, significant place: Sesto San Giovanni, the immediate outskirts north of Milan, an important industrial area since the nineteenth century. The landscape is decidedly peripheral, a mix of modernity (tall buildings in the distance, a circular, glass petrol station) and the last remaining fragments of a marginal pre-modernity. We stand outside the Breda factory, a potent symbol of the roots and history of Italian modernity. The factory embodies several myths of Italian modernity: the myth of progress (the manufacture of trains and airplanes); that of power and expansion (the manufacture of the cannons and military trucks of the Fascist empire); that of post–World War II industrial rebirth and consumerist utopia (the manufacture of motorcycles and fridges).

Like Vittoria (Monica Vitti) in Sicily in *L'avventura/The Adventure* (1959), bourgeois, urbanized Lidia is an alien body in a landscape that turns uncanny in her presence. A group of working-class men, much younger than she, stride into an empty yard as actors on a stage, silently. Two exchange blows after one of them has taken off his shirt. This is one of very few times in the film that Lidia averts her gaze; the only occasion in which she is deeply upset and animated by what she sees. (Not even the kiss between her husband and a young Valentina [Monica Vitti, again], at the party that occupies the second half of the film, will startle her). Framed by the factory's gates on one side and a tall modern building in the distant background, the two men fight brutally, dispassionately observed by Antonioni's camera at some distance. Cut; the

camera moves closer and films from the back the shirtless man who is hitting his opponent mercilessly; Lidia comes running into the frame, stops, and stares. She shouts "Enough!" until the man stops, looks at her, and stands up. Lidia and the man stand now together, side by side; the frame, now emptied of any architecture, pulses with sexual tension. On the right, shot from behind, he covers his naked muscular back with his shirt; on the left, shot frontally, she stands awkwardly with her arms stretched along her sides, in her flowery dress and white jacket, clutching her matching handbag. (Her outfit suddenly seems entirely inappropriate to her surroundings.) She looks into his eyes, but shortly averts her gaze and looks to the ground; we do not see his expression, but assume it is hard and insolent, as in the ensuing close up. She turns, starts to run, followed by the man, who calls her to stop. The female bourgeois flâneuse, here the spectator of a display of rough working-class masculinity, staged in an alien industrial non-place at the borders of the modern metropolis, is exposed to the implicit sexuality of the camera's gaze, and is repositioned as object to be looked at.

Antonioni's spaces, at once abstract and yet so materially specific, act as stages on which historicized bodies and gazes are geometrically disposed (and collide) according to class, gender, age, clothing, birthplace, accent.

Viale dell'Umanesimo, Viale del Ciclismo, Viale della Tecnica, EUR, Rome

Antonioni set and shot *L'eclisse* in a district of suburban Rome commonly called EUR, an acronym for "Esposizione Universale Romana"—or the Rome World's Fair, which should have opened in 1942, had certain cataclysmic world events not intervened. EUR was and is a document of Italian Fascism; to this day, the neighborhood is dominated visually by hypertrophied modernist evocations of classical Roman architecture. These are not the buildings, however, that Antonioni observes in his film. Rather, he shoots his film in what were, in 1962, the newest sections of EUR: streets lined, unevenly, by large, stylish, glass-and-steel apartment buildings; unfinished buildings on construction sites stacked with brick and lumber; newly planted trees along the curbside, promising future shade.

Visiting the Viale dell'Umanesimo, 307 (307 Boulevard of Humanism) today, we will find exactly the building of brick, glass, and concrete where Vittoria (Monica Vitti) lives. If we carry on past this building, a little to the south, turning right onto the Viale del Ciclismo (Boulevard of Cycling), we arrive at the zebra crossing at this street's intersection with the Viale della Tecnica (Boulevard of Engineering) at which Vittoria and Piero (Alain Delon) meet several times across the film, and where, notoriously, at the film's end, they fail to meet. And if one carries on a bit further, looking up high and to the right, across from the velodrome (hence the *ciclismo*), one sees the strange balconies that figure enigmatically and prominently in the film's devastating

concluding montage. Running up the entire height of the building, the balconies project, like a giant square-toothed saw, into space. Their debt to abstraction is plain, and yet their matter-of-fact existence as balconies (unremarkable, requisite feature of almost any apartment dwelling in Italy) is plain as well.

This little corner of EUR (Vittoria's building, the zebra crossing, the balconies) might be understood as embodying some notion of modern malaise, suburban ennui, modern alienation, even modernist abstraction. It was barely even a neighborhood when Antonioni brought his camera, his actors, and his crew there in 1962. Visiting now, however, the quarter exudes an air of settlement, of middle-class contentment. Ennui? Maybe, but who can say? The trees have grown and give much shade; as in the film, one hears the sound of water sprinklers.

The neighborhood as it is and the neighborhood as Antonioni makes us see it: these are and are not the same. Antonioni was, perhaps, as has often been suggested, the poet of modern, (sub)urban alienation. Perhaps one way to understand *L'eclisse* is to read it as a bleak pronouncement on the futility of love, the unknowability of others, the abstraction and unreality of modern life, or of life lived in modern apartment blocks. Yet, the spatial coherence of Vittoria's corner of EUR—the fact that her building, the corner, the saw-tooth-balconied building all sit next to each other in real, lived space—tells us something more and something else about Antonioni's practice. It tells us, perhaps, something about the way in which Antonioni's achievement may in part be described as an effort to, in Noa Steimatsky's words, "[cast] his modernism in documentary terms."[2] This effort is realized most rigorously and profoundly in his great films from the late 1950s and early 1960s (*L'avventura*, *La notte*, *L'eclisse*, and *Il deserto rosso/Red Desert* [1964]). What it amounts to is a synthesis and interrogation from within of two modes of filmmaking, of artistic practice: the first a (neo)realist practice of witnessing the world's infinite contingency and specificity, and the second a practice of making that same specificity almost unrecognizable through aestheticized vision. Thus Antonioni confirms for us the existence of the world and confirms as well our need to transform it or, at the very least, to see it anew.

Laura Rascaroli lectures at the National University of Ireland, Cork. Her publications include From Moscow to Madrid: Postmodern Cities, European Cinema *(IB Tauris, 2003) and* Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and the European Road Movie *(Wallflower Press, 2006), co-authored by Ewa Mazierska.*

John David Rhodes teaches at the University of Sussex and is author of Stupendous, Miserable City: Pasolini's Rome *(Minnesota Press, 2007).*

Notes

1. David Forgacs, "Antonioni: Space, Place, Sexuality," in *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. Myrto Konstantarakos (London: Intellect, 2000), 102.
2. Noa Steimatsky, "From the Air: A Genealogy of Antonioni's Modernism," in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 190.