

“it influenced a whole generation of filmmakers who started their careers in the 1960s.”⁸

Analytical Minimalism: The Antonioni Style

The most remarkable manifestation of this form of minimalism can be found in the early films of Antonioni, which feature austere compositions associated with long takes and in some cases complicated and long camera movements. I call this form “analytical” for two reasons. One is its tendency toward geometrical compositions, the other is the split Antonioni makes between different dimensions of the form: the background and the characters on the one hand, the plot and the viewer’s time experience on the other.

Antonioni’s use of landscapes as the background of his wandering characters has been one of the most conspicuous elements of his style. The visual characteristics of his landscapes and their role in the plot are important watermarks of Antonioni’s breaking away from his neorealist roots. Poor or desolate environments were of course not new to modern cinema. Neorealist films were situated in poor neighborhoods, often emphasizing emotional or spiritual emptiness as well, especially in films by Rossellini like *Germany, Year Zero* (1948) or *Stromboli* (1950). The dramatic tension between the characters and the environment disappears, and their communication is broken. Their relationship is reduced to radical isolation or alienation. Emptiness and desolation of the environment are not the indications of a social or cultural condition represented by the background world, and the characters are in a way disconnected from this background.

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Psychic Landscape?

It seems quite obvious to draw a parallel between the bareness of the landscape in Antonioni’s films and the depressed state of mind of the characters who wander around within this landscape. This similarity drove more than one critic to characterize Antonioni’s use of landscape as one of expressing the character’s psyche. Relating to *The Cry*, Seymour Chatman remarks: “Antonioni relied on the technique of ‘landscape-as-state-of-soul.’” And he adds, “And those other objects serve as metonymic signs of his inner life.”⁹

8. Serge Toubiana in “Table Ronde: Auteur de Pickpocket,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 416 (February 1989): 26.

9. Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni; or, The Surface of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 90.

Chatman is very cautious not to call Antonioni's landscape "symbolic," which is why he uses the term "metonymic" suggesting that the landscape is a physical "continuation" of the character's inner world. He is quite right to avoid the idea of symbolism in characterizing the landscape, which would contradict Antonioni's realism as well as the idea of the neutrality of the object world. The term "metonymy" refers to physical contiguity. It suggests that the characters are organic parts of the landscape they move around in, and the objects of the landscape and its general atmosphere express the same emotional meanings as the character's behavior. However, only the very early Antonioni films, in which landscape does not play an eminent role, would support this thesis. The film of the early period in which landscape has the most distinguished function is *The Cry*, where the autumnal, hazy, and grim atmosphere of the landscape apparently corresponds to the main character's depressed state of mind. Ironically, however, this film was not meant by Antonioni to represent a landscape evoking psychological states of mind: "The landscape also has a different function here. I used it in my earlier films to better define a situation or a psychological state. In *The Cry* I wanted to create a landscape of memory: the landscape of my childhood."¹⁰ Already in this film Antonioni arrived at another—modernist—conception of using the landscape: that which isolates it from the psychology of the characters.

In the series of his modernist films, starting with *L'avventura* it would be very difficult to argue that the atmosphere of the landscape corresponds to the state of mind of the characters. In most cases the environment in which the stories take place is rich, lively, and beautiful. The first part of *L'avventura* is set on an extremely barren island covered with rocks and with nothing but the sea around it. But the second part of the film takes place in various beautiful locations in Sicily. We can see the beautiful seashore, the mountains, and the lushness of the plants. Antonioni highlights not only the beauty of the landscape but that of the constructed environment too. Claudia and Sandro visit beautiful cities and churches, stay in superb old palaces and hotels. From time to time there are scenes with bare landscape too, especially the scene in the deserted town of Noto, but this is a brief scene. Instead of contiguity, there is a strong contrast between the characters' desolate psychic state and the diversity and beauty of the world around them. It is the same contrast we can find in Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1954), but in Antonioni's case there is no reconciliation.

10. André S. Labarthe, "Entretien avec Michelangelo Antonioni," *Cahiers du cinéma* 112 (1960): 3.



Fig. 21. Empty landscape:
L'avventura (Michelangelo
Antonioni, 1960).



Fig. 22. Romantic landscape:
L'avventura.

La notte is a modern urban milieu that emphasizes geometrical flat surfaces and bare streets, but in the second half the heroes first go into a bar, then go to a crowded party in a rich villa. In *Eclipse* Antonioni emphasizes even less the mere visual quality of desolation: most scenes take place in highly crowded places, like the stock market, the bar, the park, and the office. Instead of emphasizing the loneliness of the main character by the visual character of the spaces, he rather creates a feeling of loneliness within an agitated environment. Psychic emptiness is evoked with the help of a series of disappearances throughout the story, as discussed above.

Finally, in *The Red Desert* the industrial setting dominates the film almost in an abstract painterly way, inasmuch as Antonioni overemphasizes the colorfulness of industrial installations, industrial smoke, and liquid that dominate throughout the film. In this film the tension between the estranged world of the story and the colorful diversity of the environment almost creates an independent and purely ornamental use of the objects and the space. As a genuine modernist, Antonioni truly believed in the beauty of the industrial landscape:

It is a simplification to say . . . that I accuse the inhuman industrialized world where the individual is oppressed, which leads to neurosis. On the contrary, my intention was to translate the beauty of this world in which even the factories can be beautiful . . . The lines, the curves of the factories and of their



Fig. 23. Industrial landscape:
The Red Desert (Michelangelo
Antonioni, 1964).

chimneys are probably more beautiful than the lines of a tree that we have seen so many times. This is a rich, lively, useful world.¹¹

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The most general characteristics of Antonioni's landscapes are not that they are expressing human states of mind. Quite on the contrary: they create a contrast between beauty and liveliness in the material world and the depressed or even neurotic psychic states of mind of the characters. This world seems to be devoid and inhuman not because it is empty or because it is physically or visually inhuman and lacking beauty, but because it is lacking human contact. It lacks not only contact between humans but also contact between humans and the environment.

For Antonioni human alienation is fundamentally a problem of adaptation. In his opinion the individual has not yet learned to adapt to the modern environment; the individual has not learned how to feel at home in it. Antonioni is criticizing neither this environment nor the modern industrial world; he is rather longing for its appropriation:

There are people who have already adapted [to the new world], and others who still have not because they are attached too strongly to obsolete structures or rhythms of life. . . . I would like to live already in this new world. Unfortunately, we are still not there, and that is the drama of more than one postwar generation. I believe that the years to come will bring violent transformations in the world as well as within the individual.¹²

If Antonioni's landscapes are "empty," it is not because they express by their physical aspect the characters' mental state. It is because the characters cannot find their lives in there however beautiful they may appear. The characters cannot interact with their environment. They wander around in it not because they want to find something that is out there, but because

11. Jean-Luc Godard, "La nuit, l'éclipse, l'aurore: Entretien avec Michelangelo Antonioni," *Cahiers du cinéma* 160 (November 1964): 10–15.

12. Godard, "La nuit, l'éclipse, l'aurore."

they have lost their human contact with that world. And because there is no psychological contact between the characters and the environment in which they are moving around, the depiction of the surroundings becomes independent of the narration.

And that is the ultimate source of the environment's deserted atmosphere. No matter how crowded or eventful the scenes, what we feel is emptiness because they are detached from the lives of the characters. The end of *Eclipse* is the best example of this. What we see is not an entirely empty square. People come and go, buses arrive, passengers exit the bus, and cars go by. It is only the two main characters who are missing, who do not come to their rendezvous. Somebody is not there whom we expect, something is not happening what we expect to happen, and that is what makes the streets feel really empty even though they are physically crowded.

Antonioni's landscapes are not any more expressive than his actors' play. The actors' play is inexpressive precisely in the sense that they do not represent a diverse variety of emotional states. Landscape is inexpressive in the same sense: whatever it shows, it does not represent a variety of different elements, rather a monotonous variation of a small set of visual elements until they grow devoid of any emotional meaning, keeping only their pure aesthetic sense devoid of practical human contact to the point where representation of the background becomes almost self-contained. Thus, landscape in modern Antonioni films, especially the ones following *The Cry*, is not a projection of the characters' interior life. They are *aesthetic* rather than *psychic*. The visual dimension of these films does not represent what is hidden from our eyes, because nothing is hidden. Everything is represented on a pure aesthetic surface. All one can say is that landscape in Antonioni's early films is as emptied of human contact as the soul of the characters wandering around in it, which is to say in the final analysis that Antonioni's landscapes are simply the motivic variations of the characters' way of acting. That is precisely how the Antonioni style can be seen as a purely ornamental use of landscape, like in the early films of Jancsó. And this possibility is already clearly detectable in *The Red Desert*.

Continuity

It is very often taken for granted that Antonioni's style involves extreme long takes and also long camera movements. However, it is only true for what became the "Antonioni style" during the 1960s, but not for Antonioni's own style of this period. Seymour Chatman has remarked that at the time of *L'avventura* there was not much difference in shot length between

an Antonioni film and the average Hollywood film of the time.¹³ Both *L'avventura* and *La notte* contain more than four hundred shots with an average shot length over 15 seconds (17.3 seconds in *La notte*, 18.4 for *L'avventura*, still double that of the average Hollywood film). On the other hand, in the case of *Story of a Love Affair* (1950), the average shot length is 33.6 seconds, containing several shots over two minutes. Excessive long takes and long camera movement style characterize Antonioni only at the beginning of his career; in later films, especially in the “great period,” his rhythm approached that of the average European modernist art films. As he explains:

Naturally, my technique has changed, as I changed my mind. Earlier, I thought that I had to follow a character as long as possible so that I wouldn't miss the truth about him. Hence came the need for endless and very complicated camera movements, and the fact that I refused to make counter shots. Now I think by contrast that it is necessary to create a multiplicity of approaches to a character by varying the points of view, and also that I shouldn't hesitate to treat the setting separately, again for the sake of the phenomenological truth. . . . My technique now, which seems a regression to you, is in fact much more modern and audacious than what I used in *Chronicle*.¹⁴

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The real interest of the Antonioni films of this period is that he does not use extraordinary technical tools to create the atmosphere of radical continuity of his films, as does Resnais, for example, with his spectacularly long traveling shots in *Last Year at Marienbad*. Instead, Antonioni introduces a very peculiar dramatic device that appeared already in *The Cry*, which he will only radicalize in his modernist works, the most spectacular and developed example of which he will provide in *Eclipse*. I will call this procedure *inverted dramatic construction*.

The main point in this structure is that Antonioni inverts the order between the peak of dramatic tension and plot development. Usually, dramatic tension has its climax at the very end of the plot and is related to the solution of the main conflict. In Antonioni's films, from *The Cry* up to *Eclipse*, the peak of dramatic tension takes place at the very beginning of the film, *before* the development of the plot. It is still related to a conflict obviously, but what follows the exposure of the conflict is not the solution of it, but rather the “eternalizing” of it by emptying out the initial situation of its dramatic tension. The situation that was introduced as containing an unresolved and highly disturbing element for the characters becomes a sort of normal everyday state of their existence, and also the extent to which it was disturb-

13. Chatman, *Antonioni*, 115.

14. Interview with Antonioni in *Témoignages chrétien* 9, no. 7 (1962).

ing or even unbearable for them diminishes so as to reach sometimes a zero level as one can see it in *Eclipse*. The principle meaning of the situation the characters find themselves in is thus *continuity*, or eternity of the situation's existence. It is the continuous emptying out of their lives that provides the dynamics of these plots, which develop toward a certain end marked by a point where the characters realize the radical emptiness of their lives. And in *Eclipse* even this point is missing. Whether or not they are aware of their situation, the main characters simply disappear from the film, which ends with the pictures of a total eclipse, or total disappearance of the light. Rather than ascending or wavering, dramatic tension is monotonously descending in the three major early modernist films of Antonioni, and it is that monotony that represents radical continuity in these films even though their editing technique or camerawork would not include any radical solutions.

Antonioni's technique is in sharp opposition to Bresson's style. Bresson shows from every action only those scenes where the essence of the given event happens, and very little of the path that leads to the event. That is how he makes the spectator jump through huge gaps in time. By contrast, Antonioni makes the spectator follow the different paths his characters have taken to arrive at the momentous event. But after the first five to fifteen minutes of his films where real action takes place, virtually no scene contains any action of which the spectator could grasp the real sense as to how it helps the plot unfold. We follow long paths, but we never know whether we are getting any closer to a supposed goal. The dramatically tense beginnings of his films always pose an important question that is able to keep the viewer's curiosity alive throughout the film. The construction of the stories that follow the exposition is such that they constantly raise the possibility of getting close to a solution. There is a kind of extended suspense in these films whereby Antonioni makes the spectator believe that something is hidden behind the events, that something's happening beyond the frame (just as in Bresson films). And it is only at the end that it turns out that nothing happens behind the scenes. Where has Anna gone (in *L'avventura*)? After all, we will never find out, and our heroes also have lost interest in that question. Can the friend be saved (in *La notte*)? It turns out that he cannot be saved, but that is not Lidia's only or biggest unresolvable problem. Will Claudia start a new life or go back to Riccardo (in *Eclipse*)? After all that, we don't know, because he simply disappears from the story. Nothing is hidden, what we see is what there is. Editing for Antonioni is not a way of hiding important information or creating a sense of a metaphysical dimension of the story. Antonioni looks for the "phenomenological truth," as he puts it, not for the

metaphysical truth like Bresson. As a matter of fact, every technical device became neutral for him, just as he obviously lost interest in using spectacular techniques of continuity because the monotonous nature of his neutral events constructed a continuous and immediate surface with no holes in it whence any change could emerge.

Antonioni and His Followers

The Antonioni style was further developed and radicalized in two ways. One is what I will call *ornamental continuity*, initiated by Jancsó and followed by Theo Angelopoulos, which I will discuss below in the section on ornamental style. The other is what I will call *minimalist continuity style*. The two main representatives of this form are Wim Wenders, especially in *The Goalie's Fear of the Penalty Kick* and *Kings of the Road*, and Chantal Ackerman in *Jeanne Dielman* but especially in *The Meetings of Anna* (1978). Although these films reduce the Antonioni form to one of its aspects and make excessive use of it, especially Ackerman, this aspect is the one that in fact proves to be the most productive even after modernism, as witnessed in the films of Jarmusch, Tarr, Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, and Kitano. This aspect is the predominance of *temps mort* in the narrative, that is, a representation of a time sequence in the protagonist's life, where nothing happens, for example, transitions from one location to another, waiting, having nothing to do. These extremely long takes, with extremely minimalist use of setting elements, are combined in the early films of Philippe Garrel, but these elements as well as the acting are highly symbolic and mythological, thus ornamental.

One of the films most consistently constructed upon the reduced and radicalized minimalist continuity style is Ackerman's *The Meetings of Anna*. The story consists of a series of accidental or planned encounters of a woman film director traveling on her promotion tour in Germany. The encounters



Fig. 24. Empty landscape: *Kings of the Road* (Wim Wenders, 1976).