



The Psychological
Landscapes of
Michelangelo Antonioni
(1912 - 2007)
A Centenary Tribute

David Gariff

La Notte, 1961 (Photofest)

National Gallery of Art



**The subject of my films is always born of a landscape,
of a site, of a place I want to explore.**

A film you can explain in words is not a real film.

– Michelangelo Antonioni

Landscape is important to Michelangelo Antonioni. His films explore both an interior psychological terrain as well as the physical geography of nature and man-made structures and spaces. The complex dialogue between these two realms of thought and existence bestows upon his films a richness—a depth—that is uniquely his own. Antonioni is the epitome of an *auteur* filmmaker. Of course the very aspects of Antonioni's *auteur* style that many celebrate are seen by others as the source of an inaccessible opaqueness.

Emerging from this basic interior/exterior dichotomy are also a complex range of secondary tensions and interactions between words and images, men and women, love and sex, mankind and the environment, nature and architecture, the individual and society, humanism and technology, action and stasis, engagement and alienation—ultimately, between being and nothingness.

Any work of art can and perhaps must be approached through both its intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives. Those qualities most relevant to the intrinsic revolve around a work's purely formal characteristics. The formalist language of Antonioni's early films *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'Eclisse* (1962), often discussed as a trilogy, was new to the 1960s. With every shot we witness meticulous framing, taut and economical movements, precisely calibrated spaces and

distances, choreographed gestures, painterly effects of black and white (and of color in later films such as *Red Desert*, 1964), and the potential for meaning present in all objects and locations. Like Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Antonioni believed that visual expression must ultimately be translated through the intellect of its creator. It comes as no surprise that had Antonioni not become a filmmaker, he would have chosen to be an architect. Architecture provides perhaps the closest parallel to Antonioni's working methods and philosophy.

Often lost in the analysis of an Antonioni film is the extrinsic perspective. Amidst all the discussions of formal elements it is easy to ignore the social, political, economic, and cultural implications in his films (an aspect insightfully explored in Peter Brunette's 1998 book *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*). Throughout Antonioni's oeuvre are ruminations on the implications of class struggle, feminist politics in a patriarchal society, and the redefining of basic existential realities and aspirations in postwar Italy during the economic boom. Antonioni's films from the 1950s, including *Story of a Love Affair* (1950), *I Vinti* (1952), *Lady without Camelias* (1953), and *Le Amiche* (1955), speak to many of these extrinsic themes (a focus on female protagonists and social problems for example), while they hint at the formalist rigor to come. These films, along with Antonioni's earlier documentary shorts including *Gente del Po* (1943–1947) and *Nettezza Urbana* (1948), also demonstrate the rite of passage for all Italian filmmakers of his generation who had mastered their art during the golden age of neorealism.

Antonioni's debt to the neorealist films of Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977), Luchino Visconti (1906–1976), and Vittorio De Sica (1902–1974) is evident if in no other way than as something against which he reacted. By the 1950s, however, Antonioni was taking Italian film to a new place generated

from the frisson between the grit of reality and the exploration of an interior consciousness fraught with emotional and existential ambiguity. This new direction is clearly present in his 1957 film *Il Grido*.

Antonioni's negotiation between these exterior and interior worlds is worth further examination. What is it about his formal language and thematic material that so coalesces in the eye and mind, and leaves us (his viewers) fixated and enthralled by these images and their psychological (not just visual) force? Simply stated, Antonioni is able to get into our heads in ways that few filmmakers can duplicate. His visual translation of physical spaces is comparable to the outward journey of the body reflected through the inward journey of the mind that we all experience during a trip. He is thus able to reach into the deepest recesses as well as the greatest expanses of our inner psyche.

Much of this is achieved through Antonioni's mastery of framing and use of architecture and architectural elements. Walls, doors, piers, columns, and arches often separate the protagonists in his films. As solid barriers, they serve as both physical and psychological impediments. Mirrors and windows denote reflection, transparency, but also impenetrability. Images of hallways and deep-focus corridors parallel the subconscious thoughts of a character.

Antonioni juxtaposed the artifice of architecture (buildings and the spaces they create and inhabit) to the "truth" of nature (trees, water, mountains, sky). He might then cut to the interior of a room with a painted mural of a landscape covering its walls (as in *La Notte*), which reveals the artifice of nature (see cover). What emerges from this constant dialogue—inner/outer, interior/exterior, intrinsic/extrinsic—is the lack of any final resolution related to time, space, and the physical world.

There is no vanishing point, so to speak, that pulls everything into focus for us. Protagonists (and by extension viewers) move from a claustrophobic cabin on a boat, to a craggy coastline along a rough sea, to an aerial view of the world from a plane, to a slow walk across a vast, empty piazza or through congested city streets. We are left with ever-shifting visual and physical moments, endlessly and randomly reconfigured and translated into their psychological equivalents. Alienation, loneliness, ennui, entropy, uncertainty? Antonioni allows us to decide.

The location (or landscape) that best demonstrates Antonioni's genius for using architecture and open space is EUR, site of the Esposizione Universale di Roma. This series of permanent and temporary monuments, pavilions, and buildings located outside Rome was begun by Mussolini in 1935 as a tribute to and symbol of Fascist urbanism and culture. Meant to house the 1942 World's Fair, EUR is a vast array of white marble buildings, porticoes, archways, and piazzas that echoes the grandeur of St. Peter's square, the dome of whose basilica can be seen in the distance. As war broke out in 1941, the exposition never opened and construction was left incomplete.

If Mussolini had not thought to create EUR, Antonioni would have had to build it. In fact, when he first arrived in Rome in 1938, Antonioni found employment working on EUR, and references to its architecture and spaces abound in his films, most prominently in *L'Eclisse*.

Like many filmmakers, Antonioni was sensitive to the arts of painting and sculpture as well as to architecture. His use of the melancholy, abandoned spaces at EUR, with the stark white facades of its buildings and archways, recalls the metaphysical landscapes and piazzas in paintings by Giorgio De Chirico (1888–1978). When traversed by the protagonists in Antonioni's films, these spaces evoke the isolation of figures

seen in *The City Square* (1948/1949, National Gallery of Art), a sculpture by Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), whose existential angst finds a kindred spirit in Antonioni. Finally, the close-up of the streetlamp radiating a halo of light in the famous and enigmatic final sequence of *L'Eclisse* is indebted to the Futurist painting by Giacomo Balla (1871–1958), *Street Light* (1909, Museum of Modern Art, New York).

Michelangelo Antonioni is among the most influential film directors of the postwar era. Charting a course through a modern world perhaps all too familiar to us today, his films challenged his original audiences with their complex formal strategies and provocative psychological conflicts. Few moviegoers had experienced such a relentless dissection of not only human emotion and anxiety but also human adaptability in an age of uncertainty.



Alberto Giacometti, *The City Square*, 1948/1949, bronze, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Enid A. Haupt

Antonioni is one of the great modernist icebreakers in the history of cinema—a position comparable to one held in the history of art by his contemporary Jackson Pollock, the American painter also born in 1912. Both expanded the potential of their respective art forms beyond that of simple storytelling. Both explored new formal methods derived from an exploration of deeper psychological motivations that yielded complex visual results. By so doing, they opened the door for others to work in a more subjective and abstract manner and taught all of us new ways to see and to understand art, ourselves, and the world in which we live.

The National Gallery of Art is proud to join the American Film Institute (AFI) and the Italian Cultural Institute, Washington, in this retrospective of Michelangelo Antonioni's most distinguished works.

Red Desert, 1964 (Photofest)



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