

Figures in the Landscape

Gary D. Astrachan

I.

It begins with a woman hurrying to the base of a tower. The vertical column entwined by spiraling steel stairs is located in the middle of a sugar beet refinery. The tower looms over the desolate, flat landscape. Tall, phallic, it is in its own way, an *axis mundi*, a machine-made marker connecting earth and sky. A man, Aldo, hailed by a co-worker on the ground below, comes expectantly to the railing at the top of the tower. He catches a glimpse of his lover, Irma, bringing him his midday lunch. She leaves it for him with the worker sitting below in the beaten earth courtyard which doubles as a lunch place, and then hurries away. She appears upset as if she's been crying.

Fast forwarding to the very end of the film, after his long journey through the countryside and neighboring region, several brief affairs, and sinking deeper and deeper into despair, Aldo has returned to this same place where he had for seven years lived, loved, and had a daughter, Rosina, with Irma, and worked regularly at the factory. Once again, he now slowly climbs to the top of the same metal tower. He

wavers there at the uppermost railing, dizzied, looking dazed and stuporous. He seems hollowed out, emptied of hope, and he stares with vacant eyes at the wide-open expanse of fields, marshlands and river banks which surround the small factory town. Just at that moment, Irma, who's been frantically looking for him, rushes into the courtyard at the base of the tower. For an instant, their gazes lock, his absently, hers intent and worried. Up above, Aldo sways, unmoored, ungrounded. He lurches and then topples over the railing, falling to his death. Irma, his one-time mistress and common law wife kneels over his broken body. The scene is the *Pietà*, in an industrial setting. Strange, jangly, carnivalesque music starts up again. *FINE* comes across the grainy black and white screen. Aldo's passage through the film and the wastelands of his soul ends in complete loss, ruin and his own demise.



Figure 1 *Il grido* (1957)

Il grido begins and ends at the site of an industrial sheet metal tower in the middle of a refinery. The structure is a humble beacon for the workers, families and inhabitants who live in and nearby the small village of Goriano in the Po River valley in the 1950's. Their homes are huddled in a grove around the fenced-in factory warehouses and buildings. Looking up, one can always see the tower. It's a landmark in the otherwise somberly nondescript area on delta flatlands.

In this film, the tower becomes the cross where Aldo sacrifices himself. He is also in the film, like a tree, standing alone and singular in the desolate expanses of landscape, a figure estranged. The trees there, in that place, in that region, once stable and rooted, providing shade and fruit, are now being seen as useless and getting cut down in the onslaught of a nameless modernity, progress and development. His death seals, signals and signifies the bleak future which is coming. His tragic fall heralds our own late twentieth century's chapter of a finalizing devastation on the verge of completely overrunning this fragile blue sphere we call earth as it spins and speeds through space.



Figure 2 *Il grido* (1957)

The motifs of landscapes, domestic and commercial interiors juxtaposed against boundless exteriors, intimacy versus isolation, and images of trees and treelessness, dominate this powerful and stirring film. Alienation, dissociation and displacement, from natural environments, from human relationships, and from the inner emotional world are themes that continuously mirror each other with reciprocal reflections of emptiness, distance and dysphoria throughout the oeuvre of Michelangelo Antonioni's long artistic career in film.

The violent, phallogentric domination and destruction of the natural world comes rushing to the fore of his early cinematic concerns with this groundbreaking 1957 film. *Il grido* is indeed a 'cry', an 'outcry', a 'crying-out' theme which emanates from deep within the landscape itself, from a nature in the process of being brutally

stripped, defiled and laid to waste. Gashed, gouged and torn apart, the landscape heaves around us, suffering and writhing in wounded pain. Its original surface features, its contours, bones and sinews, once bristling with greenery and completely forested, these natural spaces around us, are now all disemboweled and disfigured, replaced by repulsively ugly strip malls, smokestacks spewing noxious gases, unimaginably large pools of toxic waste, skyscrapers, power lines running over cut-off mountain tops, clear-cut forests, and monstrous derricks and oil tanks leaking into subterranean water reserves and seeping into the slowly rising and dying oceans.

In the course of this long devolution and destructively antagonistic relationship of the European and American attitude towards the external environment, the human soul too has been brutalized, emptied and colonized at an accelerating pace by these same emblems of cancerous greed, indifferent profiteering, mindless consumption and heedless despoliation. The native, indigenous wilderness of the human soul is flattened, tamed and homogenized on a daily basis by collectivized, media-driven mass ideologies of amoral corporate rapaciousness.

In film after film, from *Il grido* onwards, Antonioni subtly portrays in the understated idioms of his own times, an autonomous hyper-technology run amok, devouring everything before it, and bent on self-immolation and apocalyptic obliteration. His protagonists, moved only by the forces of blind compulsion, wander, lost, sad, and tragic, through this landscape of eroding and diminishing, previously primordial nature.



Figure 3 *Il grido* (1957)

Aldo's factory tower in *Il grido* becomes a Golgotha, the hill of skulls where humankind knowingly crucifies its own bodily, physical ties to the nurturing earth mother, the sole sustainer of all natural life, the containing fundament for everything that is. What Aldo sees with his final look, gazing out from the top of the tower, is the smoking razed fields around Goriano, the ranks of policemen attempting to restrain the village's protesters, everyday residents and refinery workers alike, and the arrayed line of idling bulldozers, waiting to steam-roll and pave the surrounding farmlands and to replace its earth with the tarmac of an American military jetport.



Figure 4 *Il grido* (1957)

II.

Starting off the sixties on a huge, bare, rocky massif in the middle of the sea. Like an outsized boulder thrown in howling fury by the blinded Cyclops at taunting Odysseus, the desolate island stands as a silent sentinel, obdurate and unyielding in its harsh pile and jumble of stone. Scourged by weather and constantly pounding waves that surge into its deep, craggy ravines, the island's small flat area on top is bounded on all sides by steep drop-offs.



Figure 5 *L'avventura* (1960)

From this inhospitable and uninhabitable rock, a young woman along on a carefree yachting jaunt with her friends, has gone missing. She's totally disappeared. She just suddenly vanishes into thin air.

There is nowhere to go on this exposed, massive rock island, except down, into the sea. The police and other officials eventually arrive. With her family, her group of friends, her lover and rescue dogs, they make up various search parties, and together with boats and divers, scour the island and surrounding waters. There's not the slightest trace of Anna to be found. She is gone without a sign or a clue as to her possible whereabouts.



Figure 6 *L'avventura* (1960)

The only witness to her leaving, to her sudden departure, is the adamantine island itself, the churning, roiling sea below, in its continuous crashing over rocks, the immense vistas of sky and high clouds all around, and the wide, empty, endless horizon of water. They are the sole watchers of an unfolding enigma.

These indifferent observers of the human drama are what remain. It is they that endure. They are there from the beginning, and they persist during and at the end of each scene of the film. They are always present at *every* scene, experience and event that we could ever possibly witness or imagine in this world we live in. These natural elements eloquently and forcefully declare our human limitations. The limits of our sensibility is the land, the heavens, the sea and its surround. These *are* the boundaries of the seen and the known. They, these brute natural features, ring the

perimeter of the terrestrial world. They stand as images of finality and finitude itself, as hard and permanent as the stone of the island.

This landscape of rock circumscribed by watery depths and held in the embrace of overarching sky subsists, outlasting us. The material world, the outside, animate and inanimate nature, the eternal rhythm and flux and flow of external events, all speak to eons of duration. *They* are the only remaining testaments of our being here at all. *They* have ‘seen’ and ‘know’ it all, much more and for far longer than any of us could ever imagine. They are the holders and place markers of both the visible and the invisible worlds.



Figure 7 *L'avventura* (1960)

It is to them, to the rocks, trees, sky, seas and stars that we must turn for direction and guidance in these times, and possibly, at all times. Their sheer presence contains whatever signs, secrets or meanings there may be for the continuance of meaningful human survival on the planet.

III.

The most elegant cinematic disquisition ever to be filmed on the colors of black, white and gray came out the following year, in 1961. The whole last part of this film, tracing a nocturnal descent into the differing shades of darkness takes place at a lavish all-night party held on a wealthy industrialist's sprawling estate. The velvety blacks and obsidian shadows of suit jackets and cocktail dresses mixing with clinking glasses, powerful erotic undertones and the gay abandon of the previous night of intoxication finally gives way, however, to the stark gray dawn of disillusionment and the mutual anguish and despair of failed relationships. The two main protagonists, Lidia and Giovanni, walk through the emotional residues and wreckage of the past night's events accompanying each other out onto the grounds of their host's grand manor house. A jazz band is playing on the terrace for the few remaining early-morning stragglers still left, shipwrecked, hungover and scattered around like ruins in the wake of the night's passage through darkness.



Figure 8 *La notte* (1961)

Their marriage, which had been coming apart for some time, appears now in the coldly sobering, bleak light of gray morning, irremediably rent. Over the course of the night an even wider abyss has opened up between them. It's palpable as they stroll side by side into a large open field bounded by trees in the far distance. The passion and spark of their former love seems spent like the fleeting chiaroscuro shadows of the evening, dissipating into the wan, truthful light of early morning's harsh-edged reality.



Figure 9 *La notte* (1961)

Lidia seems resolute in the indivisibility of her separateness from Giovanni. He, on the other hand, appears feeble, aimless, and unwilling to acknowledge the unbridgeable and irreparable emotional chasm of emptiness that yawns all around them. He wants to go back to the way their relationship was, once upon a time. Lidia, however, tells him that she no longer loves him, and in fact, feels only pity. In the

gritty dirt of a golf course's sand trap, he forces himself upon her. Fully clothed in their evening's dressy outfits, they grapple, grope and struggle as the camera pans slowly ever upwards away from them as they clumsily writhe on the ground. As the uneasily entwined couple gradually slip off the side of the film's frame as the camera pulls farther away, the final scene shot from high above shows only the long, grassy fairway of the golf course and its surrounding trees and gray sky, as this ultimate panoramic image of non-human nature fills the screen, and the film comes to its resoundingly silent end.



Figure 10 *La notte* (1961)

IV.

The next year's film, from 1962, begins in a claustrophobic apartment after a long night's final playing out of the frayed and exhausted relationship between Riccardo and Vittoria. Overflowing ashtrays filled with stubbed-out cigarettes and

the cluttered bric-a-brac of the rooms add to the stifling, stale and stuffy emotional atmosphere of their mutual inabilities to communicate. Vittoria opens the heavy curtains of a picture window onto a gray morning, and looming there in the near distance of the residential neighborhood, a bulbous, mushrooming water tower fills the screen, looking like an overwhelming alien, an invading creature that has just strode in from outer space on its long metallic struts. It would also in 1962 have been a portentous allusion to a nuclear cloud, additionally underlined by a later shot of a newspaper headline about the atomic bomb. This strangely towering and inhuman structure sets the thematic tone from the outset and appears as the leitmotif for this jaggedly distancing, attenuated film.



Figure 11 *L'eclisse (Eclipse)* (1962)

Fast forwarding through the film, including scenes of the stock market in Rome, an aerial adventure with friends, and another brief affair going awry, the whole last sequence, once again, is a prolonged, abstract tone poem set in the same

dehumanized, suburban environment where the film began, except now without any of the main characters. Unfinished buildings, empty spaces, and endless stretches of sidewalks, streets and impersonal, blank-faced apartment buildings devoid of people, take up the screen's wide expanse. People disperse from a bus stop. A group of bushes barely stirs. Twilight slowly descends. A close-up of a man's ear. A total uncanniness of the ordinary becomes startlingly manifest. Different registers of consciousness collide side by side. A new modality of observing and filmmaking is here being birthed, difficult and distancing. Uneventful activity, a solitary individual going here or there, the mute movements of rustling leaves, the half-built random construction objects seen at strange angles, and water running from a derelict building site faucet, all set to dissonant music, transit meaninglessly throughout the film's absurdist ending, until finally, some electric street lights sputter, flicker, flare and then flash out in a bright glare, signaling a total eclipse of the incompleted human drama.





Figures 12 and 13 *L'eclisse (Eclipse)* (1962)

V.

With his first color film in 1964, *Red Desert*, the contrast and the clashes between the inner world and the outer world become even harsher and stranger. Loud, enveloping, large-scale factories belching steam and toxic fumes, industrial degradation, polluted waterways, pools of ghastly chemical residues, and garishly painted sea-going freighters and tankers manned by foreign sailors speaking incomprehensible languages, all threaten to overwhelm the fragile, psychic equilibrium of the main character, Giuliana, in her attempting to recover from a nervous breakdown.



Figure 14 *Red Desert* (1964)

Ostensibly seeking authenticity, intimacy and connection, she keeps running into walls of isolation, strangeness, detachment and distance. Everything seems to be teetering on the edge of both environmental and psychic collapse. Neither husband and young son, friends, an extramarital affair, or financial prosperity allow her to stay moored to meaning or purpose in this encroaching world of poisoned waste and noxious smoke. Everything is fragmented, transient, broken, and speeding towards utter ruin.



Figure 15 *Red Desert* (1964)

Omnipotent colors reign throughout the film and blare abstract warnings of emotional shock, dissociation and of the ravishing chromatic terrors of the simulated plastic ‘realities’ to come. Image and the colors themselves become the primary conveyors of both the interior and the exterior harrowing narratives being dramatically enacted on screen. The film ends with Giuliana and her son Valerio scurrying on artificial, fluorescently re-touched green grass which bubbles and fumes beneath their feet, and hurriedly exiting away from the industrial terror and out of the film’s final frame, once again, disappearing lower bottom right, to leave a horrifyingly beautiful, color-saturated image of a sprawling petrochemical factory complex, with smokestacks emitting plumes of fiery, sulphuric, yellow clouds to fill the screen.



Figure 16 *Red Desert* (1964)

VI.

Swinging London in 1966. Lots of color, flash, fashion and high style animated by eroticism, hip jazz and rock, and marijuana. For the past several years, the director Antonioni has already been inflamed by the force and activity of color and is now painting whole swaths of London's brick row houses bright red to suit the passionate interior landscape and mood of his main protagonist, Thomas, as he coolly dashes through town in his Rolls Royce convertible. Later in the film, we see that Antonioni has also spray painted his other locations to just the right desired shades, the green grassy parks, trees and bushes where the central events of the story take place, creating an oasis of an eerie otherworldly stillness within the urban, appearance-driven hubbub all around. There is total silence on the sound track during these crucial park scenes except for the supernatural swooshes of wind and

the rustling breezes stirring the trees and branches, all acting as background for the determined clicks of Thomas' camera's shutter as he captures the distinct moments and freeze-framed characters and behaviors that propel the movie's narrative.



Figure 17 *Blow-up* (1966)

This is a film about photography, art, illusion, perception, fantasy, fiction and the irreducible reality of the imaginal. It is a mind game of disappearances, reversals, and transformations. Inner and outer worlds quietly collide in mystery and vanish into the ineffable and impenetrable realms of pure being which lie in wait in every instant, in every image and scene, behind every leaf and blade of grass, in the interstices of thought, and in the wide open gaping spaces between the visible and the invisible.



Figure 18 *Blow-up* (1966)

Unsettling and suspenseful, albeit in a hushed and private way, the film ends with the main character, Thomas, in the park, watching a pantomime tennis match of young people made up as mummers, the same group who began the film carousing in the staid London streets. On the literal and metaphoric edge of both the tennis court and the youth group, and isolated in himself, Thomas hovers on the fringes of competing views of reality, with all the existential freedom in the world to choose where, how, if, and when he will actually commit to something and participate in life's dramas, or just simply and detachedly observe them aesthetically or from a distance. The camera slowly pans upward from his black and white clad solitary figure as he pauses in the park's immense field. He is standing on a huge lawn of green grass, his size gradually diminishing until his receding familiar image down below literally pops, dissolves, and disappears, leaving the movie screen now

entirely filled with just the saturatedly green grass of the park. What remains is an overwhelming color field of pure allover greenness as it naturally blots out and extinguishes all human presence.



Figures 19 and 20 *Blow-up* (1966)

VII.

The binary contrasts and polarities between inner and outer, individuality and collectivity, and the man-made, urban-industrial environment versus the natural world become even starker and stranger once the director leaves the film sites and locations of his native Italy. First, as we have just seen, he shoots *Blow-up* entirely within the trendily happening, fast-paced cityscape of 60's London, with the green park at its still center. And then, four years later, in 1970, he takes on the epicenter of tumultuous and recklessly speedy change, the United States. The film poses Los Angeles, sprawling urban development, social, racial and political divisiveness, and American west coast kitsch culture against the film's eponymous name place, Zabriskie Point, the stony rock bottom of Death Valley, Arizona's desert wilderness, scarred and sculpted out by receding glaciers five to ten million years ago. This overwhelming expanse is the film's original wild west *Urgrund*, its vast sunburnt landscape, cruel and indifferent, basically devoid of people or human intervention. It's a primordial space of going back to beginnings, a return to bare origins, reduced, minimal, fiercely physical, and stark.

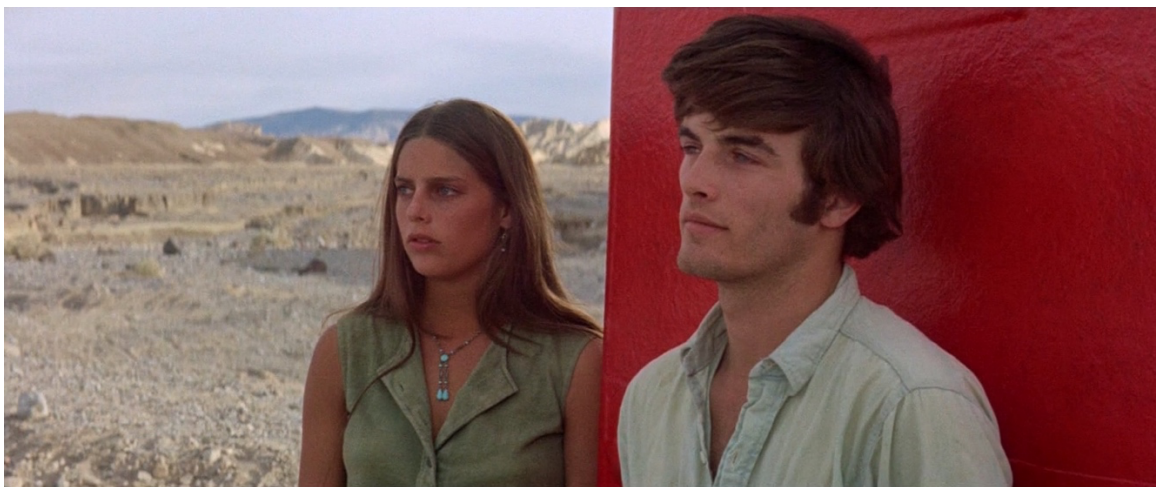


Figure 21 *Zabriskie Point* (1970)

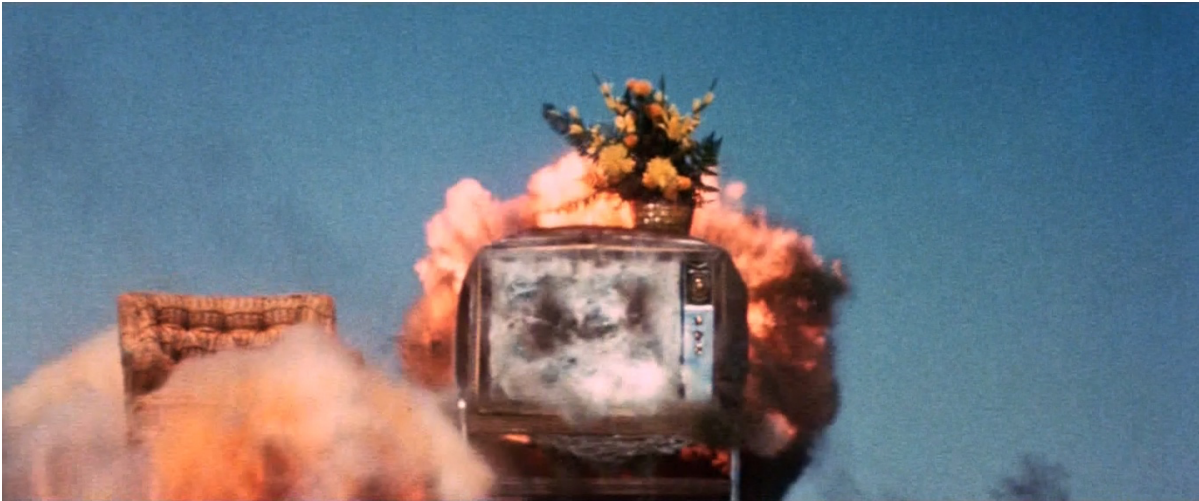
The two main protagonists, Mark and Daria, are themselves relatively blank, exceedingly good-looking cyphers as they ping-pong back and forth, propelled by impulse and the vague currents of quasi-‘alternative’ lifestyle forces stemming from the countercultural American scene circa the end of the 60’s. The rose-tinted bubble of hippies, flower people, and the wide-open roads of unlimited promise has burst. The dream of revolution and utopia is already over, and the dark side, always ever present, is insidiously co-opting the hopeful peace and love generation. Altamont, Vietnam and Charlie Manson have replaced communes and Woodstock. The happy triad of sex, drugs and rock-n-roll has almost unobtrusively slid into the shadowy backlash worlds of addiction, promiscuity, heroin and jagged punk violence.

Though it’s fun to watch and wonder at the beautiful, sun-filled scenes saturated with bright color, driven by psychedelic music and stoned sensibilities, not much really happens in this film. A shadow darkly tints all the blindingly bright landscapes. A casual randomness reigns as the tension and dynamics of a traditional movie plot and narrative fall by the side, giving way to the ominously haphazard drift of the characters, and the spontaneous and improvised events and accidents that move the film glacially towards entropy and chaos. For all the underlying social turbulences of the time, and the sexuality, paranoia and power on the screen, not much seems to be actually happening or going on cinematically, that is, until the end. And then everything changes.

The mind-altering psychoactive drugs taken before or during the movie finally kick in. As Daria gazes back at the steel and glass architectural dream desert palace of her developer/lover’s fat cat perch among the boulders, everything erupts, and

with a pent-up vengeance, and quite literally. The film actually detonates. The screen explodes in outwardly booming and mushrooming bursts of fire and smoke carrying shards and chunks of wood, stone and glass, all in slow motion, over and over, (filmed with multiple cameras from many different angles), at first in silence, as the entire contents of 'straight', mainstream American consumer and suburban television culture bursts wide open from out of the house and float dreamily in air to the spacey music of Pink Floyd. We have entered the hallucinatory realm of pure happening, a cinematic bliss of visionary, mind-blowing imagining. Everything is destroyed and drifts, suspended and falling, refrigerators, clothes, books and food, cascading with the music in mid-air as we watch the luxurious designer house and all of its contents blow up repeatedly before our eyes, revelling in apocalyptic splendor and the total obliteration of space and time in sensational visual pleasure.





Figures 22 and 23 *Zabriskie Point* (1970)

It's an otherworldly and cinematically delirious trip. As a finale to the film, it may still not be entirely socially, politically or psychologically satisfactory, and it wasn't really in 1970 either, but it is surely better than the downer ending of *Easy Rider* as the 60s' dream of unbridled freedom comes crashing down, hard, in both films. In *Zabriskie Point*, Mark, the sexy male lead, meets his final comeuppance against the military-industrial complex and the forceful authoritarian powers of the police state that crush him as he comes down to earth in his stolen and fancifully painted airplane. But Daria, the young woman and female lead, is left to contemplate the future as she drives away from the cataclysm and into the wide-open desert horizon sunset filling the screen at the end. In contrast to the grim and tragic conclusion of *Easy Rider*, its competitor film at the time of its making, *Zabriskie Point* leaves a bare but nonetheless discernibly more optimistic opening for the future and the continuation or the furtherance of a purely psychedelic and poetic imagination to develop out of the ashes of the perennially disappointing socioeconomical political changes that would be actually needing to occur in real life

and in historical time, then and still now. Instead of this literal and messianic revolution, however, Antonioni opens up the inner world as a third and viably alternative, creative and spiritual response to the reified dualistic opposites of machine-driven and technologically-oriented materialistic capitalism with its consequent dissociation and alienation, and an anarchic romantic abandon, withdrawal, rebellion, apathy and/or disillusionment with our ever-widening and deepening cultural crisis. Once again, he seems to be aesthetically stating that the individual's creation of meaning is the key, holding the tension between polarities, as he clearly calls for *both* the necessary transformation of collective consciousness in real life terms, as well as for a renewed return and attentiveness to the actual world outside and to what we are doing to it, as well as to each other.



Figure 24 *Zabriskie Point* (1970)

VIII.

Nowhere in his oeuvre does this transition away from the isms, ideologies and the deluge of media-driven banalities and absurdities generated by contemporary collective culture take on greater form and significance than in his next film, *The Passenger*, from 1975. We can now begin to see that in his cinematic techniques of the actual filming, framing, editing, and construction of a plot, that Antonioni has always been first and foremost a visual epistemologist. He is totally absorbed and obsessed by the reality of what he sees through the lens of the camera. He himself appears to learn and comes to know the world through his own making of films. He is always, especially now by the mid-'70's, additionally asking: how do *we*, as viewers, know, grasp and understand the world? As in *Blow-up*, he inquires into the very nature of reality, querying what *is* reality, identity, perception, truth, in contrast say, to appearances, illusions and beliefs?

At the heart and core of his cinematic quest, however, and what fully emerges with this film, *The Passenger*, is that the great Italian director's deeper concerns are with individual destinies, and maybe, even with the destination of human beings as a species. Where are we going on this epic and rocky journey called life? How do we choose a consequential direction and path for our actions and behaviors, not only for ourselves, but for others, for *the* other, for the world outside? How do we connect and relate to the events and scenes outside of our own cultures, minds and bodies? Do we truly even see and observe what is going on outside of our limited, encapsulated selves?

Antonioni's films are patient. They watch, wait, look at and regard the spaces of their own happening. What will emerge from this concrete physical scene just

before our eyes that lies right in front of us and just simply *is*, in its unfolding and developing on its own? For him, observation *is* a participation in the field of activity and an alchemical and Heisenbergian immersion into the selfless flow of time itself. His films essentially perform a materialization of time.

The main character in this film, Locke, played by Jack Nicholson, is an American war correspondent and journalist working in North Africa for a British news agency who is attempting to reach and interview the leaders of a rebel movement. He is a stranger in a strange land. The film begins with him smack down in a tiny village outpost in the middle of a vast desert wilderness, improbably trying to get directions to the war he is supposed to be covering. Once out in the unbounded and breathtakingly trackless landscape, an infinity of pink-tinged sand dunes, mountains and black rocks, abandoned by his first two native guides, he careens crazily onto the screen in his Land Rover and immediately becomes stuck in the deepening ruts of endless sand, his wheels wildly spinning him ever deeper into the desert. Lost and enraged, he gets out of his jeep, tries unsuccessfully to dig himself out, and then smashing the jeep with his shovel in fury and frustration, he screams towards the mute heavens: “Alright! I don’t care!” And then, finally, reduced, he falls on his knees, prostrating himself in the sand. He is the hollowed-out man. He has met his match and been vanquished by circumstantial events and the brutal reality of unmapped wilderness.



Figure 25 *The Passenger* (1975)

So begins the story of a pilgrimage, a slow, stumbling, groping towards something, towards the unknown. Is it redemption? relationship? identity? god? meaning? purpose? Maybe it is all of these. Although, as the film's story unfolds, it appears more likely that it may be none of them.

As the film time and again just returns, quietly, to the world outside, to the wind rustling a curtain, a Bedouin moving ever so slowly and silently on his camel through the desert in the opposite direction from which Locke was himself heading, to soft, rippling hills of sand, slightly shifting, the camera just watches, looks and impassively reports what is there. The characters, that is, the actors, in all of Antonioni's films for a long time now, though increasingly with this story of the passenger, a man just passing through, may repeatedly leave the screen. For him actors are just another object, one element among many in the picture frame,

nothing special. They just walk off and out of a scene and disappear entirely from the viewfinder, exiting our visual field right or left. Antonioni, however, keeps filming. He continues to record the so-called 'empty' scene, a place, some space, a cinematic reality, without people, every minute detail of it standing out just as it is, in long dispassionate takes. Or, perhaps, they are, in fact, extremely passionate takes, because the shots are full to bursting with incredibly attentive observations. They are a bare watching, a caressing, and even a tender caring for all the things of the world as they appear in front of the lens, in the moment. Equal weight is given to the books on a side table, and the curtain ever so slightly stirring in a room where the main character also sits on his bed, deeply plunged in existential angst, and we notice that the plaster is peeling off the whitewashed wall. This is filmmaking as quietly devotional practice, letting everything live its own separate life. Whether it's the dark, craggy volcanic rocks and crashing waves in *L'avventura*, or a lawn sprinkler going off at the end of *L'eclisse*, or large, black insects crawling up an electrical cord in Locke's shabby desert hotel room here, as the viewers, we become co-participants and witnesses in this cinematically poetic world being enacted in real time and space before us. The specific solidities on the screen, ordinary objects, an apartment building, a small garden, a dog, themselves a film-mediated illusion, phantasm or simulacrum of reality, dissolve and collapse into the ever-rhythmical visibility of an encompassing time-space which is always going on, which was going on before the movie began and will undoubtedly continue for long afterwards. He directs us and brings us back into our actual lived bodily lives. Antonioni, and we the audience, are constrained by this form of cinema to watch the world as it unfolds and has *its* own flowing independent existence. As moviegoers, we have the privilege to observe, and

in viewing, to immerse ourselves anew in the slowed-down, ongoing unitary reality of which he's reminding us, we are also part and parcel. The world and we in it are one and the same thing. We are recalled through cinema both to our deepest selves and to our indissoluble bonds to the world of matter, *physis*.



Figure 26 *The Passenger* (1975)

In the very first station of his unwillingly, at least at first, transformational movement towards becoming a *Mensch*, only minutes into the film, as the main character Locke is in the desert, dwarfed, humbled and bowing with outstretched arms, away from his jeep (which he'll abandon) and towards the hilly horizon, the camera pans and touchingly lingers over the rolling infinity of sand dunes and mountains, all apricot golden and blushing pink with late afternoon light, an eternal vista of creation and nothingness, questioning, forming and disappearing before our eyes, as if to say: *this* is the true subject of film, the everyday hierophany of the

world. Our small and fleeting personal dramas evanesce before this strong sweep of stark magnificence.

Whereas the director Antonioni, the main actors and most of the film crew flew into this remote oasis in the Chadian desert for the initial portion of the film's shooting (*The Passenger* was actually shot and played out in five different countries in Europe and Africa), it took the Italian film crew three days of actual driving overland to arrive at the desert location where Locke's adventure begins. Such arduous effort for just *this* location! Antonioni is a perfectionist. The unimaginable expanse, the hugeness, all that space of emptiness and silence, the wide sky and blazing sun, endless panoramas of sand and stone, savage and desolate wastelands, the unknowable desert, the feeling of that space eternally echoing and reverberating in utter stillness, no sound, just the whistling wind – that void out there is the main character of the film. It is the world outside, whatever landscape we call home, its perpetual movements and stirrings, however slight or subtle. All this existence outside of human beings becomes for Antonioni by the time he films *The Passenger*, the inspiring and passionately observed crucible for the development of his stories. It is a veritable landscape and theatre of the soul that he films and it becomes a reflection of his characters' inner worlds. The containing environment, the place and space, the ordinariness of the world itself, is the subject-object of his cinema. Ongoing quotidian daily life as a form of awe and wonder is transformed through his art into a site of revelation.



Figure 27 *The Passenger* (1975)

The last scene of *The Passenger*, taking up the final ten minutes of the film, is one extremely long, continuously unfolding camera shot which incrementally develops in slow flowing motions. David Locke, our unflagging journeyer, his destiny fulfilled, lies dead, apparently shot while in his bed in a hotel room in southern Spain. The windows of his room have a wrought iron metal grille through which he and his lover, 'the Girl', played by Maria Schneider, had previously been looking. They were seeing, as we were, all the little actions transpiring at a near distance outside in a large plaza viewed through the barred window, as if from a prison cell, inner and outer reality counterpoised: an old man sitting against the wall of a bull ring, noises, a sound of trumpets playing the familiar fanfare for the bull fight, a young boy aimlessly throwing rocks, his mother scolding him, a small black and white dog, a woman yelling, the bad-guys, the weapons-dealing assassins' car pulling

into the courtyard, two men getting out, a female jogger, student drivers in a small Seat automobile, a car door slamming, possibly a gunshot or a loud knock, police entering the square, other characters arriving on the scene... all equally incidental, measured, appearing sequentially, a dance... And all the while these activities are taking place outside, each in turn, mysterious, disjointed, suspended in time, the camera slowly, fluidly, gently, transports us, without our being aware of it, *through* the containing bars of Locke's hotel room which holds his inert body, and out into the street and the plaza, wafting us in a balletic aerial transposition through the solid matters of wall, window grille and hotel, like a wispy breath of soul, out and onto the wider stage of the active world of people just doing their things, ordinary people, onlookers performing the 10,000 things. (Like an entire village in a huge Breughel panorama, with dozens of people engaging in the total spectrum of sixteenth century winter life, while off in a small corner of the canvas, a diminutive infant Jesus, just-born, lies in Mary's lap among the animals in a peasant's hut.) It is a view of beneficent surveillance, the world in a grain of sand, or eternity in an attentively observed film scene.

Now, at the very end of this film, *we* are looking back at the white stucco hotel from an omniscient outsider's perspective. The play is over. The curtains, however, are not yet quite drawn. The owner and desk clerk of the small hotel is going out into the twilight sunset for a cigarette; a woman dressed in traditional Spanish black is sitting in front of the brightly plastered walls as the fluorescent lights come on illuminating the inn's interior of colorful neon and the painted sign of the Hotel de la Gloria, basking in early evening glow; a stained glass window inside in the reception area; smears of violet, blue and pink sky as the tableaux of life resumes and

continuingly blossoms towards the oncoming nightfall, all of this unfolding and evolving from our vantage point on the outside, in this the world, outside, where we watch and live.



Figure 28 *The Passenger* (1975)

IX.

In *The Mystery of Oberwald, Il misterio di Oberwald* (1980), taken from a fairy tale-like play, 'The Eagle with Two Heads', written by Jean Cocteau in 1946 and adapted for Italian television, Antonioni, working on commission, embraces the full license given to him as the film's director in experimenting with color filters, electronic effects, video cameras and the transference of the images to film with the newly developing kinescope technology of the time. As it was not his original project, he reacted to these new technical productions like a kid in a candy shop and played on and with the equipment to its fullest potential for emotional expressiveness. At all

the stages in the making of this film, he was able to dramatically alter the colors, shadings and tones in extreme and often violent ways to portray his own imaginal and aesthetic reality. So, unlike what he had been doing, at least since 1964 and the making of *Red Desert*, and his literal interventions with paint and color in the actual physical scenes, sets and landscapes on locations, with this film, he was able to change, correct, saturate, and wildly alter fluctuating colors spontaneously in the middle of shots, while filming live, and during the postproduction and editing as well, that is, at every stage of the creative process. For Antonioni, in this period, filmmaking became virtually indistinguishable from painting. He used the video cameras and their controls like a paint brush.



Figure 29 *The Mystery of Oberwald* (1980)

In this nineteenth century story of kings, queens, political intrigue and upheaval, assassination plots, nefarious prime ministers and powerfully romantic

storylines, all taking place in and around a picturesque castle perched high up on a mountain, Antonioni created the most extreme color modulations to be found in his entire oeuvre by far, and particularly in those scenes he shot outdoors in nature. There, both the organically blossoming natural surroundings with their hillsides, forests and mountains, and the characters in it, are entirely transmogrified by the quasi-psychedelic outlines, contours, pulsating shadows and highlighting electronic camera effects designed to produce the specific psychological tones Antonioni desired for each shot at every moment, attempting to reveal the *inner* emotional lives of his characters. As it turned out, it is a strangely dazzling, hallucinatorily altered reality that veers intoxicatingly among sixties lightshow effects, cartoonishly blooming colors, some outright kitsch, gorgeously sumptuous views of spectrally changing nature, and mysteriously probing landscape features which kaleidoscopically shift with the ongoing melodramatic moods of what is essentially a romantic love affair being played out in mid-late nineteenth century period garb. It is a thoroughly operatic work which is underlined by its accompanying classically romantic music score. Throughout though, he was able to successfully hold fast to the development of the plot, probing the characters and the evolving storyline so that the wild and sometimes extravagant special effects only enhanced and lent further haunting dimensions to the emotional and imagistic flow of the highly scripted narrative action. There are some short passages and episodes in the film where Antonioni does indulge himself and goes beyond into realms of totally abstract experimental cinema, for example, metamorphosing springtime flowers into undulating Jackson Pollock tapestries of shocking colors.



Figure 30 *The Mystery of Oberwald* (1980)

After the operatically grand tragic finale, one is left at the film's end with an aura, a mood, or perhaps something even more evanescent, like a scent of subtle exotic spices, the colors of curries in an Indian bazaar, an aureole that lingers as the aftertaste of a foreign fate and the hidden workings of a ghostly destiny which has been fully played out to its conclusion, and yet remains totally mysterious in its afterlife, not fully graspable or comprehensible. It is after all, a kind of ghost story. Inevitable and inexorable daimonic forces control and dominate all the proceedings of this drama. The historical personas and socially conventional roles of the main characters determine the straightforward plot, behaviors and outcomes of the literal narrative, but the deeper unknown energy vectors and the more universal themes of love and death hold the entire film together through their impressionistic feelings and purely cinematic color values. The film unabashedly revels in an ecstasy of color

as its subtext and creates an expressively affective language of the unconscious entirely its own in order to reveal its emotional profundity.



Figure 31 *The Mystery of Oberwald* (1980)

In perhaps her finest and most suitable role for Antonioni, and their first collaboration since *Red Desert*, Monica Vitti brings a decisive and imperious regality to the queen. Her performance allows little room for her usual neurotic, jittery tics. Instead, her character leaves the indelible impression of fathomless, remote, and unassailable feminine depths, whose autonomy and spheres of activity can only command respect and obeisance. The powers of both the female characters in this drama completely eclipse the febrile, reactive and weak male figures of their counterparts in this particular film, as male roles in general only become more and more pronounced in their lack of substance as we shall see throughout this later phase of Antonioni's ensuing films. To be sure, the perplexed, insecure and needy

male leads as characterized with unmistakable clarity in all of his films from the time of *Il grido* in 1957, to *Oberwald* here in 1980, a span of 23 years, with the two major exceptions of *Blow-up* and *The Passenger*, only come to stand exaggeratedly front and center in this very last period of his filmmaking career. This trend, the decline in power of masculine agency, and with it, his critique of patriarchy, as we will observe, is gloriously redeemed, however, by the societally necessary ascendance and virtual apotheosis of the feminine, the female principle in general, extending to the *anima mundi* and ‘soul of the world’ to be found both in nature and in the material environments of his settings, though it can be especially appreciated in the characters of his female actresses, as they are portrayed in these last three films.



Figure 32 *The Mystery of Oberwald* (1980)

X.

The real downward slope and nadir for his confused and aimless male lead roles becomes precipitously steep, to the point of occasional annoyance while watching the film and having to talk back to the main character or actor on the screen, in his 1982 feature, *Identificazione di una donna*, *Identification of a Woman*. In retrospective memory, *Identification of a Woman* had always appeared from earlier viewings around the time of its release to be rather vague, murky, nebulous and ultimately, puzzlingly forgettable, totally uncharacteristic of Antonioni's films in general and therefore somewhat of an anomaly. It would have been difficult to clearly state what the film was 'about', who was in it, or what happened, and that's primarily because nothing really *happens* in the film, except for the slow unravelling of a man's desires. The storyline itself is relatively undeveloped and the tenuous plot remains unresolved with no real catharsis or conclusion. The main male character, Niccolò, from the first scene onwards pretty much stumbles or sleepwalks through the film as we are left scratching our heads at his almost comical, misdirected ineptness, and lack of substantive masculine competency.

Now, however, tracing the whole arc of his oeuvre, it becomes more apparent that Antonioni was indeed honing and continuously differentiating and deepening his views of men, women, their relationships and their interactions against the deeper background of society, culture and nature in which the relationships unfold and become realized, manifested and materialized in words, deeds, actions and behaviors. His ongoing diagnosis of the human condition appears to hinge precisely on the gulf between the sexes. Suddenly, as if coming out of a fog myself, like the actual one portrayed in a key scene at length in this film, and trying to peer, at least

slightly, beyond my own masculine point of view, I am led to conjecture that these weak, ineffectual male characters, and his strong, related and grounded, however shakily, leading women's roles, are themselves just the point he's been making over and over since the beginning of his career. He is showing us our selves and the core of our deep malaise as it is rooted in the conflicted male-female relationships, based as they are on dangerously outdated hierarchical patriarchal models of male authority and power.



Figure 33 *Identification of a Woman* (1982)

Look at all the great, classic early films: *Il grido*, *L'avventura*, *La notte*, *L'eclisse*, *Red Desert*, and then *Zabriskie Point* and *The Mystery of Oberwald*. All of the male leads appear as patently lost, wandering souls, disconnected and groping around rudderless in an intellectual mist, without decision, agency, or true *eros*. These men all seem to uniformly lack the capacity to authentically relate, attach to, or love an

‘other’ outside of their own blind anima projections. Masculinity *per se* as depicted, is shown to be totally conditioned within its genetic, social and developmental contexts by the top down religious and spiritual traditions of monotheistic male supremacy.

In *Identificazione di una donna*, Niccolò is himself a filmmaker, though currently without a film. Eponymously in search of a woman throughout the entire movie, however, ostensibly a female lead character for his fantasied film, or perhaps more desperately for a lover or partner for himself, he pins up pictures of women in his studio on a bulletin board as if he’s trying to solve a crime or a puzzle by finding exactly the right image, the one that fits into his rational outline and projected role. It is *cherchez la femme* all over again. Antonioni depicts here in somewhat of an extreme form an externalized hunt for a man’s soul figure, for a muse or *inspiratrice*, an anima, to make himself feel more complete or whole.



Figure 34 *Identification of a Woman* (1982)

He, Niccolò, is himself though, sadly, without character, form, substantiality, or any discernible values or orientation. He is adrift, mushy, porous, and in the most memorable major scenes of the film, he is either completely out of his element, as at a fancy aristocratic society cocktail party where he is invited by his first lover, behind windows and glass in a hotel with another of his female partners looking from inside at the Grand Canal and life outside, or literally lost, in a car in a dense foreboding fog, unsure of where to go, unable to feel or express genuine emotion. He does not seem to be able to actually express or use the word 'love' in every one of these critical romantic junctures with any of his partners. While at the same time he is masking his own fears and vulnerability with a false bravado. Or, as in the final major scene of the film, he's the gondolier in a vast, hazy, boundlessly mirror-smooth Venetian lagoon, totally in his own head while paddling aimlessly, dreamily and happily without purpose, meaning or goal, vacant, blank, like the still surface of the water and the enveloping mist. Though he is physically with a woman with whom he is involved in a romantic love affair in all of these crucial scenes, he is clearly solipsistically encapsulated, in a narcissistic daze, all by himself, isolated, *una isola*, an 'island' in Italian. Cut off from his true feelings, he is a man who passively thinks of himself as an island, cut-off, unperturbed, remote and unreachable.



Figure 35 *Identification of a Woman* (1982)

Identificazione defies all the usual expectations for an Antonioni film. Not only does nothing much happen, although that is somewhat usual for long stretches and sequences in many of his films, except for the fact of his recording *that it is happening*, but here the main male lead, Niccolò, remains fixed at a complacently shallow and superficial level and does not even come together in his desperation, dejection or emptiness. Instead, prompted by his young nephew, he gently fades away into a child-like outer space fantasy for his next 'movie' which is actually portrayed on screen in this film as *Identificazione di una donna's* own futuristic science fiction finale. Foreshadowed much earlier in the film by close-up shots of the sun's molten flares, a space-ship asteroid, looking like it's made out of tin foil, is heading towards the sun, the source of all light and heat. He, Niccolò, is leaving the earth on his puer's outer space trajectory and heading towards a brilliantly pulsating oblivion. It is, in fact, a

stunning and beautiful otherworldly coda which projects and leaves the viewer 'out there' and blending into a totally abstract image of radiantly glowing solar radiation. Wonderfully filmed using actual NASA telephoto footage of the sun's boiling surface set against the background of deep, dark, fathomless space, we the viewers, along with Niccolò, are cast atomistically adrift, aloft and away in a gravity-less universe far from the earth and verdant, riotously organic life.



Figure 36 *Identification of a Woman* (1982)



Figure 37 *Identification of a Woman* (1982)

XI.

Antonioni made his last, full-length feature film, *Beyond the Clouds*, in 1995, ten years after suffering a massive stroke which left him essentially incapable of talking or walking. The fact that the finished film still bears so many direct traces of the director's vision, intention, creation, and sensibility, is nothing short of a miracle. That he was able to infuse the whole production with so much of his own humanity thanks to the compassion, generosity, patience and attentiveness of everyone surrounding him throughout the making of the film is also a testament to their extraordinary professionalism and talents. The high quality and integrity of the film, however, is in the last analysis due especially to the deep instinctual surety of his

own artistic genius which could heroically prevail and remain steadfast over seemingly insuperable, physically debilitating obstacles.

The film consists of four separate episodes taken from Antonioni's collection of short stories, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber*, *Quel bowling sul Tevere* (1983). The introduction and the transitions between the four short films and the coda were provided, directed, shot, and edited primarily by Wim Wenders, who was called in to reassure the producers and help the Italian director throughout the making of the film from pre-production and set-ups to the shooting and final editing.



Figure 38 *Beyond the Clouds* (1995)

Nearly every one of the four different episodes, each with their own separate cast of actors, sets and locations, has as its male leading role, a deeply unconscious boy-man acting on impulse, and on some degree with an aversion to, or at least a wariness of an independent woman. The women in the film, 'the women are

beautiful' (In Boer 1979, p.2), as Homer says in his 'Hymn to the Earth', and practically every one of them is portrayed as a powerful, autonomous, though still highly related, individuality. On the other side, almost all of the male characters are somewhat dissociated, disconcertingly frustrating, to the point of annoyance, and in different regards, painfully difficult to watch as they basically remain puzzled, bewildered and be-deviled by their female co-stars. Contrastingly, every one of the women seems to be at some level tied in to a deep, non-rational communion with themselves, their bodies, needs and desires, as well as with the invisible and the unknown around them. You can feel it in their characters as they each viscerally connect and follow their own ways and paths through both emotional and physical space. The men on the other hand almost evanescently disappear before our eyes. 'They come and go', as Betty Davis wryly confesses to Leslie Howard in *The Petrified Forest*.

The women, however, remain. They endure. They are like the elemental landscapes and earthscapes, as well as the urban environments, in which they live and root themselves in feeling, emotion, relationships, social surround and community.

With the making of *Beyond the Clouds*, the body of women becomes and is the landscape, the visual and tactile environment, in and on which Antonioni shoots his films, the blank screen, the frame, the *albedo*, the whiteness of beginnings, the original *prima materia* of birth and innocence on which everything is projected and from which everything emerges. Women and landscapes have finally become for the maestro, the primordial inchoate *materia*, matter itself, *mater*, the mother, the material, out of which everything is born, and back to which everything returns. At

the same time, they retain and express the unique individual characteristics and personalities of their roles in the film.



Figure 39 *Beyond the Clouds* (1995)

It is as if in late-stage Antonioni movies, the palpable skin of the woman, the female, the legacy of the earth mother, is the surface membrane that becomes extended and stretches from the individual female actress outwards, to the screen and cinematic image-reality, and from there to the entire world, like a diaphanous film that covers every material object, protecting, clothing and simultaneously revealing the visible world, while yet allowing the depths of things to retain their innermost integrity and mystery. You can see it. You can touch it. But you can't reach or feel its radiating essence with skin contact alone, with sensuality, sexuality, or with sensible, bodily touch. That desperate striving, physical urge, and carnal effort, feebly, passively and barely expended by the leading men in the film to possess by

sensation or *literal* touch, is in fact, in every case, doomed to create even more distance, isolation and disconnectedness. The phallic impulse to control deepens the rift between man and woman.

The four major geographic locales for the shooting of *Beyond the Clouds*, Ferrara and Comacchio, Portofino, Paris, and Aix-en-Provence, keep protruding *their own* topographies in each episode of the movie *into* the scenes. The places themselves disrupt dialogue and interrupt the behavior and actual movements of the actors. They cannot be restrained or controlled and add a level of indeterminacy to every scene. They keep taking up space and pushing into the foreground of the frames, blurring and merging with the actors like a ghostly or supernatural atmosphere, or an invisible misty cloud or fog that seeps into one's skin and bones. The actual physical environments of the film keep moving themselves forward as irreducible evidence and material presences, through windows, stone staircases and arcades, walkways along watery quais, cobblestone streets and medieval fountains, displaying the unavoidable fact that these concrete materialities of places and weather conditions are what finally matter in the film's episodes. The material world of boulevards and buildings, canals and cars, forces the actors to insinuate *themselves* in and around the obdurate actualities of the physical world until the human characters with all of their foibles, failings, follies and complicated stories are finally elided and eclipsed. What remains therefore for the viewer on a deeper psychological level are the tangible places and spaces of the film, *where* the scenes take place, the locales, especially with the female bodies, *their* moods and feelings. These become the true psychological, soul realities underlining the film.



Figure 40 *Beyond the Clouds* (1995)

The fog, rain and mist so pervasive throughout *Beyond the Clouds*, acts as an invisible sheath cloaking the actors in a protective moisture that permeates the characters and the audience as well, like an invisible dew, like tears of joy or loss whether shed or withheld, the flowing salt of life which lends taste and depth to each and every scene. Antonioni, finally, views and sees the world bathed in the light of the soul, the *mundus imaginalis*. With his 1964 turn to color in *Red Desert*, it's as if a switch has been thrown and turned on inside of him as he looks through the camera's lens, an inner light dawning. Plumbing black and white as deeply as cinematically possible in *La notte*, (although Fellini in *8½* and Bergman in *Persona*, *Shame*, and *Hour of the Wolf* also come to mind as his contemporary masters of filming in black and white), Antonioni was from thenceforth on called into the realm of light and color for the remainder of his filmmaking journey. It is not a coincidence

that also, beginning with *Red Desert*, he began making his own collages and paintings from discarded swatches of color on paper he'd used in designing film sets. These poetic, abstract, landscape-based art works are an alternative body of creative endeavor he produced beside his films, and they have had their own gallery and museum exhibitions both during and after his lifetime.

As we saw in the last sequence of *Identificazione di una donna*, with the spaceship heading directly towards the sun, or even with the last long takes of the desert sunset in *Zabriskie Point*, Antonioni sought to capture and film, if possible, the sources of light and light itself *in* and through his characters and in their contextual surroundings. The project and *techne* of cinema intrinsically, is to render and manifest both the visible and the invisible worlds solely in and through the medium of light; to shape, form and sculpt with light alone. Light, in this sense, makes use of bodies, objects and colors to transform its own invisible and concealed mysteries and celebrations into a continuous visual epiphany of the world. The 'celebration of the hidden treasure' is the becoming visible in bodies of the alchemy of light. This alchemical reciprocity, the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of light, is the express province, process and praxis of all art, especially the plastic arts, painting, sculpture and filmmaking. It is no coincidence that the development of filmmaking as a new medium and technology happens contemporaneously with the 'discovery' of the unconscious, the deeper, hidden parts of the psyche, and the beginnings of psychoanalysis, as well as with the theory of relativity in physics, and that they all together herald the inauguration of the 'modern' era in the twentieth century. Cinema became the self-portrait of modernity itself.



Figure 41 *Beyond the Clouds* (1995)

Antonioni's hidden agenda, or subtext, at least since *Il grido*, has been to seek out, probe and unveil the occluded light in nature itself/herself, the *lumen naturae*. Always shining, even though it may be deeply buried or disguised, it is continually flaming up and radiating outwards. Thus throughout his oeuvre, as characters, actions and narratives themselves pass out of the frame, he nevertheless allows the camera to linger on the scenes. We observe a furnished room, a city street, a grassy green field now devoid of people. Yet we watch it come alive with minute, miniscule movements, prosaic everyday breaths, and it profoundly deepens as we continue to look, simply seeing what is there. We become witness to the ineffable beauties that are always there, though perhaps obscured and camouflaged by physical matter and materials and concrete appearances. As a captive audience at the movies, we are privileged spectators and can view the inner lives of things. In deepest quiet, we learn to regard the things of the world in their own light, in the light of their own

presence and being, as they stand outside of us. In spanning modernity in his own lifetime, Antonioni comes to the full, perhaps 'postmodern', realization that psyche, or soul, is not something confined to or within human beings, but rather that his actors as seen through the lens of the camera are totally inseparable, interconnected and a part of their environments, one small insignificant element amidst the whole of the living creation within the frame as the process of cinema is transforming it into poetry.

His obsession with color and the light inherent in the surfaces of things,
recalls the ancient idea of the soul as a coloured garment
enveloping the material world. According to the Gnostic
Basilides, the world-soul is nothing but an "emphasis" or colour
of light, which has descended into matter.

(Von Franz 1966, pp. 372-3)

This master filmmaker peers through appearances and the deceptive shroud covering over 'things' to discern and delineate the inner light, the light of soul *within* things, the *scintillae*, the sparks of numinosity scattered throughout the world of creation, the true *gloria mundi*.



Figure 42 *Beyond the Clouds* (1995)

XII.

In Antonioni's breathtaking last testament, *Lo Sguardo di Michelangelo*, *The Gaze of Michelangelo*, or, as it is translated into English on the commercially released DVD, *Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, light and matter, the *primae materiae*, are cinematically apotheosized – they meld together through palpable touching to become the sum total of everything in this film, as they are in life. The pure white light of *physis* is everywhere in this diamond body of a film, his ultimate gift to the cinema.

Despite being confined to a wheelchair for the previous nineteen years of his life, the august director of this very short coda to a lifetime of achievements in the creation of great cinematic art, walks into the Roman church of San Pietro in Vincoli for a final communion with his eponymous namesake, Michelangelo Buonarroti and

his sculpture of Moses, made between 1513 and 1516. As the centerpiece for the much reduced, originally grandiosely-planned tomb of Pope Julius II, the fiercely gazing statue of Moses, seated, holding the ten commandments, stands guard in this otherwise rather humble church dedicated to Saint Peter, whom legend has it was kept in chains and martyred by the ancient Romans on this very same spot.



Figure 43 *The Gaze of Michelangelo* (2004)

In the first shot, the bluish-tinged daylight streams into and floods the entrance to the darkened, vaulted church. Slowly, a man's trousered legs appear, and the figure first enters our full view as he steps through the nave and the huge colonnade of pillars into a slanting light-filled aisle. Suddenly, momentarily, we are in the vast forums of the ancient world, Greece, Rome, the early Christian church, and the creation of awesome sacred basilicas devoted to the glory and worship of

gods, all hand-worked stone, marble, and glass, the colossal, classical spiritual architecture of the West. An entire tradition of European civilization's monumental and numinous spatiality sets the scene for this 21st century play of physics, psyche, matter and light.

An elegantly-clad older gentleman with a nimbus of white hair like a halo illumined around his head gently enters into the vestibule and purposively approaches the double-tiered sculptural assemblage that constitutes the great Renaissance tomb of Pope Julius II. He looks up at the white marble as the camera glides over surfaces. We see for the first time the familiar face of Michelangelo Antonioni, serious, reserved, deep within himself in thought, and as always, appreciatively and keenly observant, his eyes glinting with spirit. He emanates a quiet gratitude for this occasion of loving leave-taking.



Figure 44 *The Gaze of Michelangelo* (2004)

Solemn and soulful, performing his last act before the camera, he already seems to be in nearly another world. Although throughout his directing career and even while working on the set, he *was* always in his own introverted world, reflectively re-creating the world to correspond to his interior feeling-imagination and aesthetic visions, now as an actor performing Michelangelo Antonioni, he is truly deep within himself and on the actual and imminent threshold of the beyond.

The camera, the devoted eyes and true reality-seeker of the filmmaker, caresses and tactilely brushes over the glistening rippling folds, crevices and contours of the flowing marble. The lenses move carefully and respectfully among the sculpted figures and then back to the director's gazing at the details of carved living stone, so that there is a rhythmical dance, an arabesque woven over the whole scene that we as viewers are seduced and pulled into sensuously joining. Everything is moving. The pace is of slow breathing, in and out, back-and-forth, a binding, blending and intertwining with the world of matter, dematerializing, as our eyes go over Michelangelo's serenely pensive face and Michelangelo's marble Moses, taking us into their solitudes, and silent, pulsating depths. We're encompassed within the heart of living matter.



Figure 45 *The Gaze of Michelangelo* (2004)

As frames dissolve into each other, the screen becomes flowing movements of colors muted into extremes, blacks, whites and grays, opposites of light and dark. Solids vanish into air and matter returns to its origins in unfathomable depth. Viscerally engaging, the loving camera work pulls us into reverie, pure poetic visibility disappearing into no-form, only an energetic flux as colors and forms merge and interchange into supremely abstract compositions, created perhaps for a future race of seeing beings. It is the pure experience of change, the transformation and metamorphosis of all nature at the intersection of matter and soul.

Sometimes the screen appears divided into two halves, blacks and whites in the dimly lit church. For example, Antonioni may be profiled in black shadow on one side, and blurry white marble coming in and out of focus appears on the other, chiaroscuro par excellence, as figure, ground and poles of color dance into each other and emerge transmuted into something else, always new, again and again.



Figure 46 *The Gaze of Michelangelo* (2004)

Then, there is the inevitable return to mortality and finitude, as Michelangelo's face, etched by age, his features slightly tilted by the stroke, exudes the fullness of humanity in each line, fold and crease of skin, soulfully still there, revealing a life lived in deep engagement with art. There is one last long shot from behind as he gazes up at the great towering sculptural wall tomb, and then as he meditatively tilts his head downward and away signalling his exit, the vocal chorus of Palestrina's 'Magnificat IV Toni', after so much silence, quiet and natural sound, hauntingly fills the air and screen. And finally, after eighteen minutes, he slowly walks out of the church, re-tracing the same gait and way he came in, slowly, gently, without impatience, purposefully. The heels of his leather shoes clack and echo from the marble floors up into the vaulting columns. Music echoes in the vast space. Slanting sun beams illumine floating dust motes in the tall doorway as he exits.

XIII.

In 2004, Antonioni directed a 28-minute film, *The Dangerous Thread of Things*, which is the last segment of a trilogy of films produced together with two other directors, Wong Kar Wai and Stephen Soderbergh. The whole trilogy is on a DVD collectively titled *Eros*. Interestingly, *Lo Sguardo di Michelangelo* is included as a 'special feature' on that same DVD, and they were released together in the same year.

Antonioni's contribution to the *Eros* trilogy appears upon first viewing as a strangely oblique, slightly offbeat and seemingly rather lightly, and perhaps quickly-made, casual film. The male-female relationship, which he'd been documenting throughout his entire oeuvre is here reduced in its final version to an erotic theme played out by three paradigmatic characters, two women and one man. The man comes off as an entirely inconsequential, loud-talking billiard ball, made up of empty masculine fluff who arbitrarily ricochets between the two women and then disappears entirely, only to re-appear at the beginning of the very last sequence of the film as a disembodied voice over a cell phone. In that scene, he's calling his lover, Cleo, one of the two women, from Paris, where he says it's snowing and muffled and white. He sounds depressed, still angry about their conflicted relationship, and lonely.

The opening shot ushers us into the film with strongly discordant and dissonant sounds. A woman, Cleo, is sunbathing semi-nude on a chaise lounge, topless, tattooed, in a kind of garden in front of a pyramidically-shaped, very old, stone building. It seems to be a tower, perhaps once a fortress, medieval Italian

military architecture built close to the water. Electric rock music is playing tinnily. It's a strangely disquieting setting, but idyllic in its own way, that is, until a man, Riccardo, played by the German actor Christopher Buchholz, enters. He is self-conscious, clearly acting, and he exchanges words with the reclining woman. Their language with each other is rough and abrasive. Irritation, dislike and resentment crackles like shards of broken glass between them. The air of the scene becomes immediately poisoned as their harsh words contaminate the potential security and serenity of the garden. He leaves and she slowly, meticulously, gets dressed and follows to go out somewhere with him.



Figure 47 *The Dangerous Thread of Things* (2004)

The couple are angrily at odds and it seems as if they have been bickering and feuding like this for a long time. Their strained relationship appears essentially over and it's becoming further torn apart by the acrimonious, recriminating words they

exchange in each of the brief, emotionally violent interactions they have throughout the film. In practically all of their scenes together, with two major exceptions, the cinematic space of their natural surroundings becomes shattered by the spikes and thorns of invective they hurl back and forth. Their exchange of hostilities only gives way occasionally to brief bouts of wistfulness or melancholy and is appearing to take place over the already-dead body of a failed Eros. Authentic communicative language between the sexes appears impossible at this late phase of relationship except for admissions of regret, loss and sadness.

The man, Riccardo, is always in motion, driving a car, controlling, consuming the atmosphere of the beautiful Tuscan coast locale, preening himself, at odds and in conflict with this natural environment. He seems a transient visitor, intent on mastering the scene, whatever it is, penetrating it, dominating it with his air of tight, masculine entitlement.

From the opening scene in the courtyard to the closing image, *The Dangerous Thread of Things* is shot with incredible fluidity and languorous movements. Gorgeous framing and agile camera work keep pace with the close-ups and the active, dynamically-moving women who take up the entire screen with their naturalism. The rhythmically active, energetic filming of the women stands in stark contrast to the more sedentary, longer-range set shots of the man, the self-assured Riccardo.



Figure 48 *The Dangerous Thread of Things* (2004)

The blue Maserati sports car he drives as his phallic extension is a techno-engineering paen to the masculine imagination and mechanical ingenuity as it motors through space. In one scene it also becomes a comic and grotesque, Disney-like outer space vehicle as it rolls over and through the natural and man-made worlds, barely squeezing through narrow, stone entrance ways, roaring down a road, racing around an outdoor picketed car park, and as we follow closely behind with the camera, surrealistically bouncing over grassy sand dunes like a brightly colored pop fun toy, mindlessly probing the limits of both inner filmic and real external space with no justification other than just because it can.

The final sequence of scenes begins with the girl, the later and secondarily-appearing Linda, who lives in a neighboring stone tower and whom Riccardo has pursued in the film into *her* tower and already had sex with. She is now, in this overture to the finale, by herself, driving to the beach in her truck. She gets out,

inhaling and embracing the salty air of the sea and heads saunteringly towards the beach. There is then a sudden cut and we're looking at beautifully rippling waves and the empty, open water. You can see right through the riffling sea to the brown sand as the wind skims across the waves. It's late summer turning into fall.

Then Linda is playfully walking alone along the beach at the edge of the water, her coat off, enjoying herself, skipping along, reveling in the outdoors. Masterfully intercut, these whole last short scenes are themselves a dance between the two women, Linda and Cleo, each seen by themselves until they come together at the end in one final, tightly-held, closely-cropped shot.

Again a cut, a different scene, and now Cleo is near the beach trying to tend to her horses that have gotten free and are racing wildly back and forth. Just then her cellphone loudly rings and it's Riccardo, once again, his voice jarring the natural, female environments. She ends her call with him far away in Paris by saying that he and they need time to 'think differently', by 'letting go', 'seeing things for what they really are', and 'finding their essences once again'. It seems they are speaking totally different languages. She rings off by sending him an embrace, whistles loudly to gather the horses and heads slowly herself to the beach.

Then there's another cut. The next scene. We then see the extraordinarily beautiful and voluptuous Linda at the beach, at the water's edge, naked, dancing freely, playfully dragging a branch in the sand, ecstatic, joyful, spinning around and around, kicking up waves, beaming, her black hair flying, until she goes to lie down, stretches out on her back on the sand, breathing heavily from her exertions, relaxed. We view her from above. Cut.

Cleo now walks onto the beach by herself in the next shot, fully clothed in a light leather jacket, trousers and boots. She looks up and around at the sky and water, reflectively, slowly, at peace, appearing grateful, and then, extending her arms out wide from her sides, she stands there, palms upturned in thanks, totally present and relaxed, leaning her head back, eyes closed, at one with everything, light and sun warmly shining on her, embracing the all of the moment, in complete submission as nature enfolds the screen.



Figure 49 *The Dangerous Thread of Things* (2004)

A shot of brown beach sand. Another cut. Music begins on the soundtrack and Cleo is now naked and dancing gracefully, gesturally. Her animal-like movements are ritualistic, angular and wild as she dances by the water, abandoned, arching her body with her long hair fully falling down behind her.

All of the action here at the end of the film is condensed into these two women. Cleo stops dancing and suddenly looks away, noticing something. Leaving her dance

at the water's edge, she walks to where Linda is sunbathing on her back. She approaches her until their shadows converge and touch, crossing each other's bodies in visual communion. Cleo is standing, and Linda opens her eyes, shading them from the sun, sits up, and leaning back on her elbows, gently smiles up at Cleo. They are enwrapped in a visual embrace by the camera and by the sunlight. There is a total rapprochement. They are unified, together, two women, contained and containing, two aspects of woman in feminine *coniunctio*.



Figure 50 *The Dangerous Thread of Things* (2004)

The film ends there as hypnotic music continues to play. Two women, one lying, one standing, juxtaposed in a composite shot together on the brown sand, by the sea, without a man in sight, looking at each other, whole. With this last narrative film scene of Antonioni's, the dominance of the patriarchy has finally become totally eclipsed, toppled and dismantled. The entire last section of the film, just the two

women, dancing on a beach, uninhibited, rhythmical, playful, joyous movement, is a glorious testament to the power and divinity of the feminine. Self-contained, autonomous, generative, there is no need for men here. Amazingly poetic, this wedding of sky, sea, air, earth, and female body-in-motion in these scenes expresses everything that needs to be said and done about the basic human need for acceptance, being in the present moment, gratitude, grace, and fullness, living wholly in the shadow of physical mortality and embracing the body. It is also in its modest way a very radical statement and a call to action, for what needs to happen in our relationships with each other, between men and women, and with the nature around us. Basically, as Cleo said over the phone to Riccardo, there needs to be a letting go. Spontaneous, improvisational and immediate, we return with these beautiful images to the deep interconnectedness and intertwining dance of body, psyche, and matter, to the radiant effulgence of the world.

The Dangerous Thread of Things, Il filo pericoloso delle cose, indeed pulls together the many strands of Antonioni's filmmaking concerns to weave a shimmering tapestry of a possible future where harmonies both interpersonal and interspecies may exist and become actualized. The very way the film is put together, shot by shot, and edited, illustrates and parallels the soul's own methods of creating meaning. As in our dreams every night of our lives, different scenes are cut out of actual life, taken out of their everyday context and transported into the depth dimension of the psyche in order there to fabricate an entirely new bricolage and construction, based upon rhythm, feeling and emotion, with the affective associations between images being guided and linked by a deeper self, the self as the director and editor of the larger life view within us. Rationality, logic, and cause and

effect fall by the wayside and can be discarded since they are meaningless and useless in this realm of soul. Scenes shot separately at different times and places are cut and reassembled in new configurations pulsating to an altogether different beat. The power of filmmaking to suspend and alter both space and time imitates the natural dimension of psychic depth itself, the unconscious, where all past present, future, and the unimaginable become one. This is the realization of filmmaking as the creation of a waking dream. It is cinema performing a creative transmutation of nature before our eyes, a psychical and alchemical *opus contra naturam*. Montage as the essence of cinema stages these possibilities for the invisible to become visible as emanations of a divine mystery. These images have their *own telos* and purpose beyond our conscious awareness. The inherent logic of the soul, the unconscious, takes over and drives the new presentation and performance onto an 'other' level, a transfigured reality that resonates timelessly and universally, revealing the indestructible filaments, the connecting links, lines and threads that hold all things together. The entire cosmic web, if only momentarily, flashes, shines and radiates before us, whole. *Poiesis*, human 'doing', 'making', the creating of soul sutures which bind the threads together, as 'dangerous' as they may be, allows the artist to attempt to bring forth and call out from concealment, occlusion and non-being, something that was not there before, *some thing* that requires human effort to be actualized, so that *it* may come into the light of presence, unveiled, absolutely real, and transformatively breathing within and without us.

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Gary D. Astrachan, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and Jungian psychoanalyst in private practice in Portland, Maine. He is a faculty member and supervising and training analyst at the C.G. Jung Institutes in Boston and in Switzerland and lectures and teaches widely throughout North America, Latin America and Europe. He is a founding member of the C.G. Jung Center of Brunswick, Maine, and is also an independent curator of contemporary art installations and exhibitions. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles in professional journals and books and writes particularly on the relationship between analytical psychology and Greek mythology, poetry, painting, film, postmodernism and critical theory. His most recent publication, *Naming the Gods: Cy Twombly's Passionate Poiesis*, was released by Chiron in 2019.