

Jean-Luc Godard's INTERVIEW WITH MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI
From Cahiers du Cinema, No. 160 November 1964

GODARD - Your three previous films, *L'Avventura*, *La Notte*, *L'Eclisse*, gave us the impression of being in a straight line, going ahead, searching; and now, you arrived in a new area, which is called, perhaps, the red desert, which is perhaps a desert for this woman but which, for you, is, on the contrary, a film about the entire world, and not only about some fuller and more complete world or other: it is a film about the entire world, and not about today's world..

ANTONIONI - It is very difficult for me to talk about this film now. It's too recent. I am still too tied up with the "intentions" that pushed me to make it. I have neither the lucidity nor the detachment necessary in order to be able to judge it. I believe I can say, however, that this time it's not a question of a film about sentiments. The results (whether they be good or bad, beautiful or ugly) obtained in my previous films are here out-dated, null and void. This is another matter altogether. Before, it was the relationship of one character to another that interested me. Here, the central character is confronted with a social milieu as well, and this means I must treat my story in a completely different way. It simplifies things too much (as many have done) to say that I accuse this inhuman, industrialized world in which the individual is crushed and led to neurosis. My intention, on the contrary (moreover, we may know very well where we start but not at all where we'll end up), was to translate the beauty of this world, in which even the factories can be very beautiful... The line, the curves of the factories and their smoke-stacks, are perhaps more beautiful than a row of trees - which every eye has already seen to the point of monotony. It's a rich world - living, useful. As for me, I hold that the sort of neurosis seen in *Red Desert* is above all a question of adaptation. There are people who adapt themselves, and others who haven't yet done this, for they are too tied to structures, or life-rhythms, that are now out of date. This is the case with Giuliana. The violence of the variation, the wedge between her sensitivity, intelligence and psychology and the cadence that is imposed on her, provoke the character's breakdown. It is a breakdown concerning not only her epidermic contacts with the world, but also her perception of the noises, colors, cold personalities surrounding her, but also her system of value (education. Morality, faith), which are no longer valuable and no longer sustain her. She finds herself, thus, in the position of needing to renew herself completely, as a woman. This is what the doctors advise and this is what she strives to do,

GODARD - What is the explanation for the insert of the episode of the story she tells the little boy?

ANTONIONI - There is a woman and a sick child. The mother must tell the child a story, but he has already heard all the ones she knows. She must therefore invent one. Giuliana's psychology being given, it seems natural to me that this story become, for her - unconsciously - an evasion of the reality surrounding her, towards a world where the colors belong to nature: the blue sea, the pink sand. The rocks themselves take on human form, embrace her and sing sweetly. Do you remember the scene in the room, with Corrado? She says, leaning against the wall, "Do you know what I like?... Everyone who ever loved me... to have them here, around me, like a wall." She needs them, in fact, to help her live, because she is afraid she won't be able to arrive at it alone.

GODARD - The modern world is therefore only the revealer of an older and more profound neurosis?

ANTONIONI - The milieu in which Giuliana lives accelerates the personality's breakdown, but, naturally, the personality must carry within itself a favorable terrain for this breakdown. It isn't easy to determine the causes and origins of neurosis, it is manifested in such different forms, at times going as far as schizophrenia, whose symptoms often resemble neurotic symptoms. But it is by means of a like exasperation that one arrives at encompassing a situation, I have been reproached for having chosen a pathological case. But, if I had chosen a normally adapted woman, there would no longer be a drama; the drama concerns those who do not adapt.

GODARD - Aren't there already traces of this character in the one in *L'Eclisse*?

ANTONIONI - The character of Vittoria in *L'Eclisse* is the opposite of that of Giuliana. In *L'Eclisse*, Vittoria is a calm and well-balanced girl, who thinks about what she does. There isn't a single neurotic element in her. The crisis in *L'Eclisse*, is a crisis of the sentiments. In *Red Desert*, the sentiments are a ready-made fact. Moreover, the relationship between Giuliana and her husband is normal. If you were to ask her, "Do you love your husband?", she would answer yes. Until her attempt at suicide, the crisis is underground, it is not visible. I want to underline the fact that it isn't the milieu that gives birth to the breakdown: it only makes it show. One may think that outside of this milieu, there is no breakdown. But that is not true. Our life, even if we don't take account of it, is dominated by "industry". And industry shouldn't be understood to mean factories only, but also and above all, products. These products are everywhere, they enter our homes, made of plastic and other materials unknown barely a few years ago, they overtake us wherever we may be. With the help of publicity, which considers our psychology and our subconscious more and more carefully, they obsess us. I can say this: by situating the story of *Red Desert* in the world of factories, I have gone back to the source of that sort of crisis which, like a torrential river, swelled a thousand tributaries, divides in a thousand arms in order, finally, to submerge everything and spread everywhere.

GODARD - But isn't this beauty of the modern world also the resolution of the characters' psychological difficulties, doesn't it show vanity?

ANTONIONI - One must not underestimate the drama of man thus conditioned. Without drama, there are perhaps no longer men. Furthermore, I do not believe that the beauty of the modern world in itself can resolve our dramas. I believe, on the contrary, that once adapted to new life-techniques we will perhaps find new solutions to our problems. But why have me speak of these things? I am not a philosopher and all these observations have nothing to do with the "invention" of the film.

GODARD - Was the presence of the robot in the little boy's room benevolent or malevolent?

ANTONIONI - In my opinion, benevolent. Because the child by playing with this genre of toy, will adapt very well to the life waiting for him. But here we come back to what we were just talking about. The toys are produced by industry which in this way even influences the education of children. I am still stupefied by a conversation I had with cybernetics professor from the University of Milan, Silvio Ceccato, considered by the Americans to be another Einstein. A formidable type, who has invented a machine that can drive a car, make a report from an aesthetic point of view - or ethical or journalistic, etc.

And it's not a matter of television: it's an electronic brain. This man, who, moreover, proved to be extraordinarily lucid, never spoke one technical word in the course of a conversation I didn't understand. Well, I went crazy. At the end of each minute, I no longer understood anything of what he had just said to me.. He forced himself to use my language, but he was in another world. With him was a young girl, 24 or 25 years old, pretty, of petit bourgeois origin - his secretary. Now she understood it perfectly. In Italy, these are generally very young a simple girls, who have only a modest diploma. Who work at programming electronic brains: for them, it's very simple and very easy to program an electronic brain - while it isn't easy at all for me.

Another savant, Robert M. Stewart, came to see me, six months ago, in Rome. He had invented a chemical brain and presented himself as a cybernetics congress in Naples to give an account of his discovery, which is one of the most extraordinary discoveries in the world. It's a very small box, mounted on tubes : it's a matter of cells, into whose compositions gold enters, mixed with other substances. The cells are alive in a liquid chemical and they live an autonomous life; they have reactions: if you come into the room, the cell takes on a certain form; and if I come in, it takes on another form, etc. In this little box there are only a few million cells, but starting from that, one can arrive at remaking the human brain. This savant feeds them, puts them to sleep.. he talked to me about all that, which was very clear but so unbelievable that at a certain point I was no longer following him. By contrast, when he gets a little older, the little boy who plays with robot from earliest childhood will understand very well; he will have no trouble at all in going, if he wants to, out to space in a rocket.

I look at all that with a great deal of envy, and would like to be already in this new world. Unfortunately, we aren't there yet; it's a drama that will last several generations - mine, yours, and the generation of those born right after WW II. I think that, in the years to come, there are going to be very violent transformations, both in the world and in the individual's interior. Today's crisis comes from this spiritual confusion, from this confusion of conscience, of faith and of politics, there are so many symptoms of the transformations to come. Then I said to myself, "What does one say, today, in the cinema?" and I wanted to tell a story based on these motivations I was talking about before.

GODARD - However, the heroes of this film are integrated with this mentality, these are engineers, they're part of this world..

ANTONIONI - Not all of them. The character played by Richard Harris is almost a romantic, who thinks about fleeing to Patagonia and has no idea at all about what he must do. He is taking flight and believes he is resolving, in this way, the problems of his life. But this problem is inside, not outside, of him. All the more true that it is enough for him to meet a woman in order to provoke a crisis, and he no longer knows whether he will leave or not; the whole thing turns him around. I would like to point out a moment in the film which is an accusation of the old world: when at the breaking point, this woman needs someone to help her, she finds a man who profits from her and from that crisis. She finds herself face-to-face with old things, and it is the old things that shake her and sweep her off her feet. If she had met someone like her husband, he would have acted differently; he would have, first of all, tried to take care of her, then after that, perhaps... When there, it's her won world that betrays her.

GODARD - At the end of the film is she going to become like her husband?

ANTONIONI - I believe that, following the efforts she makes to find a link with reality, she ends by finding a compromise. Neurotics have crisis, but also

moments of lucidity which may last all their lives. Perhaps she finds a compromise, but the neurosis stays with her. I believe I have given the idea of this continuity of illness by means of the slightly soft image: she is in a static phase. What is she going to become? Another film would have to be able to know that.

GODARD - *Do you think that this new world's heightened consciousness may have repercussions on aesthetics, on the conception of the artist?*

ANTONIONI - Yes, I believe so. That changes the way of seeing; of thinking: everything changes. Pop Art demonstrated that something else is sought. One must not underestimate Pop Art. It is an "ironic" movement, and this conscious irony is very important. The Pop Art painters know very well that they are making things whose aesthetic value is not yet ripe - except for Rauschenberg, who is more of a painter than the others... even though Oldenburg's "soft typewriter" is very fine... I like it very much. It believes it is good that all that is coming out. That can only accelerate the transformation process in question.

GODARD - *But does the savant have the conscience we do? Does he reason as we do, in respect to the world?*

ANTONIONI - I asked that of Stewart, the inventor of the chemical brain. He answered that his very specialized work, without a doubt, had reverberations in his private life, even including his relationship with his family.

GODARD - *And must the sentiments be preserved?*

ANTONIONI - What a question! Do you think it is easy to answer that? All I can say about sentiments is that they must change. "Must" isn't what I mean to say. They are changing. They have already changed.

GODARD - *In the science-fiction novels, there are never artists, poets...*

ANTONIONI - Yes, it's curious. Perhaps they think that one can do without art. Perhaps we are the last to produce things so apparently gratuitous as are works of art.

GODARD - *Does Red Desert also help you to settle personal problems?*

ANTONIONI - While making a film, we live, and nevertheless, we are always settling personal problems. Problems which concern our work, but also our private life. If the things we talk about are not those we were talking about right after the war, it is because the world around us, in fact, changed and, also, we ourselves have changed. Our requirements have changed, our purposes, our themes. Right after the war, there were numerous things to be said; it was interesting to show social reality, the social condition of the individual. Today, all that has already been said and done. The new themes we can treat of today are those about which we were just speaking. I don't know yet how we can approach them, present them. I have tried to develop one of these themes in *Red Desert* and I don't think I exhausted it. It is only the beginning of a series of problems and aspects of our modern society and of the way of life that is ours. Moreover, you too, Godard, you make very modern film, your way of treating subjects reveals an intense need to break from the past.

GODARD - When you begin or end certain sequences with quasi-abstract forms of objects or details, do you do it in a pictorial spirit?

ANTONIONI - I feel the need to express reality in terms that are not completely realistic. The abstract white line that enters the picture at the beginning of the sequence of the little gray street interests me much more than the car that arrives: it's a way of approaching the character in terms of things rather than by means of her life. Her life, basically, interests me only relatively. It is a character that participates in the story as a function of her femininity, her feminine aspect and character are the essential things for me. It is exactly for that reason that I had the role played a bit statically.

GODARD - Thus, there is also on this point a break with your previous films.

ANTONIONI - Yes, it is a less realistic film, from a figurative point of view. That is to say, it is realistic in a different way. For example, I used the telescopic lens a great deal in order not to have deep-focus, which is for good reason an indispensable element of realism. What interests me now is to place the character in contact with things, for it is things, objects and materials that have weight today. I do not consider *Red Desert* a result: it is a research. I want to tell different stories with different means. Everything that's been done, everything I've done until now no longer interests me, it bores me. Perhaps you, too, feel the same thing?

GODARD - Was filming in color an important change?

ANTONIONI - Very important. I had to change my technique because of it, but not only because of it. I already had a need to change my technique, for the reasons we've spoken about. My requirements were no longer the same. The fact of using color accelerated this change. With color, you don't use the same lenses. Also, I perceived that certain camera movements didn't always jell with it: a rapid panoramic sweep is efficacious on brilliant red, but it does nothing for a sour green, unless you are looking for a new contrast. I believe there is a relationship between camera movement and color. A single film is not sufficient for studying the problem in depth, but it's a problem that must be examined. I made, for this reason, some 16mm tests. They were very interesting, but I was unable to achieve, in the film itself, certain effect I had found by this means. Up to this point, I've been in too much of a corner. You know that a psycho-physiology of color exists; studies, experiments have been done on this subject. The interior of the factory seen in the film was painted red; two weeks later the workers were fighting amongst one another. It was re-painted pale green and everyone was peaceful. The workers eyes must have a rest.

GODARD - How did you choose the colors for the store?

ANTONIONI - It was necessary to choose between warm colors and cool colors. Giuliana wants cool colors for her store. These are colors that are discordant with the objects displayed. If you paint a wall orange, this color will kill any object nearby, while sky-blue or pale green will set the objects off without overwhelming them. I wanted this contrast between warm colors and cool colors: there is an orange, a yellow, a maroon ceiling, and my character discovers that, for her, they don't go well together.

GODARD - The film's title was Celeste e Verde (Heavenly Blue and Green).

ANTONIONI - I abandoned it, because it didn't seem to be a virile enough title, it was too directly linked to the color. Moreover, I had never thought about color in itself. The film was born in colors, but I always thought, first of all, of the thing to be said - this is natural - and thus aided the expression by means of the color. I never thought: I'm going to put a blue next to a maroon. I dyed the grass around the shed on the edge of the marsh in order to reinforce the sense of desolation, of death. The landscape had to be rendered truthfully: when trees are dead, they have that color.

GODARD - *The drama is thus no longer psychological, but plastic...*

ANTONIONI - It's the same thing.

GODARD - *Thus, all those shots of objects during the conversation about Patagonia?...*

ANTONIONI - It's a sort of "distraction" on the character's part. He is tired of listening to all these conversations. He is thinking of Giuliana.

GODARD - *The dialogue is simpler, more functional than that of your previous films; isn't their traditional role of "commentary" taken by the color?*

ANTONIONI - Yes, I believe that is true. Let us say that, here, the dialogue is reduced to an indispensable minimum and that, in this sense, it is linked to the color. For example, I would never have done the scene in the shack where they talk about drugs, aphrodisiacs, without using red. I would never have done it in black and white. The red puts the spectator in a state of mind that permits him to accept this dialogue. The color is correct for the characters (who are justified by it) and also for the spectator.

GODARD - *Do you feel yourself to be closer to the researches of painters than to those of novelists?*

ANTONIONI - I don't feel too distant from the researches of the New Novel, but they help me less than the others: painting and scientific research interest me more. I don't believe they influence me directly. There is, in this film, no pictorial research at all, we are from painting. It seems to me. And, naturally, the requirements of painting have nothing to do with narrative content where one is found in the cinema: this is where the novel's research join those of painting.

GODARD - *Did you re-work the color in the laboratory, as is permitted with Technicolor?*

ANTONIONI - I placed no confidence at all in the laboratory, during the shooting. That is to say, I tried, during the shooting, to put the colors I wanted on the things themselves, on the landscapes. I painted directly, instead of trafficking with color in the laboratory. After that, what I demanded from the laboratory was a faithful reproduction of the effects I had obtained. It wasn't easy, for Technicolor, as you know, requires numerous operations involving the master print: the job was very long and delicate.

GODARD - *You verified things during the shooting, as you went along...*

ANTONIONI - Exactly. I believe one mustn't place too much trust in the work that can be done in the laboratory. It's not their fault. It's just that technically, color is still a long way behind.

GODARD - In your opinion, does Giuliana see the color as you show it?

ANTONIONI - You know, there are neurotics who see color differently. Doctors have done experiments on this subject, with mescaline for example, in order to try to know what they see. At a certain pint, I had the intention of having some effects of this nature. But now there is no longer anything of this but one single moment, when you see stains on a wall. I also thought of modifying the color of certain objects, and then the fact of using all those "tricks" very quickly seemed to me to become artificial; it was an artificial way of saying things which could be said in a much more simple way. Well, I eliminated these effects. But we may think that she sees color differently.

It's amusing: at this moment, I am speaking with Godard, one of the most modern talented cinéastes of today, and just a while ago, I lunched with René Clair, one of the greatest directors of the past: it wasn't at all the same genre of conversation... he is preoccupied with the future of the cinema. WE, on the contrary (you agree, I believe), have confidence in the future of the cinema.

GODARD - And what are you going to do now?

ANTONIONI - I am going to do a sketch with Soraya... This sketch interests me because I am going to pursue my researches with color, push ahead the experiments I did with *Red Desert*. After that, I'm going to make a film that interests me more. If I find a producer who will let me do it...