

Italian Film
in the Light of
Neorealism

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8 Antonioni's *Red Desert*: Abstraction as the guiding idea

IF THE 1950S WAS the decade of the crisis of neorealism, it was also the decade of the proliferation of neorealisms, each with its own determining adjective and each with its justification for a style whose resemblance to the postwar films was not always immediately obvious. Thus we get "phenomenological neorealism" for Fellini's work, "lyrical" or "romantic neorealism" for Visconti's, and "interior neorealism" for Antonioni's.¹ Like the psychotherapist who can retrospectively find ample cause for his patient's nervous breakdown in the stresses that led up to it, yet was unable to predict the illness in advance, critics can look back on neorealism from the vantage point of Fellini's, Visconti's, or Antonioni's work and see in it the source for all three divergent aesthetics. Neorealism is somehow "reinvented" in retrospect each time it is called upon to justify a new stylistic departure, making it the absence of hierarchical significance, the openness to transcendent meaning that looks ahead to Fellini's approach, or the attention to the dynamics of the historical process that looks ahead to Visconti's, or the new way of putting oneself in relation to the world by means of

a movie camera that anticipates Antonioni's.² The return to various aspects of neorealism to legitimize all important subsequent cinematic developments in Italy, even when those developments seem to contradict each other or to negate the neorealist example, is a testimony to the power of this precedent and to its elasticity.

Nor are critics the only ones to insist on the primacy of neorealist influence, for the filmmakers themselves follow suit, arguing that their styles are not radical breaks from neorealism, but gentle stretchings of its confines. "I began as one of the first exponents of neorealism," wrote Antonioni, "and now by concentrating on the internals of character and psychology I do not think I have deserted the movement, but rather have pointed a path towards extending its boundaries. Unlike early neorealist filmmakers, I am not trying to show reality, I am attempting to recreate realism."³ Such a distinction between the neorealists' intent "to show reality" and his own ambition "to recreate realism" might sound like pure semantic quibbling, until we realize that this is Antonioni's way of performing for his own work what Aristarco did for Visconti's.

For both filmmakers, neorealism is condemned as "restrictive sociology,"⁴ unable to consider the deeper and broader issues that shape the historical process in Visconti's case, or the individual psyche in Antonioni's. When Antonioni says that he is extending neorealism by "attempting to recreate realism" he is really offering to go forward by going backward, that is, by returning to the cultural antecedents of the postwar movement and by taking them along a different evolutionary course. Aristarco, with his penchant for finding nineteenth-century literary analogies to the Italian cinema, invokes Flaubert, particularly the Flaubert of *L'éducation*

¹ On Fellini's phenomenological neorealism, see Ayfre, "Néo-réalisme et phénoménologie," pp. 6-18. On Visconti's lyrical or romantic neorealism, see Giuseppe Ferrara, *Luichino Visconti* (Paris: Seghers, 1963), pp. 46-47. On Antonioni's interior neorealism, see Lorenzo Cuccu, *La visione come problema: Forme e svolgimento del cinema di Antonioni* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1973), p. 160; Giorgio Tinazzi, *Antonioni* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1976), p. 34; and Michelangelo Antonioni, "La malattia dei sentimenti," in Lizzani, *Storia del cinema italiano*, p. 297.

² See Cuccu, *La visione*, p. 169.

³ See Hollis Alpert, "A Talk with Antonioni," *Saturday Review*, 27 October 1962, 65.

⁴ Tinazzi, *Antonioni*, p. 31.

tion *sentimentale*, as the model for Antonioni's representation of middle-class malaise.⁵ The writer's portrayal of a life which suffers no major catastrophes, but which undergoes continual erosion from within, is the dynamic not only of *L'educazione sentimentale*, but of the modern novel in general, according to Aristarco, and it is in this tradition that Antonioni's filmmaking finds its proper place. But perhaps a more fruitful explanation for Antonioni's aesthetic would be the "transvaluation" of the realist concepts of truth and honesty that Noehlin sees occurring at the end of the nineteenth century in the plastic arts.⁶ Whereas "truth and honesty" first described the realists' attempts to represent the external world as a natural or social entity, it later came to mean fidelity to the nature of the medium or to the artist's subjectivity itself, as the notion of an objective external order began to fall into disrepute.⁷ Antonioni's emphasis on technique may be seen as just such a transvaluation of the realists' premium on truth and honesty of representation. Rejecting Zavattini's plea to conceal the hand of the artist and to make the medium transparent, Antonioni insists that his style be not only opaque and self-referential, but the primary vehicle of meaning, taking over the signifying function that drama or dialogue serve in the conventional cinema. Thus, as Cucu argues, Antonioni's films are far from mere visual translations of a priori conceptual themes; they are representations of a twofold visual act which registers first a candid impression of an image and then seeks out its hidden meaning.⁸ For Antonioni, cinema is vision in process, or as Cucu calls it, "vision in development or *in fieri*,"⁹ and such a process is always an interrogative one that denies prefabricated significance and opens

⁵ See Guido Aristarco, "Cronaca di una crisi e forme strutturali dell'animazione," in *Michelangelo Antonioni*, ed. Carlo Di Carlo (Rome: Edizioni di

Bianco e nero, 1964), p. 222.

⁶ See Noehlin, *Realism*, p. 230.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁸ See Cucu, *La visione*, p. 155.

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itself up to continual inquiry by cinematic means.¹⁰ Putting it another way, Cameron and Wood admire Antonioni's "ability to think in film, as opposed to translating ideas into images,"¹¹ thus corroborating what Cucu calls the preeminence of the visual moment over the "figural-discorsivo-diegetico" ("figural-discursive-diegetic") one.¹²

In a passage that reads like a gloss for *Blow-Up ante litteram*, Antonioni describes reality as a palimpsest whose various layers must be visually unpeeled by the movie camera in the quest for ultimate truths. "We know that under the image revealed there is another which is truer to reality and under this image still another and yet again still another under this last one, right down to the true image of that reality, absolute, mysterious, which no one will ever see or perhaps right down to the decomposition of any image, of any reality."¹³ Vision, for Antonioni, becomes a kind of meditational act capable of penetrating to the very core of reality, if there is a core, or revealing the final absence of any meaning to which the images ultimately point. This, of course, is Thomas's dilemma in *Blow-Up*: does the photograph within the photograph within the photograph—that of the corpse in the park—correspond to an external reality or is it a non-referential sign unable to be verified or to generate the chain of crime-detecting events that murder necessarily entails?

But more important for our study of *Red Desert* is the very nature of the visual act described in this passage, for it is one of abstraction, of probing so deeply into the nature of images that they decompose, becoming instead agglomerations of pure color, line, and shape.¹⁴ This explains Anto-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹¹ Ian Cameron and Robin Wood, *Antonioni* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 112.

¹² See Cucu, *La visione*, pp. 147 and 149.

¹³ In Samuel, *Encountering Directors*, p. 23.

¹⁴ In speaking of *Red Desert*, Antonioni explains the appropriateness of an abstract style: "The story demanded shots of a reality that had become

nioni's fondness for shooting angles or lens distortions which transform the ordinary and the banal into objects of surpassing aesthetic interest, so that the factories of Ravenna become striking abstract compositions of color and design, "more beautiful than a row of trees which every eye has already seen to the point of monotony."¹⁵ A taste for abstraction also explains why Antonioni tends to break up his shots into small visual cells, as he does in the factory, looking down at his two male protagonists through a grating, or using split compositions to divide the *mise-en-scène*. It is through abstraction that Antonioni is able to suggest connections among otherwise disparate settings—settings that would conjure up antithetical expectations in the conventional cinema. Thus, Antonioni makes a norm of the factory, whose brightly colored pipes give the composition a fragmented and painterly quality, just as do the balusters in Giuliana's house, the bed frame in Corrado's hotel room, and the pipes on the freighter he is preparing to load for Patagonia.¹⁶

When Antonioni has Giuliana ask her friends, "What should I do with my eyes, what should I look at?"¹⁷ he is raising his visual style to the level of a full-fledged thematic concern, and is making Giuliana its embodiment within the film.¹⁸

with Michelangelo Antonioni," in *L'avventura: A Film by Michelangelo Antonioni*, ed. George Amberg (New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 240.

¹⁵ Andrew Sarris, *Interviews with Film Directors* (New York: Avon, 1970), p. 23.

¹⁶ Thus Stanley Kauffmann sees in the film "a buried history of modern painting . . . from the Impressionists through Mondrian to Hopper and Weyth." See *The New Republic*, 20 February 1965, 30-31. Liehm notes the special influences of the Italian abstract painter Alberto Burri on Antonioni's visual style. See her *Passion and Defiance*, pp. 228-29.

¹⁷ Michelangelo Antonioni, *Il deserto rosso*, ed. Carlo Di Carlo (Bologna: Cappelli, 1978), p. 79. All quotations will be from this edition, and subsequent page references will appear in the text. The translations are mine.

¹⁸ For an excellent account of Antonioni's visual and narrative strategies in *Red Desert*, see Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, the pictorial insert between pp. 112-13. On Antonioni's abstract shooting techniques, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 220.

That we are seeing the world through her abstracting vision there can be no doubt, as Tinazzi says when he calls *Red Desert* a film "in subjective camera"¹⁹ and as Cameron and Wood suggest when they explain how a composition which includes Giuliana in sharp focus looking at a background in soft focus is a compressed version of a conventional pair of shots: the closeup of a character, followed by an image of what that character is seeing through his or her own eyes.²⁰ By using Giuliana as his visual receptor within the film, Antonioni is exemplifying Pasolini's notion of "free indirect subjective" which is the cinematic equivalent of the free indirect discourse in literature.²¹ It is by means of this technique that cinema realizes its highest poetic possibilities, according to Pasolini, freeing itself from the restrictions of conventional narrative form and allowing itself to return to its expressive source in preconscious thought.²² Unlike Cameron and Wood, who fault Antonioni's placement of a neurotic woman at the center of his statement about the contemporary world,²³ Pasolini applauds this choice, for the neurotic's vision gives Antonioni an excuse to indulge his extravagant aestheticism and thereby to achieve "the greatest poetic liberty—a liberty which precisely borders (and this is why it is intoxicating) upon the arbitrary."²⁴

If Giuliana's abstracting vision is equivalent to Antonioni's, then her story is an explanation, though in no literal-minded way, of how his own visual style came to be. By grounding his vision in a character who has a tendency to look with wonder and fear at the things around her, Antonioni suggests a prior phase of his own perceptual develop-

¹⁹ Tinazzi, *Antonioni*, p. 100.

²⁰ Cameron and Wood, *Antonioni*, p. 120.

²¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 549.

²² Ibid., p. 552.

²³ Cameron and Wood, *Antonioni*, p. 124.

²⁴ Pasolini, "Cinema of Poetry," p. 553.

ment. What Giuliana accomplishes in *Red Desert* by transforming her fear of the world abstractly perceived into an acceptance of it, is a prerequisite to the artist's own accomplishment, which is to transform that acceptance into a celebration. By the end of the film, Giuliana is not quite at the point where Antonioni is at the beginning—she has learned to fly around the poisonous yellow smoke but has not yet learned to love its yellowness, or its texture or shape. Presumably, this too will come, now that she has abandoned her dreams of escape, be they through suicide, adultery, stowing away, or selling undetermined merchandise in a multicolored shop, and can now concentrate on putting her abstract vision to positive uses.

If we read *Red Desert* as the story of the genesis of a visual style, many of the otherwise troublesome aspects of the film gain new necessity and logic. The storyline itself is minimal; it alone would hardly suffice to recommend the film to our attention. It chronicles the recovery of a middle-class wife and mother from a nervous collapse suffered in the wake of a minor automobile accident. Her hospitalization occurs prior to the action of the film, which begins with Giuliana's visit to the factory where her husband, Ugo, works as an engineer. There she meets Corrado, the factory owner's son, who is in search of workers for a new plant to be opened in Patagonia. Grasping for ways to improve her life after her breakdown, Giuliana attempts to open up a ceramics shop, but her efforts are sporadic and ineffectual. Drawn to Corrado for his seeming sensitivity to her plight, Giuliana accompanies him from Ravenna to Ferrara in search of recruits for the Patagonian venture. A Sunday outing with Ugo, Corrado, and assorted friends promises to become an orgy but ends up instead a crisis for Giuliana, who emerges more convinced than ever of her solitude. While Ugo is on a business trip, Valerio, their son, suffers a temporary, inexplicable paralysis whose equally inexplicable, spontaneous cure sends



8. Giuliana (Monica Vitti) stands before her husband Ugo (Carlo Chionetti, center) and her future lover Corrado (Richard Harris) in the scene of the pseudo-orgy.

support. Unconsoled by their lovemaking, Giuliana runs to the shipyards where she momentarily considers stowing away before finally coming to accept her lot.

As this synopsis suggests, Antonioni's storyline is so loosely woven and arbitrary in its progression that we are compelled to look elsewhere for the locus of meaning in the film. The narrative also constantly raises and frustrates audience expectations by flirting with various genres but refusing to settle into any one conventional mode. *Red Desert* is not quite a love story, not quite a psychological case history, not quite an environmentalist or anti-industrialist polemic. The plot itself is full of false starts, dead ends, and unanswered questions, beginning with the workers' strike at the very opening of the film which Antonioni does not see fit to explain or amplify in any way. The curiosity that such a politically charged event naturally arouses is never satisfied, nor are we told what the workers' grievances are, why one man crosses the picket line, and, indeed, most mysteriously, why the plant seems to be fully operant despite a drastically reduced staff. Soon after, the spectacular effusion of steam and noise that envelops Ugo and Corrado as they talk outside the factory is left unexplained. Ugo apparently offers an explanation to a bewildered Corrado, but we cannot hear him for the noise. In a later sequence, we never learn if Valerio's paralysis is a real hysterical episode or an entirely theatrical one. The cry heard by Giuliana and Linda in the seaside cabin also remains an enigma—was it associated with the approaching ship and its unknown contagion? Indeed, all the boats in the film are mysterious: the one in Giuliana's fable to Valerio—a frigate that disappears as inexplicably as it appears and never reveals its purpose—the tanker that materializes like an apparition amid the pine groves of Ravenna; and the one she considers stowing away on toward the conclusion. These narrative loose ends have their verbal equivalents in the many unanswered questions with which the dialogue abounds. Perhaps the most pervasive and troublesome of all the un-

resolved mysteries is the origin of Giuliana's neurosis. Is it her unfulfilling family life, or some trauma in her past, or the inhumanity of the technological world to which Giuliana reacts as if she were an exposed nerve, registering its every assault on her fragile sensibility? Antonioni's refusal to cast blame bespeaks not only his general indifference to questions of causality,²⁵ but also his desire to posit the analogy between Giuliana's vision and his own—an analogy that would suffer from too technical an explanation for her illness. If Giuliana's neurosis were presented as a specific clinical condition attributable to concrete causes and susceptible to a given psychiatric treatment, we would dismiss her vision as just one more pathological symptom, rather than a viable model for Antonioni's own aestheticizing approach.

If visual style is the primary vehicle of meaning in *Red Desert*, and abstraction is its organizing principle, then we can expect that principle to offer the interpretive key to all other elements of the film. Here let us turn to the literal meaning of abstraction as "removal, withdrawal, or separation," or more elaborately, as "the act of considering a thing independently of its associations"²⁶ and consider how one of the most striking images in the film makes visual style the source of narrative and thematic significance. The outing in Max's seaside cabin has just ended with the ominous arrival of the quarantined boat, and all are making their way to the cars when Giuliana remembers she has left her purse on the doorstep of the cabin. Ugo and Corrado both volunteer to retrieve it, but Giuliana panics at the thought of their approaching the malignant ship. When her anxiety subsides, she turns to regard the company standing dispersed on the quay, enshrouded in a fog which slowly dissolves their contours and threatens to swallow them up. The vision is a terrifying one of separateness and of evanescence, and such is

²⁵See Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, pp. 29–30.

²⁶*OED* (1933), 1:42.

its power that Giuliana is compelled to rush for the car and drive close to the water's edge in an act more suggestive of a death wish than of the confusion to which she later pleads. Abstraction on the stylistic level becomes alienation on the narrative one—just as images are estranged from their normal contexts, so people are estranged from one another. When Giuliana says to the Turkish sailor, "bodies are separate" (134), she is giving words to the image of fog-enshrouded separateness that characterized her friends on the wharf, while at the same time acknowledging Corrado's recent failure to help her by offering physical consolations for the emotional ones she so desperately requires. The need for intimacy finds an inadequate and self-detecting expression in the desire for sexual conquest that the verbal foreplay in Max's cabin amply illustrates. Mili's nymphomania, Max's predatory pursuits of women in crisis, and the revelers' mechanical concern for increasing their appetites and prolonging their endurance through aphrodisiacs reveal how empty of emotional components their eroticism is. Not surprisingly, Giuliana's and Ugo's sexual drives are completely out of phase—when she awakens from her night terrors and needs Ugo's reassurances, she gets his caresses instead, but when she eats all three quail's eggs and announces, with wonderful absence of guile, that she wants to make love, he pleads the social impropriety of leaving the party so soon.

During the sequence in the cabin, Antonioni reveals what it is that turns sex into empty exhibitionism and keeps people irremediably estranged. Early in the scene, the cry is heard on the soundtrack to which only Giuliana and Linda respond. The others deny hearing it, and Ugo, worst of all, denies its significance. "Scream or no scream, what does it matter?" "No, instead it does matter! Someone screamed" (80), protests Giuliana, granting importance not so much to this proof of her sanity as to the human suffering betokened by the cry. Had the contested sound been a bell or a horn, she probably would not have bothered to insist, but a cry of

pain or alarm which falls on the deaf ears of her companions proves once more their ruling defect—the failure of empathy that prevents them from imagining or participating in another's plight. "If you prick me, you don't suffer" (134), Giuliana tells the Turkish sailor at the end of the film, translating this failure of human solidarity into the simplest of physical terms.

But the absence of empathy had been evident throughout the story, from the moment the cold, impassive Ugo was introduced on the screen. His most grievous emotional failure is with regard to Giuliana, the gravity of whose illness he constantly minimizes, happy to believe in the euphemisms and delusions that she and the doctors have conspired to foist upon him. It does not take much to see through this tissue of lies, as Corrado does immediately, but Ugo remains so blind that he is ready to repeat his original error in judgment and embark on another business trip with Giuliana on the brink of nervous collapse, just as he had done on the eve of her accident and hospitalization. In a seemingly trivial detail, Ugo reveals his unwitting cruelty when Giuliana asks how many days he'll be gone. "Five . . . six" (116), he answers with a casualness and an imprecision devastating to a woman who fears abandonment and needs all the certainty she can get.

Even Corrado, who evidences true concern for Giuliana's plight, demonstrates a similar failure of empathy in the treatment he accords prospective members of his crew for Patagonia. He is completely untouched by the idea of breaking up families, answering the men's questions about when they can be reunited with their wives and how often they can speak to them on the phone with official indifference. Perhaps we can excuse his callousness in the face of the men, who dare not betray their true feelings in so public a forum, but when confronted with the raw emotion of one of the wives who would be separated from her husband, Corrado, to our surprise and disappointment, remains impassive. No

sooner does he leave the woman's apartment, driven out by the violence of her refusal to be parted from her Mario, than Corrado resolves to seek out Mario himself. Giuliana too is shocked by his insensitivity—so shocked, the screenplay tells us, that she can find no words to contradict him or impede his mission (63).

As an itinerant, Corrado embodies the principle of abstraction in the literal sense of the word, constantly denying himself a physical or emotional context by his unwillingness to put down roots. When Giuliana asks Corrado where he's from and he answers with a long list of cities, the effect is at once comic and pathetic, for this is a man perpetually in transit, whose geographic instability precludes the forging of emotional bonds. It is to this sentimental detachment that Giuliana refers when she faults Corrado for traveling so lightly. Giuliana, instead, would take all her belongings for fear that she might return to find that something had changed. But Corrado likes change for its own sake—change of scenery, change of activity, change of "historic ambience," as he pompously tells Max. "I must feel 'spaesato' [literally townless or villageless] to feel well" (77). Geographical rootlessness is a condition to which Corrado aspires, as Max aspires to a kind of entrepreneurial rootlessness, wandering from one deal to the next in an accumulation of managerial conquests. Indeed, all the characters seem to have accommodated to the emotional inadequacies of their situations by seeking their own particular methods of escape: Linda through the ever-present novel, Mili through promiscuity, Corrado through travel, Max through predatory pursuits of women and property, and Giuliana through neurosis. In a society characterized by alienation, these remedies seem designed expressly to aggravate the very problems they promise to address. Thus Giuliana is not qualitatively different from the rest of the more functional neurotics who populate the world of the film—she simply takes their escapist tendencies to a patho-

logical extreme.²⁷ Her illness, which in clinical terms would probably find its closest equivalent in schizophrenia, also exhibits the principle of abstraction which is the guiding idea of the film's aesthetic vision. "You ought to learn how to love," the psychiatrist had told Giuliana. "To love a person or also a thing: your husband, your son, or a job or a dog. . . . But not husband, son, job, dog, trees, river" (61). The doctor's criticism suggests that Giuliana is too diffuse and indiscriminate in her love, that she must be more select and concrete in the objects of her affection, for not all things will love her in return. To love and to be loved universally is an abstract desire dictated less by the identity of specific objects than by the neurotic's need for global approval—a need that is by definition insatiable because its very diffuseness precludes total reciprocity. Giuliana must exchange this abstract, universalizing desire for a concrete, object-appropriate one which rewards selectivity by being returned in kind. This new way of loving will countermand Giuliana's sense of alienation, allowing her to reintegrate herself into reality, according to the psychiatrist's glib prescription for mental health.

In his very title, Antonioni teaches us to read the film abstractly, for it is only on the most general level that "red desert," as a description of industrial Ravenna, makes any sense at all. Like Dante's Santa Lucia who, from the height of the Emyrean, can call the dark wood where the poem begins "a river" because the pilgrim is indeed spiritually drowning in that sylvan setting, Giuliana is able to compare the urban seaport to a desert by virtue of certain shared attributes: desolation, barrenness, and hostility to life. The an-

²⁷ See Sergio Micheli, "Il personaggio femminile nei film di Antonioni, *Bianco e nero* 28 (January 1967), 6; and Cameron and Wood, *Antonioni*, p. 112. Tinazzi comments that Giuliana's disease extends itself to Mario, the Ferrarese worker, and to Valerio in his pseudo-paralysis. See his *Antonioni*, p. 101.

totype to the red desert of industrial Ravenna is the pink beach of the fable with which Giuliana amuses Valerio during the episode of his hysterical paralysis. Indeed, this idyllic interlude constitutes an antifilm within the film, providing a contrast not only to the physical setting of the rest of *Red Desert*, but to its predominant visual style. The industrial city and pink beach are polar opposites in every way: one is overcast and grey, the other is lit by radiant sunlight; one is shot with color and lens distortions, the other in unblemished technicolor; one is spatially congested, the other open to the horizon; one has foul polluted waterways, the other has the transparent sea; one is accompanied by electronic music and industrial noises, the other by Giuliana's narrative voice or by human song; one is afloat with modern tankers, the other with an Old World frigate; one is governed by man-made rhythms, the other by the movements of the sun, and so on. But more importantly, the fable offers the corrective to the terrible abstraction of Giuliana's city, for the fairy-tale island is an organic whole that binds all elements to an establishing natural context and forbids any analytic dismemberment of its parts. It is no accident that the protagonist of the fable is a prepubescent girl who has not yet suffered the fall into experience that will irrevocably exile her from the earthly paradise of her island retreat. This is Giuliana's personal myth of Eden, a place where the primal unity between the self and the world has not yet been split asunder by guilty knowledge or willful rebellion against the natural order. The child and the environment live in happy concord, she obeying the rhythms of the sun, the rocks mimicking the smooth brownness of her flesh, and the mysterious song, half human and half wild, making literal the metaphor of harmonious coexistence.

It is against this myth of primal unity and concord that Antonioni asks us to judge the rest of the film, to take the true measure of its alienation and abstraction. On the narrative level, correctives for the ills of modern urban living

are nowhere to be found. Political options are rejected out of hand—the strike at the beginning of the film is a feeble, uninspired event which neither binds together a community nor effecuates reform. Since we are not privy to the workers' grievances, we cannot determine the legitimacy of their complaint and can only judge them by the languor and mechanical sloganeering of their demonstration. Similarly, Corrado's spouting of socialist pieties is so slick and unconvincing that we applaud Giuliana when she replies, "You've put together a nice group of words" (67).

Psychiatric solutions to Giuliana's malaise are also discredited. The doctor's suggestion that she accommodate to reality has little to recommend itself when we look for examples of successful social adjustment among the dramatic personae of the film. Indeed, the only character not madly seeking escape is Ugo, but he is exemplary only for those who would equate normalcy with numbness.²⁸ In Valerio's paralysis, the boy seems to be somatizing his father's temperamental trademark.

The absence of resolutions on the narrative level leads us back to the visual style in search for an answer to the alienation that blights Giuliana's world. It is only aesthetically that Antonioni is able to offer some consolation, and he does so through the use of the objective correlative which posits a continuity between character and setting, between the inner life of the psyche and its outward reflection in the phenomenal world. In *Red Desert*, color assumes this important expressive function, as the title of the film suggests with the chromatic adjective red, distinguishing it from the single, unmodified noun titles of Antonioni's previous trilogy (*L'avventura*, *La notte*, *L'eclisse*). This is Antonioni's first color film, and he uses the technique in a highly self-conscious, aggressive way, imposing his own chromatic scheme on all settings, be they landscapes or interiors. Since he refuses to

²⁸ See Cameron and Wood, *Antonioni*, p. 115.

manipulate color in the laboratory,²⁹ this means directly painting the backgrounds in order to make the slag heaps dark grey, for example, or Corrado's hotel bedroom pink, or the fruits on the cart outside Giuliana's shop white.³⁰ Color constitutes so active and autonomous a presence in the film that it makes the environment a character, according to Kauffmann, in dramatic conflict with the protagonists of the film.³¹ "Color represents Giuliana's state of mind," Antonioni once agreed in an interview,³² but Giuliana herself complicates the relationship when she tells Corrado in the shop, "maybe blue is better . . . [for] the walls. And the ceiling green. They are cold colors that shouldn't disturb" (56). Her comments reveal what Antonioni himself has learned about the psycho-physiology of color: that it both reflects and conditions mood.³³ Since chromatic perception is a relational process, it makes color an objective correlative in a dynamic way, bearing passive witness to the character's psychic state, while exerting an active influence over it.³⁴ "Color does not exist in the absolute," Antonioni explains. "It is always a relationship . . . between the object and the psychological state of the observer, in the sense that both influence each other in turn. That is, the object with its color has a determined influence on the observer and contemporaneously, he sees the color which in that moment he has interest or pleasure in seeing in that object."³⁵ In an interview with Godard, Antonioni exemplifies this reciprocity in the use of red—a color that was found to incite workers to violence in psychological experiments, and which reflected

²⁹ See Sarris, *Interviews*, pp. 30–31.

³⁰ On Antonioni's aggressive use of color, see "Antonioni in Color," *Time*, 19 February 1965, 99.

³¹ See Kauffmann, "Red Desert," p. 31.

³² These are Sarris's words in *Encountering Directors*, p. 30.

³³ Sarris, *Interviews*, p. 29.

³⁴ On the reciprocity of color and character, see Tinazzi, *Antonioni*, p. 103.

³⁵ See Di Carlo, "I colori dei sentimenti," in *Il deserto rosso*, p. 20.

the agitation and sexual arousal of the revelers in *Red Desert*. "I would never have done the scene in the shack where they talk about drugs, aphrodisiacs, without using red," he told Godard. "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."³⁶ When Giuliana includes "i colori" (132) in the list of things that frighten her in the environment, she is acknowledging the power of color to reveal and determine character. It is thus no surprise that at moments of acute psychic distress or exaltation, Giuliana hallucinates a welter of colors, or "a stain," as she calls it, literalizing the metaphor of the "colors of the sentiments."

Space functions similarly as an objective correlative for Giuliana's state of mind, and when she tries to verbalize her feelings, she often positions herself in spatial settings that corroborate or complement what she is saying. During the visit to the worker's apartment in Ferrara, for example, Giuliana stands framed in a doorway and pushes against its side posts as she discusses her need for firmer psychological grounding. In Corrado's hotel room, she withdraws into a corner when speaking of the desire for a wall of friends to protect her against "something terrible in reality" (133).

The seeming inhospitality of the industrial cityscape to its human populace is thus reversed on the aesthetic level by a continuity which allows that setting to externalize the inner lives of its inhabitants, to make accessible what dialogue and story fail to tell us about them. Such a resolution might strike us as arbitrary and futile for the victims of this society until we realize that Giuliana is on her way to acquiring Antonioni's aestheticizing vision, enabling her to accept and to use what she once feared and fled. Ugo's mechanical accommodation to an industrial world need not be the only road to mental health, nor must Giuliana give up her special vi-

³⁶ Sarris, *Interviews*, p. 30.

sion in order to survive. She need only to master it and put it to the service of aesthetic ends, as she shows she can do through storytelling. Indeed, the tale she tells her son is therapeutic for them both, enabling her to recognize the counterfactual quality of her desires for primal innocence, while it seems literally to cure Valerio, who gets up and walks in the very next scene. Another of Giuliana's stories included in the screenplay but unfortunately cut from the final version of the film tells of a kite whose flight is the collective venture of an entire village. As the craft ascends, the villagers unravel all their fabrics to provide the length of string required for it to reach the stars. The kite survives all manner of threats, both natural and man-made (lightning and missiles) so that the analogies to Giuliana's own psychic state are not far to seek. Such is the therapeutic power of her fictions that one of them, the final one, contains her prescription for mental health, and the germ of the plot for the film which is just drawing to an end. When Valerio asks what happens to the birds who fly through the poisonous smoke, and Giuliana says they learn to avoid it, the solution to her struggle is at hand.

Antonioni's highly abstract, aestheticizing vision may seem worlds away from the concrete, documentary approach of postwar Rossellini or De Sica, for example, and yet the ethical commitment of neorealism is still very much alive in him. Zavattini's notion of a "cinema of inquiry"³⁷ in search of the truth about contemporary Italy has simply been transferred from the level of theme to that of visual style,³⁸ but the impulse to reexamine and revise the relationship between the observer and the phenomenal world is still as much a concern for Antonioni as for his neorealist predecessors. Indeed, as Umberto Eco argues, Antonioni's points of departure and arrival are always the world "out there"—the fact that his characters are firmly rooted in a given social class,

³⁷ See Sandro Pettaglia, "Cesare Zavattini teorico del neorealismo," in *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*, ed. Micciché, p. 215.

³⁸ See Tinazzi, *Antonioni*, pp. 30–31.

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profession, geographical and temporal setting,³⁹ and the fact that Antonioni is always "of his times" according to the realist imperative to contemporary subject matter, means that whatever happens within his autonomous aesthetic framework has a bearing on the extracineematic world, if not the direct, political bearing that the neorealists would have, at least an indirect, exemplary one that teaches us to consider an alternative vision and perhaps a new relationship between the self and the world.

But we have strayed far from neorealism indeed when we realize that Antonioni's primary use of film form as the repository of meaning leads naturally to a self-reflexive cinema which constantly scrutinizes its own language until finally, in *Blow-Up*, it questions the very referentiality of the sign.⁴⁰ Yet it is a measure of the strength of the realist impulse in postwar Italian cinema that a filmmaker with Antonioni's formalist tendencies does not withdraw into an art-for-art's sake position, or wallow in metacinematic uncertainties, but that he insists on pursuing an extracineematic truth—not the neorealists' documentary truth, but the "transvaluated" truth of the sentiments and of the vision that registers them. When Antonioni writes of *Red Desert*, "it is a less realistic film from a figurative point of view. That is to say it is realistic in a different way,"⁴¹ he is expressing the paradox of an art that is opaque and self-reflexive on the one hand, didactic and *impegnata* (committed) on the other. If Giuliana's fanciful fiction-making can "cure" Valerio of his paralysis, and her spontaneous miniature parable of the birds circumventing the poisonous fumes can point the way to her own truce with the environment, then angst can become art, and art, in turn, can heal.

³⁹ See Umberto Eco, "Antonioni impegnato," in *Michelangelo Antonioni*, ed. Di Carlo, p. 70.

⁴⁰ See Tinazzi, *Antonioni*, pp. 36 and 55.

⁴¹ See Sarris, *Interviews*, p. 28.