
L'avventura

Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* was the third film of 1960 that signaled the dramatic revival of the Italian cinema. In the final speech of that film, Patrizia, a friend of the heroine, Claudia, tells her "there is certainly

no point in being melodramatic.” Even though she refers to Claudia’s intense conflict, brought about by falling in love and starting an affair with Sandro, the fiancé of her closest friend, Anna, who disappeared during a yachting party to the Eolian Islands just two or three days before, the resistance to melodrama can be heard as a programmatic declaration of a principle of Antonioni’s mature style. In fact, the international prestige of *L’avventura* may have been as much a function of the ultimate suppression of the melodramatic tensions that had been at work in Antonioni’s earlier films as it certainly was of its refinement and extension of their visual elegance.

L’avventura shares an aesthetic with the phenomenological, psychoanalytical, and avant-garde currents emergent in Italian culture in the late fifties, but which previously had no significant representation in film. When Guido Aristarco of the journal *Cinema nuovo* circulated four questions about the status of the new Italian cinema (specifically the three new films of Fellini, Visconti, and Antonioni) among novelists and critics, Luciano Anceschi, the professor of aesthetics at the University of Bologna and founder of the journal *Il Verri* (who was the godfather of the Italian avant-garde of the sixties), responded that Antonioni “touched him, personally, more deeply than all the others”; and that *L’avventura* was “a coherent vision, not a mechanical one; in fact, it is at once delicate, fast, deep, and light. Or to put it another way, its truth and invention seem unlabored.”¹⁹

Umberto Eco, the most prominent apologist of the Anceschi circle, devoted several pages of *Opera aperta*²⁰ (*The Open Work*, 1962) to a discussion of “the openness of *L’avventura*” but nowhere else in that influential book does he dwell on cinema. For both Anceschi and Eco formal research in art can be a political activity. For instance, in a later essay on “Form as Social Commitment” (included in the 1972 edition of *Opera aperta*) Eco wrote of *L’eclisse*:

This movie about a useless and unlikely love affair between useless and unlikely characters tells us more about contemporary man and his world than a panoramic melodrama involving workers in overalls and countless social confrontations, structured according to the logical, rational demands of a nineteenth-century plot—whose very denouements would imply the resolution of all contradictions into a universal order. In fact, the only order man can impose on his situation is the order of a structural organization whose very disorder allows the apprehension of the situation.²¹

Similarly, in the journal of the phenomenologist Enzo Paci, *Aut-Aut*, where issues of psychoanalysis, American pragmatism, and Heideggerian thought were frequently debated, cinema was rarely discussed; but whenever it was, Antonioni was the dominant focus of attention.

At the end of the fifties and through the early sixties the Frankfurt school, the French *nouveau roman*, the aesthetics of chance operations, abstract art, and psychoanalysis attracted considerable attention in Italy. The development of Antonioni's cinema was of particular interest to those most open to these currents, just as, conversely, his work was attacked from factions opposed to them. For example, Alberto Moravia, whose realist novels the critics of *Il Verri* disparaged, criticized *L'avventura* in his column in *L'Espresso* for its lack of social and political vision. Ironically, Moravia's novel *La noia* (*The Empty Canvas*, 1960) would turn out to be the literary work most frequently aligned to Antonioni's worldview, and Moravia himself would soon come to champion his films.

To a large degree Antonioni shared a sense of the modernist tradition with the Anceschi circle. Lorenzo Cucco lists the following profound literary and figurative allegiances: Flaubert, Gide (whom he translated), Camus, Joyce, Pavese, Adorno, Fitzgerald, and De Chirico.²² This list clearly associates him with the antimelodramatic tradition, which Brooks describes in terms of "stoic materialism and a language of deflationary suspicion."²³ His summary of this mode of fiction can bring us to the details of *L'avventura*: "Plot and action are de-dramatized, voluntarily insignificant. Desire, the relations of intention to action, the coherence of subjectivity, ambition as the self's project are all stripped of significant status, shown to be inauthentic or illusory."

I shall start my analysis of *L'avventura* by drawing attention to a decidedly unemphasized moment near the end of the film in which "nothing happens": Sandro is wandering about the San Domenico Palace Hotel, actually a converted monastery, apparently in search of his fellow architect Ettore, for whom he has the profitable but unfulfilling job of providing building estimates. He has just left Claudia in their room to sleep. When the film began in Rome a few days before, Claudia and Anna, his girlfriend, stopped to pick up Sandro for a cruise on a private yacht. He had just returned from a month away which had made Anna very anxious. After a painful conversation on the first Eolian island they visited, Anna disappeared without warning. After a day of searching for her in vain, her friends had only inconclusive hypotheses: she may have killed herself,

drowned accidentally, or somehow got off the island with a passing fishing boat or even with smugglers. In the midst of the search Sandro makes a play for Claudia, who rejects him, insisting that they go to the mainland to pursue the tenuous clues offered by the police and the press. When he persists in pursuing her, she leaves him to join the rest of the yacht party at a villa. Filled with anxiety about his arrival there, she rejoins him in his search, this time responding to his advances. By the next day she has fallen in love with him. Therefore, with intense guilt she came to fear Anna's return.

So it is on the second night of their affair that I want to begin my examination of the film. In his wandering, Sandro briefly passes a Mannerist painting and a woman looking at it. Neither the painting nor the woman will appear again in the film. Here is Seymour Chatman's description of the scene from his lucid analysis of the filmmaker's stylistics, *Antonioni; or, The Surface of the World*:

Sometimes the found object comments on the story in a more lighthearted way, as when we see, from Sandro's point of view, an old master painting in the lobby of the luxury hotel in Taormina. The decadence implicit in the depiction of a patriarch king taking refreshment at a lady's breast is ironically mediated by the jaded, complicitous gaze of the young woman, another guest at the hotel. Her eyes convey both boredom and invitation, and though Sandro refuses her, he is soon to accept the favors of Gloria Perkins.²⁴

Sandro looks briefly at the painting and exchanges glances with the woman held in its spell. He turns away, disgusted or bemused, but the camera fixes him for several seconds, his head blocking our view of the image of the elderly man sucking the breast of a young, dressed woman. Just as the scopic flirtation of the woman looking at the painting suggests an offer to reenact the baroque scene in a more private place in the hotel, the very oddity of the glances within the painting seems somehow relevant to the eyeline matches in the scene's montage. Both the painted woman and the old man are looking off to the right, instead of acknowledging each other, but the object of their gaze is not within the canvas, which suggests that it might be a fragment of a larger painting or part of a larger unit.

Chatman's description of the scene and his interpretation of the scopic interplay are, as usual, accurate; but from an art-historical, iconographic

point of view he could not be farther off base about the painting, as he subsequently acknowledged in his notes to the published filmscript. It depicts "Roman Charity," or the story of Pero, a dutiful daughter who sustains her starving, imprisoned father, Cimon, with her own milk. The story, recorded in Valerius Maximus, has been painted since the Pompeian frescoes. By the seventeenth century it became a combined image for feeding the hungry and visiting prisoners in representations of the Seven Acts of Charity. Thus we find Pero and Cimon on the left of Caravaggio's great painting of this theme in Naples.

What relevance does this iconography have to Antonioni's film? At first sight, none. Certainly Chatman is correct in foregrounding the play of invitation and refusal between the viewers of the painting. When Sandro does not respond to the tacit solicitation, we may assume for the moment that it is because he is so much in love with Claudia, just as in the shots to follow he does not seem to react to the stares of the exhibitionist Gloria Perkins. But soon the film will demonstrate the error of such readings. For when Claudia wakes at dawn and does not find him in the room, she first goes to Patrizia, to see if he has stayed with her and Ettore, and then finds him embracing Perkins on a couch in the hotel lobby. There is just one more scene in the film: when Claudia runs out of the hotel, Sandro gives Perkins the money she asks for ("just a little memento") and follows Claudia in despair. In the final shot *she* consoles *him*, caressing his head as he sits on a bench.

Merely as an expensive baroque object the painting contributes to the opulence of the hotel. As an image of an old man sucking the breast of a young woman it is a curiosity, all the more fascinating because of the indication of a sight off the canvas. In the sexually charged environment of the lobby, it mediates a failed seduction. The obscurity of the subject, Roman Charity, and the fragmentary and suppressed allusion to the Seven Acts of Charity in the Gospel of Matthew underlines the gaps between Roman and modern morality, Christian charity and psychosexual dynamics, iconography and pornography.²⁵ In this film of ellipses that parades one loss of meaning or certainty after another, the painting and its multiple interpretations allegorizes the status of the cinema.

The nominal subject of the painting, the devotion of Pero to her father, brings us back to the opening shots of the film in which Anna's father confronts her about her yachting trip. He is a wealthy diplomat whose thirty years of "diplomacy and lying" (in his own phrase) subtly attest to

the continuity of Fascist and DC foreign ministries. When she tells him where she is going, he gives three responses in ascending critical order: First, he asks her if it is not the custom to wear a cap with the name of the yacht, indicating how out of touch he is with fashion. Then, he observes that he is used to being left alone, implying that Anna has not been a dutiful daughter. Finally, he criticizes her relationship with Sandro: "He'll never marry you." When she counters that she is the one who refused him, he insists, "It's the same thing." The coupling of his hostility to Sandro with his feeling of desertion directly reverses the tale of Pero and Cimon, in its incestual undertones as well as its overt moral exemplum. Actually, we hear Sandro propose first to Anna, then to Claudia in the film. According to Spinazzola, "In a very Italian way, he wants to marry all the women, because marriage would satisfy his bourgeois aspiration for stability and would offer a justification for his renunciation of any professional ambition."²⁶

When Anna disappears she leaves behind a copy of the Bible and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, a novel about the relationship between a psychiatrist and his patient-wife, who suffers from schizophrenia brought on by an incestuous relationship with her father. Anna's father significantly pays no attention to the novel, but takes the presence of the Bible as a good sign that she has not killed herself.