Michelangelo Antonioni—a flawed legacy

Part 1

Richard Phillips
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Two of the major figures of postwar European cinema, Sweden's Ingmar Bergman, 89, and Italy's Michelangelo Antonioni, 94, died this week. Today and tomorrow, the WSWS is reposting an assessment of Antonioni written in response to a retrospective of his works screened at the Sydney Film Festival in 2004. In the coming days, we will be posting a comment on Bergman's life and career.

This is the first article in a two-part series.

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"Films are born as poems are born in the heart of a poet. Words, images, concepts present themselves to the mind, they are all mixed together, and the result is the poem. I believe it is the same for films." —Michelangelo Antonioni

This year, the Sydney Film Festival provided a valuable opportunity to watch a comprehensive presentation of movies by Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni. The retrospective, which was first assembled by the Venice Film Festival in 2002 to celebrate the director's 90th birthday, included 14 features, 13 short non-fiction films (made from 1943 to 1950 and 1983 to 1997) and several documentaries about the filmmaker.

Many critics and academics consider Antonioni one of the most significant Italian directors of the post-WWII period. Writer Alberto Moravia once praised him for recreating the "nameless, formless anguish" of contemporary life and compared his work to that of French existentialist writers and surrealist painter and sculptor Alberto Giacometti. Numerous contemporary filmmakers, such as Wim Wenders, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang and Wong Kar-wai, cite him as a major influence.

Antonioni's better movies, particularly those made during the 1960s, are skilful and established new conventions for dramatic cinema. While they can be visually striking and often emotionally engaging, they are also infused with a deep sense of pessimism.

Like much of his work, Antonioni is an elusive and especially contradictory figure. In a 1962 interview, he declared that it was the duty of filmmakers to "reflect the times in which they lived...to capture their effect upon us, and to be sincere and conscientious." But this thoughtful definition of artistic responsibility, he always insisted, could only be achieved by entirely intuitive methods.

"An idea comes to me through an image, which I transfer to the screen," he once said. "[But] very often these images have no explanation, no *raison d'être* beyond themselves." It could be argued, however, that such a thoroughgoing reliance on the non-rational ultimately helped lead him to a creative dead-end.

Early films

Born in 1912 to a middle class family in Ferrara, northern Italy, Antonioni studied economics at the University of Bologna in the early 1930s. On graduating, he worked in a bank and in 1939 relocated to Rome where he wrote some reviews for *Cinema*, the official film journal of the ruling fascist party, before falling out with the organisation. He briefly attended Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, a leading film school, and in 1942 began working, first as a screenwriter on Roberto Rossellini's *Un Pilota Ritorna*, and then as a writer and assistant director on Enrico Fulchignoni's *I Due Foscari*. Later that year, he was employed as an assistant on Marcel Carné's *Les Visiteurs du Soir*, a joint Italian-French production.

Antonioni started his first film—the *Gente del Po*—a documentary about Po River fishermen in 1943, but it was disrupted by the war and not finally edited and screened until 1947. During this time, he directed several other black-and-white non-fiction films, among them *Nettezza Urbana*, about Rome's street cleaners, *L'Amorosa Menzogna*, a behind-the-scenes look at the lives of *fumetti* (Italian photographic comic book stars) and *Superstizione*, about bizarre superstitions in Italian villages.

These short but fascinating films were made when "neorealism" dominated Italian filmmaking—a genre characterised by its humanitarian outlook, the use of mainly non-professional actors, on-location shooting, and its dramatisation of the everyday lives and problems of ordinary people.

Prior to neo-realism, Italian movies were strictly controlled by Mussolini's regime with directors obliged to produce either "white telephone" glamour stories or empty tales about a

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"healthy" country and its "happy" citizens. But with the collapse of the fascist government in 1943, Luchino Visconti, Rossellini and other directors began to portray life as it really was in the war-ravaged country. In fact, Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*) was filmed even as German troops occupied the Italian capital in 1944.

But the neo-realist movement, which produced over 20 features, including two or three masterpieces from 1943 to 1952, was not without its problems. Its almost exclusive concentration on workers and the poor, in some cases portrayed as a politically passive class, and its refusal to explore other aspects of class society, were limiting factors.

Moreover, the emergence of Italian neo-realism did not occur in a political or ideological vacuum. Despite its undoubted artistic achievements, the trend always represented something of an adaptation to Stalinist (or national-populist) conceptions. Definite limits were placed on which social layers and problems could be examined, and on what could be said and the artistic forms employed. In the long run, serious artists were bound to chafe against these conditions.

The background to all this, of course, was the historical betrayal of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), directed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR, which oversaw the handing back of power to the Italian bourgeoisie following the collapse of the hated Mussolini regime.

To oppose neo-realism, in other words, was by no means inevitably a "right-wing" or retrograde act. The question was: from which direction was it to be opposed? With Antonioni, the answer is perhaps a little murky.

Although an early adherent of the movement, Antonioni soon began challenging its aesthetic boundaries. He became increasingly preoccupied with aspects of middle class life in post-war Italy. Suicide was a regular occurring theme.

His first feature, *Cronaca di un Amore* (*Story of a Love Affair* [1950]), for example, explores the class tensions within the marriage of a successful but suspicious factory owner and Paola, his working class and younger wife. When the husband hires a private detective to investigate Paola's early love life, he inadvertently brings her into contact with Guido, a former lover, and the resumption of an affair that had long since ended. Paola and Guido eventually decide to plot the factory owner's death.

Antonioni followed this relatively successful movie with *I Vinti* (1952), three stories about youth in post-war Paris, London and Rome; and *La Signora Senza Camelie* (*The Lady Without Camelias* [1953]), which attempts to explore the relationship between cinema, money and stardom.

His next film, *Le Amiche* (*The Girlfriends* [1955]), tells the story of four young girls from an Italian fashion house and their disappointing relationships with various men. Behind the glamour world they inhabit is a gnawing inner emptiness and spiritual poverty, themes to which Antonioni would return again and again. In this movie, he began to depart from a linear plot structure, substituting in its place a series of events and incidents.

Although not all these early films were entirely convincing, they had some merit because they aspired to a more complex view of social life, an approach at odds with that espoused by the neo-realists.

As Antonioni explained in a 1958 interview: "The neo-realism of the postwar period, when reality itself was so searing and immediate...created an appropriate cinema. Now, however, when, for better or worse, reality has been normalised once again, it seems to me more interesting to examine what remains in the characters from their past experiences."

But was the director's highly developed artistic intuition but generally ahistorical approach to these complex issues capable of transcending the limitations of neo-realist filmmaking?

According to a recent film writer, neo-realism was a great but "tragic episode" in cinema history. Its intellectual decline occurred when directors "realised" that the real cause of the poverty and social dislocation they were attempting to dramatise "was in the unchangeable form of human nature."

While this echoes the justifications advanced during the Cold War by sections of the intelligentsia, as they repudiated earlier associations with the working class and the socialist movement, the limits neo-realism placed upon itself rendered it unable to combat these reactionary assertions. Restricting artists to merely pointing out the injustices inflicted on the poor was, and is, an insufficiently large arena, and can become a means of evading other issues.

It is not clear whether Antonioni consciously embraced the various false claims about "human nature," but *Il Grido* (*The Cry* [1957]), about the psychological breakdown and suicide of a Po Valley sugar refinery worker, is a bleak work. In fact, the last of his early black-and-white films coincided with a mood sweeping sections of the Italian "left" and liberal intelligentsia, who were accommodating themselves to the post-war stabilisation and boom. Falsely equating Stalinist betrayal with socialism, these layers claimed that "human nature" made progressive social change all but impossible.

Antonioni lived through some of the most tumultuous upheavals in Italian life—two decades of fascist rule, WWII and the overthrow of Mussolini, the PCI's betrayal of the revolutionary upsurge of the working class, and the rise and decline of post-war Italian cinema. He seems, however, to have never subjected any of these strategic experiences to serious analysis and eschewed all public comment on political issues.

To be continued

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