Michelangelo Antonioni—a flawed legacy

Part 2

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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's posting is the second part of an assessment of Antonioni written in response to a retrospective of his works screened at the Sydney Film Festival in 2004. The first part was posted August 2. In the coming days, we will be posting a comment on Bergman's life and career.

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In 1960, Antonioni wrote and directed *L'Avventura* (*The Adventure*), the first of four films that concentrate on what the director described as "the internals of character and psychology." It is difficult to give a real sense of the film by simply recounting its storyline—Antonioni's great skill lay in his ability to create emotional depth by editing, camera movement and complex images. Most often it is not what his characters say and do, but their silences and lack of activity that matter most.

The film follows several days in the life of a group of rich Italians cruising the Aeolian Islands, off the coast of Sicily. Anna (Lea Massari), who has a troubled relationship with Sandro (Gabriele Ferzetti), disappears after going for a walk on one of the islands, and is never found again. Apart from Anna's friend Claudia (Monica Vitti) and Sandro, the other characters quickly lose interest in searching for her, leave the island and return to their rather purposeless lives.

As Sandro and Claudia continue looking in other parts of Sicily they fall in love. But Sandro is intellectually frustrated, self-centred and sexually promiscuous. Formerly a promising architect, he has decided to abandon this profession for a more lucrative job as a draftsman. His relationship with Claudia is complex and, like the film itself, has an intangible and melancholic character. The mystery of Anna's disappearance is never solved.

When *L'Avventura* first premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, there were audience walkouts and booing from those offended by its rejection of conventional cinematic techniques. But the next day a group of leading filmmakers issued a statement praising the movie and it was given another screening, a "special achievement" prize and quickly secured an international release.

L'Avventura is a complex and artful film. Antonioni demonstrated that movies could depart from a formal narrative structure or logical ending and that atmosphere and emotional depth could be created with extended silences or "dead time," carefully choreographed cinematography and other visual techniques.

Explaining "dead time," he said: "The rhythm of life is not made up of one steady beat; it is, instead a rhythm that is sometimes fast, sometimes slow; it remains motionless for a while, then at the next moment it starts spinning around. There are times when it appears almost static, there are other times when it moves with tremendous speed, and I believe all this should go into the making of a film."

Most importantly, the film attempted to explore the spiritual emptiness of its bourgeois characters and thus hint at broader social dissatisfaction.

"We live today in a period of extreme instability, as much political, moral, and social as physical. I have made a film on the instability of the emotions, on their mysteries," Antonioni declared in a statement to the Cannes festival. Scientific advances, he continued, had not produced a development in mankind's "inner spirit" and sex had now become a substitute for self-fulfilment. Although each relationship was an "adventure" it provided no genuine fulfilment.

As he later explained: "Sandro is a character from a film shot in 1960 and is therefore entirely immersed in such moral problems. He is an Italian, a Catholic, and so he is a victim of this morality ... All the characters in my films are fighting these problems, needing freedom, trying to find a way to cut themselves loose, but failing to rid themselves of conscience, a sense of sin, the whole bag of tricks."

Antonioni's next three films—*La Notte* (The Night [1961]), *L'Eclisse* (The Eclipse [1962]) and *Il Deserto Rosso* (Red Desert [1964])—attempt to explore some of these issues. His recognition of the psychological and moral concerns of middle class protagonists is sensitive and evocative, but the underlying subtext is that there is no way out of their dilemmas.

La Notte portrays 24 hours in the life of a writer Giovanni (Marcello Mastroianni) and his wife Lydia (Jeanne Moreau), who have all the accoutrements of a sophisticated existence, but whose marriage is disintegrating. The film follows the couple as they visit a dying friend in hospital, wander through Milan, go to a jazz strip club and then attend an all night party held by a wealthy industrialist, where they half-heartedly resist the temptations of infidelity.

Like Sandro in *L'Avventura*, Giovanni has arrived at an artistic and personal impasse. At the party he is offered a lucrative salary and a company directorship to write the life story of the industrialist. As dawn breaks, Giovanni and Lydia walk in the gardens of the industrialist's mansion. Lydia reads aloud a love letter written to her years before, but Giovanni is so distant that he doesn't even remember that he was the author. The film ends with the couple making love on the grass—an act of self-pity more than anything else.

L'Eclisse is set in Rome and is about a young woman in the process of leaving her lover and beginning a new relationship with a young stockbroker. The film has some thoughtful moments—telephones ring but are not answered and characters are constantly separated by windows, doors and various other physical barriers. Scenes at the Rome stock exchange give a palpable sense of the ruthlessness of the market and the psychological impact on its players. *L'Eclisse* concludes with an extraordinary sequence at a spot where the two lovers have agreed to meet. They fail to show up and the film ends with an eerie seven-minute visual essay of the location.

Much of *Il Deserto Rosso*, Antonioni's first colour feature, occurs at an industrial plant in northern Italy. Spectacular industrial sights and sounds dominate the film, its alienated characters trapped in a strangely dehumanised world. The film begins with Giuliana (Monica Vitti) wandering aimlessly with her son Valerio outside the heavily polluting factory. She has suffered a nervous breakdown after a car accident but her

husband, Ugo (Carlo Chionetti), is preoccupied with his job and takes little interest in her. A visiting engineer, Corrado Zeller (Richard Harris), who is attempting to recruit workers for a business project in Patagonia, is attracted to Giuliana.

While Ugo is away on a business trip, Valerio apparently becomes paralysed and then inexplicably cured. Giuliana, who is becoming more and more distraught, is drawn towards Corrado and makes love with him. While this brief relationship is emotionally barren, Giuliana somehow begins to recover her psychological stability.

The film ends where it began, with Giuliana and Valerio outside the factories. When Valerio asks what happens to the birds who fly through the yellow smoke emitted by the complex, Giuliana tells him that they survive by flying around the poisonous fumes. These final comments attempt to demonstrate that Giuliana has somehow found a way to adapt to the social environment in which she is trapped.

Creative decline

Although the trilogy (*L'Avventura*, *La Notte*, *L'Eclisse*) and *Il Deserto Roso* expanded the international audience for Italian movies, Antonioni's movies increasingly tended to luxuriate in the dilemma of their protagonists. The now celebrated director was constantly experimenting with different forms but he refused to probe the deeper roots of the middle class malaise he was dramatising. And rather than examine the underlying social reality that produced his characters' disquiet, he often mystified it.

As his introduction to *Four Screenplays of Michelangelo Antonioni* in 1963 declared: "We are surrounded by a reality which is not defined or corporeal. Inside of us things appear like dots of light on a background of fog and shadow. Our concrete reality has a ghostly, abstract reality."

Blowup—the first of Antonioni's English-language movies and his most commercially successful work—indicated that the director was stagnating artistically. Set in London during the mid-60s, it takes the form of a murder-mystery and follows a few days in the life of Thomas (David Hemmings), a successful but dissatisfied fashion photographer, searching for some inner meaning to his life.

One day he photographs two lovers embracing in a park. The woman, Jane (Vanessa Redgrave), demands he hand over the film, which he refuses. At the same time Jane's lover, an older man, suddenly disappears. Thomas returns to his studio to develop the photographs, but Jane tracks him down and tries to seduce him in order to retrieve the negatives. He pretends to give her the film and she leaves.

One of the photos appears to show a body on the ground and someone in nearby bushes firing a gun. Has a murder been committed? Enlargements of the negative only seem to add to the mystery. He returns to the park and finds Jane's lover dead on the ground.

Thomas leaves, informs his disinterested friends and returns to his studio only to discover that it has been ransacked and the negatives and most of the pictures stolen. He revisits the park the next morning but the body is gone. The film concludes with Thomas playing an imaginary game of tennis with a mime group in the park and, as the camera pulls back to an aerial shot, he slowly blends in with the lawn.

Blowup has a few interesting moments—the dark room sequences have a certain tension, and the social atmosphere of mid-1960s London is well captured. But its underlying and rather obvious message—that reality and truth are relative—is a retreat from the more serious psychological explorations of his early work.

Antonioni's next film, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), despite recent attempts to rehabilitate its reputation, is an artistic failure. Set in late 1960s America, the movie returns to more conventional narrative forms but is unconvincing and confused.

The film's two main characters are Mark, involved in radical student politics and accused of shooting a policeman during a protest, and Daria, the young secretary of a Los Angeles property developer. Mark hijacks a small plane and links up with Daria, who is traveling to a planned real estate development in the desert. The two travel together, smoke marijuana, and make love at Zabriskie Point, a desert tourist attraction. As they begin making love, the film merges into an orgy fantasy involving dozens of young people.

Mark eventually decides to return the plane but is gunned down by police. When Daria hears about his death she imagines a massive explosion destroying the developer's desert property. The final scene consists of slow-motion exploding homes and consumer items against the sound of Pink Floyd's rock anthem, "Careful with that axe Eugene."

Professione: Reporter (The Passenger [1975]), staring Jack Nicholson as world-weary journalist David Locke in North Africa, although a slight improvement, ends with another visually complex Antonioni ending—a seven-minute single take in which Locke is killed. Form and technique was now almost entirely dominating the filmmaker's work and had become his way of avoiding any genuinely creative exploration of his subject matter.

This was even more apparent in *Il Mistero di Oberwald* (The Oberwald Mystery [1980]), a turn-of-the-century period piece starring Monica Vitti. Antonioni shot the movie on video and then transferred it to film for theatrical release. During the shoot he manipulated the video cameras to give the actors colour "auras," according to their character's moods. None of this improved the story or increased its dramatic impact.

In 1982 Antonioni attempted to recreate some of the emotional atmosphere of his earlier work with *Identification of a Woman*. The visually lush movie, about a director searching for the "perfect actress," has little to recommend it.

Badly affected by a stroke in 1985 that left him paralysed and unable to speak, Antonioni, with the assistance of German director Wim Wenders, returned to similar themes in *Beyond the Clouds* (1995). The rather pointless movie consists of four separate stories about sexual encounters between strangers; one of the characters is a film director (John Malkovich), also preparing for his next movie. It has a short "clever" segment starring Marcello Mastroianni and Jeanne Moreau as an old couple, as if their marriage in *La Notte* had survived the years.

Thousands of words have been published dissecting Antonioni's work over the years—the director elevated to cult-figure status during the confused and culturally barren environment of the 1990s—but most of the often-lengthy observations are confused and self-serving.

British film critics Ian Cameron and Robin Wood provide one of the better commentaries in *Antonioni*, a series of essays published in 1968. The authors admire the director's artistic skills but perceptively point to one of the underlying weaknesses in his work—Antonioni's "defeatist" approach.

According to Wood, Antonioni's concentration on style became a means of avoiding more complex aesthetic and social questions. Wood argues that one of the functions of art is to make its recipients "in some sense more *alive*—not necessarily happy ... but alert, responsive, active. The whole movement of [the films] seems to work in the opposite direction, so that they become a sort of depressive aesthetic drug."

The artistry in Antonioni's movies, he continues, "makes them the ideal medium for the self-indulgence of disillusioned intellectuals. Even their desolation is strangely comforting, because it is so little disturbed by any activeness of protest, and so beautifully expressed. There are many ways of seeking refuge from the complexities, confusions and anxieties of a profoundly disturbing age; Antonioni's retreat into a fundamentally complacent despair is a particularly subtle and insidious one, because it gives the impression all the time of uncompromisingly confronting them."

This analysis, and the recognition that powerful creative work can only be maintained by fearlessly challenging the existing social order, is valuable advice for any filmmaker and artist today.

Antonioni's creative skills, particularly his ability, in his early films, to visually demonstrate the inner, emotional complexities of modern life, and to make some sort of protest against it, constitute a contribution to cinematic art. This vital element, however, became increasingly faint during the late 1960s and then appears to have died out altogether over the last two and a half decades.

The artistic decline of an undoubtedly talented figure is a complex process and, in Antonioni's case, obviously connected to the difficult intellectual climate in which he worked. It is also, however, bound up with his own decision, conscious or otherwise, to accommodate himself to the political and social status quo.

Concluded