SPACE AS VISUAL CONTEXT IN MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI'S *L'AVVENTURA* AND *LA NOTTE*

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With the exception of his two most recent films, Antonioni situates his characters in places which yield an absolute minimum of incidental contextual richness. In comparison with the ambiguous fascination and loathing felt by Godard for Paris or Fellini for Rome, Antonioni's barren islands, characterless houses and nameless streets offer an expedient and impassive setting, against which the central characters are compelled to seek definition since they cannot blend into a friendly landscape or seek anonymity of a crowd. The purpose of this paper then, is to show how Antonioni uses space, that is, visual context in *L'Avventura* and *La Notte.*

When Godard and Raoul Coutard pose characters starkly against white walls usually there are posters, prints and various optical displays not only to provide the characters with a visual framework which is at least partly defined, but to permit the characters a certain freedom of choice — they may hold back and refuse to define themselves, a procedure which Antonioni's blank settings make impossible. To take an obvious example, the Picasso portrait of a woman which is seen in *Breathless* and *Pierrot Le Fou* may help us to define a combination of romantically induced destructiveness and fragmented beauty present in the figures of Patricia and Marianne, especially when these two women are posed side by side with the portrait. In fact, though, these women remain inscrutable to the end, and the qualities inferred from their juxtaposition with the portrait emulate the false attributions about these women made by Michel and Ferdinand. Obviously a Renoir portrait would have impelled the audience,

even had the character said and done the same things, to make different assessments.

Partly, then, Godard's visual field is less harmoniously composed than Antonioni's, so that objects thrust themselves rather importunately forward. When Antonioni does permit the viewer's attention to violate the unified field of the shot, the details themselves are likely to be more confusing than complex — not only the indecipherable sign on the skyline above the fateful part in *Blow-Up* but the very movement of the trees swayed by the wind present themselves as enigmas, ultimately inviolate to the synthesizing movements of the imagination, no matter how fraught with significance. Yet most people find Godard much more confusing (some critics charge hin with willful obscurantism even before the extreme turn taken by his career after 1968),[1] perhaps because Antonioni's surfaces remain so refined and languid.

The world's passivity in the face of human drama forces Antonioni's characters to perform without sheltering visual context, and outside the sustaining comfort of dramatic continuity; those who undertake searches in this blank world for the meanings of past events, or who act with an eye to the future, find disappointment. The restrained, expedient visual style encloses the characters in the individual moment, like bees in amber. Even self-discovery has no momentum and goes nowhere.

Necessarily, then, the character-artist is deflected from his proper function, and exists without past or future—cut off, that is, from trandition and without the hope of reconstitution. In *L'Avventura* the character's long-passed moment of self-betrayal is shown refracted in the present through a series of carefully interlaced gestures, which illustrate Antonioni's narrative style operating with maximum compassion and

[1] Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1980). Louis D. Giannetti, *Godard and Others: Essays on Film Forum* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1975). Royal S. Brown, *Focus on Godard* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972). Robin Wood, "Godard and *Weekind*", in *Weekend, Wind From the East*, (London: Lorrimer Publishing, 1972)), pp. 5-14. James Roy Macbean, "*Wind From the East* of Godard and Rocha at the Crossroads", in *Weekend, Wind From the East* (London: Lorrimer Publishing, 1972), pp. 109-119.

restraint. In the course of their joint search, whose object technically is the lost Anna, Sandro and Claudia arrive at Noto. Earlier in the day they had driven through a newly constructed workers' town now totally abandoned; the love-making which immediately follows, seems, like the multiplying couple in the desert of *Zabriskie Point*, to infuse a barren region with life. At Noto they put up at a hotel on the main square whose central feature is a church with an ornate baroque facade.

At the moment of their ascending a church roof to overlook the entire square, we are given what amounts to the only example of flashback memory in a film which insistently denies the possibility of recalling in any meaningful way people and thoughts which have departed. The film's denial of Anna's presence, as a substantial theme (she may, of course, serve Sandro as a pretext) or even as a character with the right to a separate, un-doubled existence, means that we are denied access to the past. In searching for clues of motive, the viewer sees Anna's father when brought to the island toward the close of the futile search. He is presented with two books of Anna's —a bible and a copy of Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*— and from these contradictory and ultimately mute objects the solemnly attempts to infer the state of his daughter's soul.

Overlooking the square in Noto, Sandro stands precisely at the moment when he thinks that he might undertake a change connecting past and future through the agency of the present: the illusory promises of romantic stability and the architectural heritage arranged about him are united in his love for Claudia. He thinks of a new beginning and proposes marriage, and when bells answer Claudia's gesture of pulling on a rope, Antonioni would seem to be utilizing a rather didactic aural effect. The bells, however, untie Sandro's new love and his reawakened ambition. It is a climactic and joyous moment in a film which carefully avoids narrative climaxes.

In the sequence which immediately follows, Claudia is still ecstatic, but Sandro's enthusiasm has waned. He leaves the hotel room, goes into the piazza, only to find that the building which he believes to be the church (there is some question as to whether it is a museum) is locked. At this point

he stops at the drawing being executed by a young architecture student, swings a key-chain at the bottle of india ink, and ruins the sketch. The scene is done lightly, and the entire sequence, from Sandro's emergence into the piazza to his return to the hotel takes less than three minutes. Its importance derives in large measure from its uniqueness: only here is Sandro seen through eyes other than Claudia's and only here is there some indication of the overtly destructive currents existing beneath Sandro's rather placid exterior.

One of the procedures by which *L'Avventura* achieves thematic amplitude within its very refined limits of plot, character and setting is the process of doubling — muffled reverberations, equivocations of memory which seem almost tricks played on the mind. A pharmacist thinks he may have seen the missing Anna, smugglers possibly aided her escape from the island and are questioned at police headquarters, a converted palace; more explicitly, Claudia wears Anna's blouse on the last day of the island search, while the woman with whom Sandro sleeps at the Montalto's party closely resembles Anna.

Doubling debases the central characters even while it provides a needed thematic amplitude. Just as Claudia never fully escapes from the implication that she is merely a replacement for Anna, Sandro cannot avoid mockery from those whom he all too closely resembles. The gigolo Raimondo and the young "artist" Goffredo are disturbing to the degree that they appear extensions of Sandro's confused amalgam of sexual acquiescence and professional corruption.

Beyond this, certain crucial events are unostentatiously reduplicated, but with a darkening of tone as the story proceeds. At the beginning of the film Claudia waits resignedly while Anna and Sandro make love, her dramatic inclusion and physical exclusion from the action in the bed are indicated by a shot through the entrance-hall of Sandro's apartment, showing her in the court-yard. Almost at the close of the film she will be similarly poised, as she discovers Sandro making love at the Montalto's party. This time Antonioni shifts the point of view, showing the couple on the couch through a medium shot over Claudia's shoulder — in effect,

this second act is more intimate and dangerous. Claudia's vulnerability is declared in the subsequent close-up, against a white wall which provides no shelter.

The isolation chosen by Sandro is not comparable to the traditional pose of the romantic artist inherited from the nineteenth century (he is, in fact, constantly surrounded by the society he seeks) but a compartmentalization of the artistic self enacted through the divisions apparent between the individual and society, between two selves (oneself and one's lover, oneself and one's double), between the mechanical procedures of mere being and the deepest energies of the creative spirit — and the pictorial embodiment of these divisions provides Antonioni with some of his strongest shots and *plans-séquences*

Examples are plentifully available in *La Notte,* where the opening track down the cold facade of the Pirelli building draws the viewer into the dehumanized procedures for accommodating pain and death in a modern hospital. The dying man is drugged, and enclosed by glass in his sterile room while struggling to keep touch with the cultural life going on outside the walls. The world's structures impose unnatural divisions throughout the film: not only the glass walls of the industrialist's home and the windows of a car shut to block out the incessant noise of traffic, but in the sterile, massive outline of the impersonal buildings which conspicuously signify wealth and modern achievement. The estimates made by Sandro, now, have taken concrete shape.

Gherardini's house stands part-way between the dead blankness of modernism and the traditionally humane, book-lined study; within Giovanni Pontano can apparently no longer write his novels. Books and paintings are mixed indiscriminately with racehorses and swimming pools. Perhaps it might be said that are here exchanges its potential freedom for the privileged identity of a collected commodity — Gherardini's project to increase "communication between the management and workers" is in fact "a brochure on the history of may company ... about me, who founded it..."[2]

[2] Michelangelo Antonioni, "La Note" in *Screemplays* (New York: The Orion Press, Inc., 1963), p. 254.

Earlier Gherardini's assumption of equality with Giovanni ("I always looked after my businesses like works of art") had made the novelist wince.[3] But his own self-doubt, though heartfelt and made valid by what has gone before, comes perilously close to uncritical self-pity and the social flattering of a prospective patron — Giovanni to Gherardini:

> I don't consider myself that important; perhaps there are other ways out. How often the writer of today wonders whether writing isn't an irrepressible yet antiquated instinct. The work is so lonely, the work of a craftsman putting down one word after another painstakingly, a job which you can't possibly find a way to mechanize...
> But you industrialists have the advantage of building your stories with real people, real houses, real cities. The rythm of life itself is in your hands. The future is in your hands.[4]

The reflexive, unthinking judgements about his art are correlative with much of what has gone before —boredom with a successful reception for his new novel, compliance with a sexually disturbed woman in the corridor of the hospital, disregard of his wife's naked body— so that his assessment of art is bland and unpersuasive.

Giovanni's subsequent fascination with the industrialist's daughter becomes an exploration in the mirror of his own future as "one of our executives ... sharing in the life of our company."[5] When Giovanni first sees her, she is behind glass, playing a trivial game which soon becomes the subject of intense interest with the people at the party. For private diversion, as it turns out, she writes novels by dictating into a machine (so that she seems to provide a bridge between art and the mechanized world) but then erases her words. When she plays a tape for Giovanni the words seen a trifle precious, as poems or stories tend to seem when read aloud for effect, but even the undifferentiated feelings of Valentina's personal crisis are more potently expressive than Giovanni's protracted disaffection. Even so, the words will be erased almost immediately; and she will undoubtedly come to forget the feelings which inspired them, just as Giovanni has forgotten both emotion and language whose remnant is the letter read aloud to him at the end of the film by his wife.

[3]Antonioni, p. 245.
[4]Antonioni, p. 246.
[5]Antonioni, p. 254-255.

Valentina, in effect, is *La Notte's* incarnation of Antonioni's "sensitive" woman, enclosed in a world which has no placed for her aimless sensitivity. Like the dying Tommaso she can only urge Giovanni and Lidia in turn to transcend their private crises. The effect exhausts her, and she is left silhouetted in a doorway by the dawn light— even the freest character in *La Notte,* the one who sees most clearly into her situation, is firmly locked within certain clearly defined limits.

Physical and spiritual enclosure affect every character in the film. For the artist, of course, solitude need not mean isolation from the sources of his work. Bu the crucial scene in the novelist's study —the only time Giovanni is physically alone in the film— succinctly registers a disgust for the intellectual performances contained in the books on the wall. The late afternoon light is subdued, and Mastroianni exudes a weariness of world and spirit reaching almost to the borders of exhaustion. Everything bears witness to the denial of life, and an acceptance of loss.

The final scene only consolidates the essential themes of enclosure and isolation. Still inside the industrialist's grounds (the golf course is nature disguised from herself) Giovanni and Lidia are unwilling to relinquish the idea of a past which in fact can never be recovered, and can only be alluded to in intimate words now grown alien. It is Giovanni who insists upon the desperate love-making, so tha the act becomes an attempt to regain feeling which inspired both their love and his powers of intimate description. He reaches out simultaneously for his lost art and for the woman he once loved.

The artist's vocation, in these two films, struggles vainly to disengage itself from sterile modernism. The struggle is of brief duration, since the artist has denied himself any vital contact with his function. We see a brief emergence of vision and creative energy —overlooking a square filled with monuments to the imagination, with a girl at a party— but they are soon absorbed by the enclosed anonymity of the present

moment. Art has no future, and the past is accessible only through the facades of buildings which cannot be entered and books which one cannot write or read.

Antonioni's own artistry often echoes the dislocation of his artist-heroes. Plots will suddenly dislocate themselves (Anna's disappearance in *L'Avventura,* the unkept rendezvous at the end of *Eclipse)* as if the film's world cannot sustain the expectation of order. Tonality of composition may shift markedly for a single sequence (as in the blank, stage-like surface against which the girl in the hospital is impaled in *La Notte)* and point of view can perversely be used as a means of excluding the audience from the transactions of the characters, so tha one is denied even the minimal comfort of their continuing presence (as when Lidia is driven away from Gherardini's party, and her refusal of Robert is seen in a blur through the window of a car). Occasionally these dislocations adumbrate a film's themes, so that Antonioni paints nature's colors in *Red Desert* and *Blow-Up* to force the landscape into yielding particular, artificial meanings, as super-natural as black and white. Or Giovanni's frist encounter with Valentina comes to mind: one of them seems to be reflected in glass, the other to be real — and not until the camera tracks horizontally are one's initial assumptions shown to be mistaken. This ontological game-playing, like the doubling in *L'Avventura,* enhances the connections between the two characters and economically speaks to their mutual confusion.

Despite these and other formal dislocations in the use of visual context in *L'Avventura* and *La Notte,* Antonioni may on the whole be seen as an aesthetically conservative film-maker, who would concern himself with "fuller" plots, more copious invention if he could.