Antonioni

OR, THE SURFACE OF THE WORLD

Seymour Chatman

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The mere exposure to the visible surface of the world will not arouse ideas unless the spectacle is approached with ideas ready to be stirred up.

—Rudolf Arnheim

Images are mute, yet presently the silent cinema begins to talk, and I recognize its language.

—Vladimir Nabokov (in his last interview)

A movie has meaning in the same way that a thing does: neither of them speaks to an isolated understanding; rather, both appeal to our power tacitly to decipher the world of men and to coexist with them. It is true that in our ordinary lives we lose sight of this aesthetic value of the tiniest perceived thing. It is also true that the perceived form is never perfect in real life, that it always has blurs, smudges, and superfluous matter, as it were. Cinematographic drama is, so to speak, finer-grained than real-life dramas: it takes place in a world that is more exact than the real world. But in the last analysis, perception permits us to understand the meaning of the cinema. A movie is not thought; it is perceived.

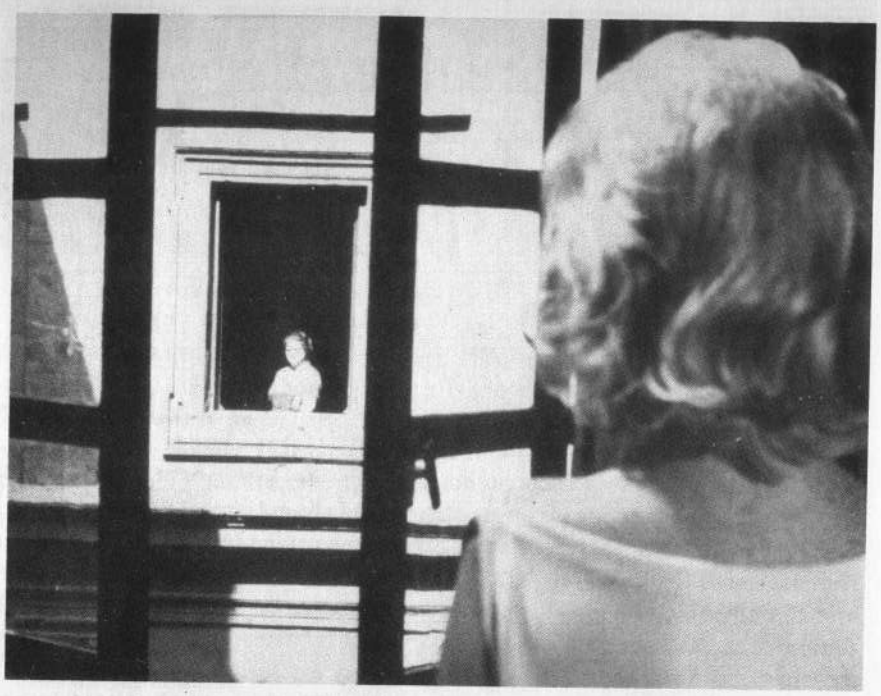
—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Not to speak does not mean that one has nothing to say. Those who do not speak may be brimming over with emotions, which can be expressed only in forms and pictures, in gesture and play of feature. The man of visual culture uses these not as substitutes for words, as a deaf-mute uses his fingers. He does not think in words, the syllables of which he sketches in the air like the dots and dashes of the Morse code. The gestures of visual man are not intended to convey concepts, which can be expressed in words, but such inner experiences, such nonrational emotions as would still remain unexpressed when everything that can be told has been told.

—Béla Balázs

It was precisely by photographing and enlarging the surface of the things around me that I sought to discover what was behind those things.

—Michelangelo Antonioni



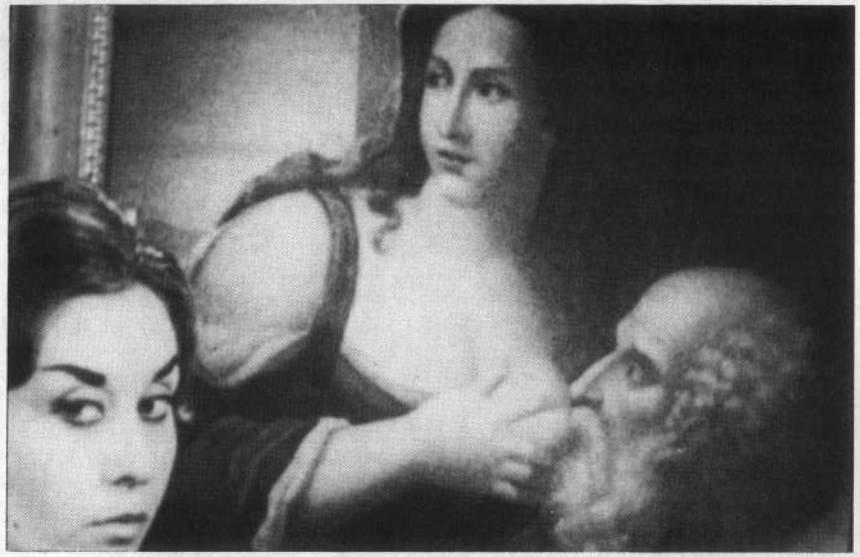
Frame 61

ately as though swallowed by the shadows. Vittoria turns back toward the chest. Piero is standing next to the door leading into the living room.

Why did I change it? Why, because when the scene was composed we had no idea what Piero's house would have been like, so that the screenplay was of value to me only as a psychological note. And even then, only to a certain point.[2]

The objects found in the actual house not only suggested details of plot and character but caused existing details to be rewritten. Such uncommented visuals attentuate the meaning. The text is opened: the other window offers a glimpse of another life, one rendered mysterious by not being explained. Who is this woman suddenly "swallowed by the shadows"? Is she there to illustrate the kind of traditional, restricted, housebound role to which Vittoria would never agree? We can imagine (though we cannot see) Vittoria shudder as she meditates the fate of the middle-class matron. But it is impossible to know her feelings for sure. We are not supposed to. The contingency of incidental objects photographed with loving care opens a world that we must contemplate, not categorize.[3]

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 that depiction of a patriarch taking refreshment at a lady's breast is ironically mediated by the



Frame 62

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.

The *objet trouvé* undeniably guarantees the "thereness" of the real world, not because it is verisimilar but because it really *was* there. Antonioni did not invent anything: he merely uncovered it. One consequence of this new kind of realism is that the universe is demonstrated to be basically meaningless. For if this bit of the world is no less and no more worth photographing than any other, questions of moralistic or psychological commentary cannot arise. "There it is" is all the film is willing to say, "the neutral surface—make of it what you will." The semantic burden is shifted to the viewer's shoulders: that is Antonioni's gift to the cinema.

THE AMBIVALENCES OF ARCHITECTURE

What Antonioni finds in the environment is immensely rich and esthetically coherent. It is obvious that Antonioni is a long-time student of architecture, and all his films show a keen interest in buildings and public and private spaces. Already in *Gente del Po* there is loving treatment of the fishermen's houses along the river. A documentary that never got made was to have centered on a specific architectural component. Called *Scale* (Steps) and published in 1950,[4] the film would have

been a collection of brief incidents occurring on a variety of stairways. Like *Dubliners* or the Wandering Rocks section of *Ulysses,* these incidents would have been epiphanic vignettes of Italian life, everything from youthful professions of love, the chatter of postman and housewives, and the disappointment of an unemployed man who sees a No Help Wanted sign at the top of a steep flight of stairs to a mason carrying a heavy load of cement up a ladder, a crowd with political placards running up a wide expanse of official-looking steps, and an inmate being dragged up the steps of a lunatic asylum by orderlies.

In the early fiction films, architecture was still a traditional feature of verisimilar background. By the time of the tetralogy, it had begun to play a more prominent and innovative role. In his 1965 interview with Godard, Antonioni said, "Whereas in earlier films I was interested in relationships between individuals, I am now concerned with the individual in relation to his surroundings (though not with this alone), which means that I have a very different approach to the story."[5] Indeed, the story becomes secondary, a consequence, not a cause, of his new interest in the environment. The represented environment may evoke some theme or merely convey a sense of how it feels to be alive and perceptive these days. The shots often express nothing more—and nothing less—than the seeable wonder of existence.

It is hard to imagine a movie in which buildings do not appear. We tend to ignore them in most films as mere background. But in the tetralogy we come to *read* buildings as architects, urban planners, and designers do. And though the characters do not lose their individual importance, they also function, especially in certain long shots, like mannequins in architectural models.

L'avventura is full of architectural commentary. The contrast between the beautiful and solid old buildings and the shoddy new condominiums is conveyed in the opening scene between Anna and her father. And the disaster of Fascist architecture and planning is documented by the deserted village, a Cassa del Mezzogiorno town near Caltanisetta, Sicily.[6] The street scene in the deserted village (see Frame 46, p. 77) evokes De Chirico's so-called metaphysical period, except that the paintings suggest that the town was once occupied, that the people have gone away and may even return.[7] In *L'avventura,* however, the town looks as if it has never been lived in, as if some intuition warned the Sicilians to have nothing to do with it.

But the true architectural films are *La notte* and *L'eclisse.* For the first time, Antonioni virtually reverses priorities. For moments on end, it is the cityscape that is the true protagonist, and audiences used to empathizing or identifying with a human character must find their expectations strangely undermined. One learns a more appropriate stance, that of fellow observer of an environment that is subtly inimical. I underline *subtly,* since what Antonioni shows is not cataclysmic or even sordid. It is just mediocre, badly done, ill conceived. But that makes it no less ominous.[8]

The city planning and architecture of Milan in *La notte* or of Rome in *L'eclisse* did not cause Lidia's and Vittoria's problems. But personal problems and bad

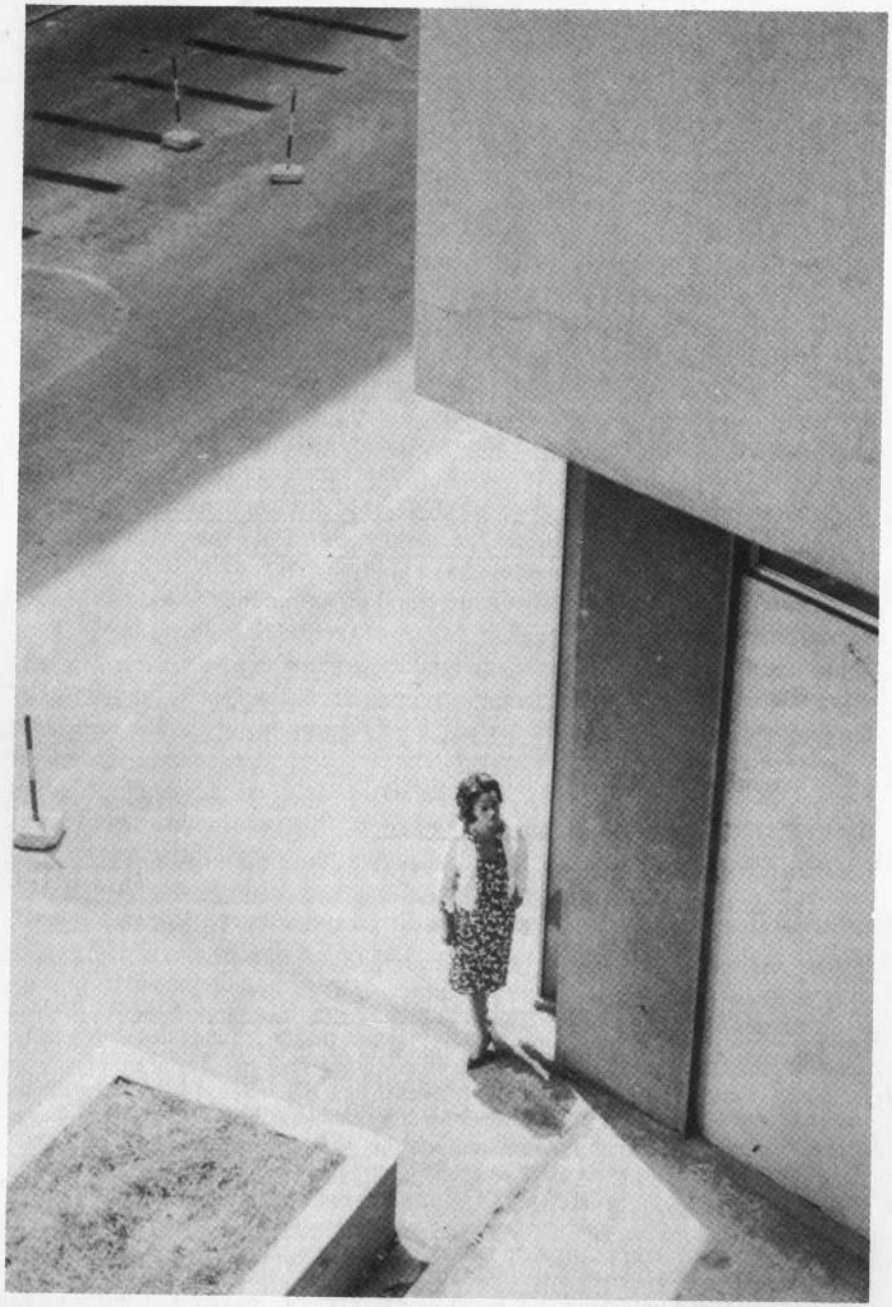
Frame 63

buildings and misused public space are all parts of a vaster network of problems facing Western man. Bad architecture is simply one visible, concrete manifestation of the *malattia dei sentimenti.*

La notte is the most intensely architectural of Antonioni's films. As the film opens, the camera descends the glass surface of the Pirelli Building in Milan, of all Italian cities perhaps the most anonymous and international. The movement down this space is at once lonely and perversely beautiful. The beauty is that of pure geometry and the smooth perfection of modern materials; the loneliness issues from the lack of human relevance. The absolute and meaninglessly straight lines of the building never reappear in the film, and they are never alluded to by the characters, but they dominate its atmosphere. Since nothing else in Milan is as high, the glass reflects only the city below, from whose business it appears completely divorced. Even the noise of traffic cannot rise high enough to disturb its impersonal and useless tranquility. As Rudolf Arnheim puts it, in a passage that could almost be put forth as a commentary on *La notte:*

> Evidently, emptiness is not simply related to the absence of matter. A space on which nothing is built can be pervaded nevertheless by perceptual forces and filled with density, which we might call a visual substance. Conversely the fenestrated wall of a high-rise building . . . may be experienced as empty even though the architect has put something there for us to look at. The effect of emptiness comes about when the surrounding shapes do not impose a structural organization upon the surface in question. The observer's glance finds itself in the same place wherever it tries to anchor, one place being like the next; it feels the lack of spatial coordinates, of a framework for determining distances. In consequence, the viewer experiences a sense of forlornness . . . A prime source for . . . perceptual disorientation is the recent fad of reflecting glass walls, which create a surrealistic contradiction between incompatible images. The wall is destroyed, and the reflection shows a space that is not there.[9]

The slowly descending camera dwells on the interminable monotony of geometric form. Parallel lines will always be parallel: that is their destiny. The shot af-

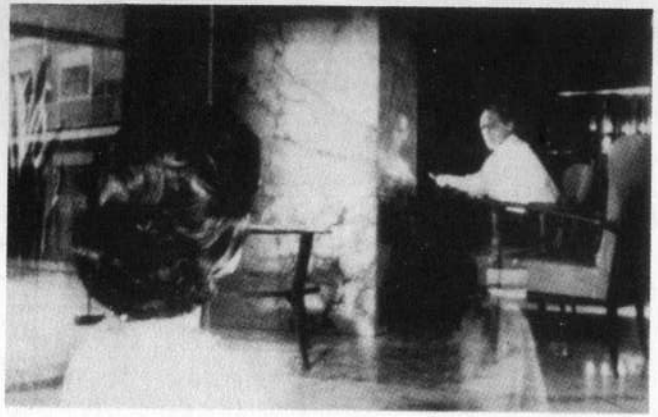


Frame 64

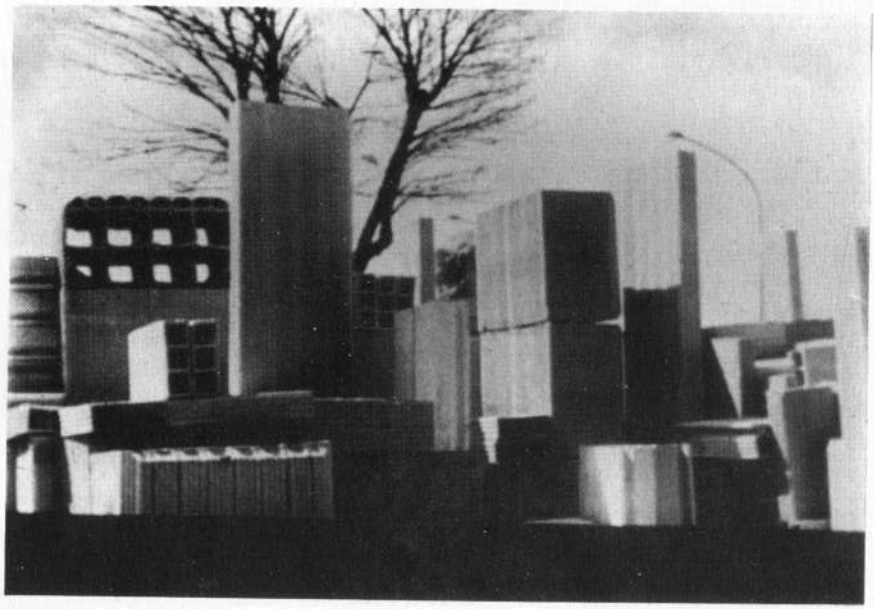
fords no Chirican perspectives, no shadows, no bugle calls echoing down long colonnades or deserted streets with pennants flapping in the breeze, no ambience of past empires; only the sterile bleakness of outer space, not Star Wars space with its comforting robots but empty lonely zero-degree space. The building, all surface, bears only the most abstract relation to the events of *La notte,* but it does that uncompromisingly.

Consider Frame 64, a production still. The scenario reads: "Lidia . . . reaches a spot where there is an open space between the tall, glass-covered buildings. The sun beats down on the narrow space. She looks at the patch of sky above the buildings as though longing to flee those oppressive walls." The composition of the frame is at once beautiful and oppressive—a paradox characteristic of Antonioni. The tiny human figure, sharply foreshortened by the camera's high angle, amounts to no more than an eighth of the picture. The figure is the center of convergent straight lines (echoed and emphasized by parallels and perpendiculars) that bound perfect oblongs in various tones of white and gray. The textures of these masses are also relatively homogeneous—all this makes Lidia at once the center of and yet, strangely, irrelevant to the composition. The human being is the purpose for which the buildings have been constructed, yet among them she is not only dwarfed but alien, unassimilable. Lidia poses and points her right foot outward like a model, but somehow she does not fit. She is the center, but of what? Do the lines radiate from her, as from a dynamic source? No, the lines target her, transfix her, nail her into place. The huge white block seems to hang there for no other purpose than to crush her. The building pays tribute to the tensile strength of modern materials. It is solid beyond its looks. But it is precisely the look of a building that gives us our sense of security. What good is technology if it only causes unease? The lines are bare and clean; there is no capital, no pediment; concrete sprouts from concrete; it is hard to tell where the building stops and the ground begins. The unwillingness of this building to mark its own limits dooms it to ambiguity. Concrete from concrete? Is there really earth underfoot? Or is the tiny plot of grass an ironic subterfuge? For all his theoretical functionalism, the architect seems to have forgotten whose functions were being accommodated. Nor has he remembered that people need privacy. There is a fine shot of Lidia unwittingly disturbing a man at work who is separated from the street only by glass.

Poor Tommaso has some respite from the architectural sterility of his hospital room. Through his window, he can see a comfortable old building with round arched windows in a vaguely Venetian style (see Frame 41 above). It is no accident that Lidia comes to stand in the window facing that building in her traditional print summer frock. It is the same Lidia who later is to experience nostalgia when she finds herself in the old neighborhood where she and Giovanni first lived together and who ends the film with her reminiscences of Tommaso's youthful love for her. The yoking together of Lidia with architectural tradition is one of the major motifs of the film.

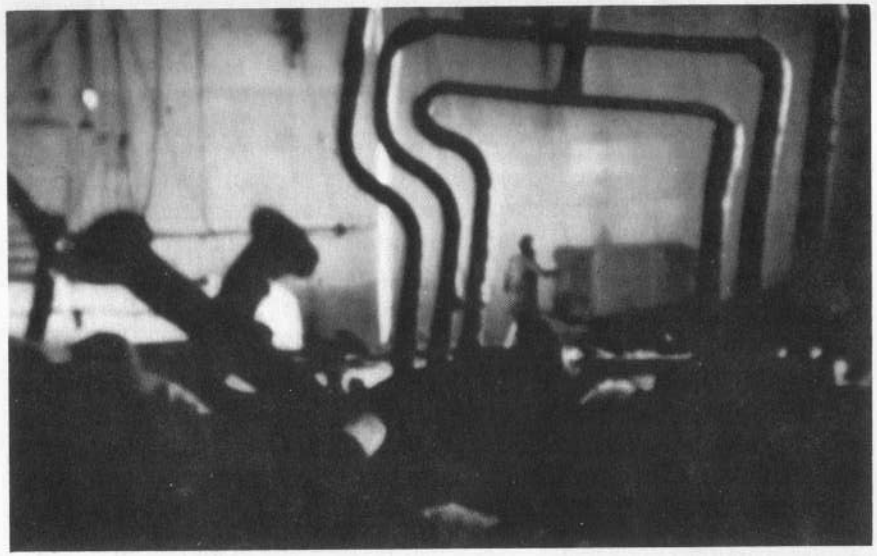


Frame 65



Frame 66

After *L'avventura* there is no comment, no word of architectural judgment, only images. Perhaps the most powerful is that of the mysterious unfinished building at the end of *L'eclisse.* Wrapped in straw it looks as if it had been packed for future use. Next to it, there is a pile of bricks waiting to be set in place. The bricks "remind one of a view of a large city, with skyscrapers and houses crowded



Frame 67

together one on top of the other."[10] The future is already with us, whether or not we are ready. Its advance is "implacable," in Antonioni's word. Hide our heads in the sand, fantasize like Giuliana about childhood retreats—beaches and azure lagoons—as much as we like, we always come back to the city, to science and industry, if we wish to stay in the world—that is, to stay sane.

By the time of *Il deserto rosso,* Antonioni's attitude seems to have changed. The images argue that if we look steadily at modern structures—pumps, valves, boilers, machines, silos—we can see that they have their own beauty, a beauty not anthropomorphic but nonetheless real and valuable. Giuliana is not an implicit critic of this architecture but a would-be refugee from it. Yet she manages only to escape into fantasy. Her other attempt, the little boutique on the via Alighieri, is plainly doomed to failure. The camera takes a wholly different perspective on the industrial structures. Its clear focus and sensitive composition and framing reveal hidden beauties of color and form. No longer does a character judge her surroundings, but the surroundings judge her ability to cope. Like Leger, Antonioni in *Il deserto rosso* tracks complex forms, clean lines, pure colors, fascinating volumes. Never mind that they carry noxious liquids and gas; pipes become beautiful when their pure colors and bold curves fit so beautifully into the frame. *Their* adjustment—whatever human beings achieve—is perfect. The match of form and function is pure, independently esthetic, essentially separate from, even at odds with narrative considerations. Even as we sympathize with Giuliana's inability to cope with this environment, we marvel at its boiling energy. We see, perhaps, a way in which one *could* live in such an environment.

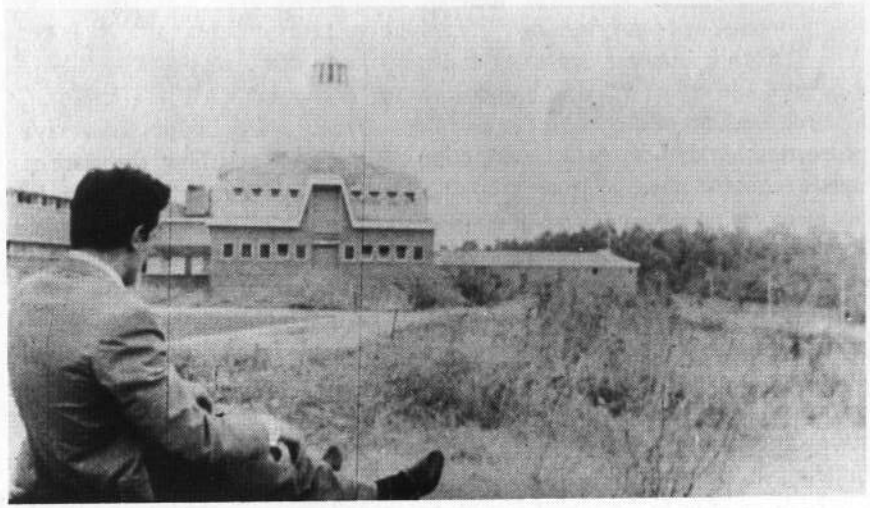
CITY PLANNING: Whatever Happened to the Piazza?

Bars to communication are formed not only by buildings or parts of buildings. The whole layout of a city can thwart communication and community. Consider the street corner rendezvous sequences of *L'eclisse.* A traditionalist novel or film would have had Vittoria and Piero meet in a romantic café. Why this anonymous street corner in EUR? The drab intersection is not mere scenery. It is the sign of a general predicament. It is not only a place where a representative couple fail to meet but a culprit for that failure. It exemplifies, both as instance and as reason, the general incapacity of the modern city to facilitate meeting.

How different is a motor intersection from a square or piazza, the traditional meeting place of lovers! The intersection evokes what is most transitory, casual, and ephemeral in our society: mere encounters, not genuine meetings, among jittery moderns like Piero, who live on the edge of things. The art of making appointments in congenial places is lost to the hurry-up generation, to their fast sports cars and their breezy approach to life. In earlier times, the standard architectural solution to the problem of intersecting streets was the square—the *piazza* (*place, Platz,* from Latin *platea,* a broad street), the *locus classicus* of community, where business during the day yields organically to socializing during the night. In Rome of all places one would expect that graceful alternative to the drab suburban street corner. In the old sections, even the most modest neighborhood boasts its piazza and fountain or at least a spigot.[11]

Frame 68

But in the EUR quarter, no such relief has been planned. A vital tradition has been forgotten in the general amnesia of modernism. The characters, Piero in particular, desperately need esthetic relief (though he probably thinks the only kind that he needs is sexual). His work is appallingly stressful, and he takes sleeping pills and flies off the handle at callers who do not identify themselves quickly enough over the telephone. Ironically, his workplace, the Borsa, fronts on one of the most beautiful squares in Rome, the Piazza di Pietra. But the place has become so crowded and befouled by traffic that socializing, though intensive, is a parody of the refreshing human contact that the great Roman architect intended.



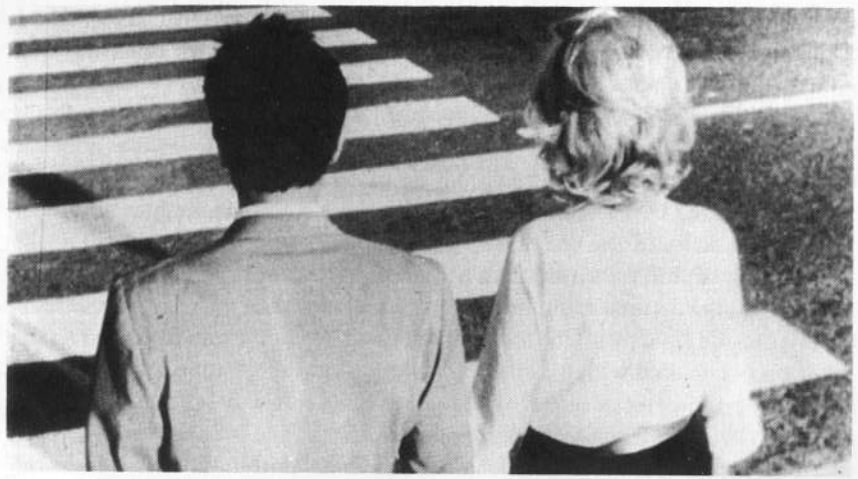
Frame 69

Frame 70

It was Antonioni's original intention to shoot Vittoria and Piero's rendezvous sequence in a tiny modern piazza in EUR.[12] But in the actual film, there is only the intersection marked by zebra pedestrian stripes. Piero says that he will kiss Vittoria when they get to the other side of the street. In the middle, Vittoria stops and says portentously, "*Siamo a metà*" ("We are halfway across"). Clearly, Antonioni's decision to change the site from a square (no matter how shabby) to a mere intersection reflects a feeling that the latter is even more forlorn. In the age of the sports car, people go through lovers like water through sand on a beach. The beginning of a relationship (the very word suggests preprogrammed triviality) is already the middle, and the end is clearly in sight. We do not need to be shown how things end. Like celestial bodies (as the title has it), modern lovers converge only for a few moments, since they are traveling at high speeds in different directions.

Why is this suburban corner so undistinguished and undistinguishable from the thousands like it? What surrounds it is so amorphous that it hardly constitutes a place. The hallowed European square, from Danzig to Lisbon, possesses visual properties that no mere traffic intersection can enjoy. For one thing, the space of a square is autonomous, sui generis. It is not simply the absence of something. It is not merely what remains after buildings are erected around it. It must be planned, and its very existence depends on the limits of impinging structures. They give it what Arnheim calls a "figure character."[13] But the intersection in *L'eclisse* has no such character. It is a void, not an intended place. The buildings that encompass it are without character. On one corner stands a low wall between nondescript houses and the street. On another there are a few randomly placed four-story apartments. On the third lies a low, vague stadium complex of some sort, impossible to read from street level. The fourth corner is dominated by the shapeless building under construction. Not only are these structures nondescript, but their spatial orientation to the crossing is too distant and weak to frame it properly. No, the intersection cannot be considered a humanly relevant place. It has no closure: "Straight-line boundaries do not close a square compellingly. They stop at the corners, but their straightness impels them to continue, not to terminate,"[14] especially when that straightness is at the service of cars. The pavement shared by the two streets was not designed for human feet. Lingering becomes a crime, an obstruction of traffic. Unlike the cobblestones of a piazza, the asphalt of an intersection is not a "floor" for the sky above. The intersection is only a mechanical product, the simplest, cheapest, least humane solution to the problem of automobile circulation. It reflects the needs of cars, not of people. Instead of strollers, they have become "pedestrians," mere pawns in the game of traffic chess. Vittoria and Piero's affair is in a sense already doomed simply by their meeting there. It is not a place for meeting and lingering but only for going separate ways.

Pedestrians crossing intersections are always at the periphery, never the center. Aliens to the place, they need special marks—a zebra-striped zone (*passaggio zebrato* in Italian)—set parallel to the curb like long hyphens to show them where it is safe to cross. These strange marks suggest that the pedestrian is an endangered species (remember the zebra skins in Marta's apartment and the photograph of zebras in *Il deserto rosso*). The streets are the natural habitat of the automobile; it is people who now have to be guided across them. So accustomed are we to the authority of cars that we concur without a murmur to such street painting. The stripes point with relentless and foolish dynamism. They keep us moving. If we take them at their own logic, we keep going around and around. Their sole concern is to get us off to other business—even if that business is itself endless and pointless.



Frame 71

The zebra-striped intersection is not a genuine place. Its invitation is mechanical, a mere formula. Like the mirror-clad skyscraper, it reflects, in utter redundancy, only its own function, that of crossing. It is a very agony of functionalism. Architectural function achieves significance only when it is matched with human significance. And that is precisely what is being called into question here. How meaningful can lives be that are as regulated as these? The stripes are the blazon of Piero's hectic life, dashing as he does to and fro, around and about, from client to broker, from woman to woman. Perhaps Vittoria does not allow him to kiss her when they reach the other side of the street because she recognizes all this.

I would not dwell on this intersection if Antonioni's camera had not made so much of it. His camera elevations, for example, are not innocent. When the history of the lovers' affair is being followed, the camera rolls along level with them, more or less conventionally immersed in the plot. But after the couple have vanished, the camera moves to a decidedly higher, more objective angle, the angle of scientific inquiry. With the loss of the protagonists, the intersection shifts from object to subject. The new text, which ends the film, is a nonfictional documentary; the intersection is its protagonist. The technique was adumbrated in the scene of the deserted Sicilian town in *L'avventura*. There, the couple left the town behind. Here, the suburb leaves the couple behind. If Antonioni's purpose had

been only to show the lovers' breakup, he could have shot Vittoria or Piero returning to the corner alone. The background would then have remained background, unremarkable if verisimilar. But by having both characters disappear, Antonioni insists on the banal intersection, makes us contemplate it with such dreary intensity that we sense, if not completely understand, the ferocious relation between the urban humdrum and the prospect of worldwide technological self-destruction. This intersection in the EUR becomes a harbinger of catastrophe. The banality of the streetlamp makes it an icon of that ultimate banality, push-button atomic war. Antonioni achieves this astonishing effect precisely by frustrating conventional demands for a denouement, transforming the tedium of the ongoing Ordinary into the terror of the End. *L'avventura* and *La notte* tease us into a preoccupation with the characters through a whole battery of modern concerns, especially erotic, and then refocus our attention on the look of things, especially from an architectural perspective. But in *L'eclisse* Antonioni goes much farther, beyond mere appearance. The overexposed streetlight and the overamplified music in the final shot are too much to bear. No other film has left its audience so rudely to ponder the question, Is that all? Is that all there is to this love affair? To our common destiny? To our civilization? To the earth itself?

NATURE AND CULTURE

L'avventura resembles *Il grido* more than the other three films of the tetralogy in favoring natural over urban settings. Most of its significant moments pass under the open sky. Precisely because man did not invent it, nature for Antonioni seems not a subject for man's criticism. Whether savage, as the crags of Lisca Bianca, or soft, as the flowery hills of Sicily, its beauty remains mysterious and neutral, untouched by human quandaries, imperturbably itself, filled with details that have no significance for plot yet that are somehow profoundly meaningful in their own way. In *L'avventura,* the sky—in contrast, say, to the sky above Monument Valley for John Ford—is never there for man, never portending his glories and conquests. It goes its own way: the storm off Lisca Bianca is only a storm—but what a storm! It is not symbolic of the "stormy" emotions of characters or theme.

Lisca Bianca is sufficiently mazy and wild to serve as a backdrop for Sandro's and Claudia's disoriented discovery of their mutual attraction. Antonioni also uses the rugged scenery for compositional purposes. The rocks become a rich source of textures, lines, and masses. For instance, in the sequence in which Sandro first recognizes his passion for Claudia, there are moments when only sky or water separates them and others when the obstacle between them is palpable rock. Antonioni used a curious double-spurred boulder to divide them, to emphasize Claudia's resistance to the idea that she might become Anna's double and replacement. It functions very much like door edges, window bars, and other vertical and oblique framing lines in the other films, effectively separating the couple in a carefully balanced yet provocative way. The boulder is too amorphous

to make a good symbol, but it clearly connotes the idea of doubleness (with its cognate duplicity). The rocks of Lisca Bianca not only form a maze, but the maze has no key. They provide a perfect backdrop for characters who are at sea, ethically and psychologically as well as physically. And only stark, flat lighting illuminates their confusion. The effect is completely different from that of the soft hill near Noto where they first make love.

There is little in the way of nature in *La notte,* and what there is—in the *periferia,* on the grounds of the tycoon's estate—bears the marks of man's failures. The final shot on the golf course introduces nature in an almost ironic way: unnerved by his sudden glimpse of the emptiness of his marriage, Giovanni forces himself on his wife in a sand trap (an artificial obstacle created by man to resemble nature, all for the purpose of making the game a bit more difficult).

In *L'eclisse,* nature generally appears as a refuge for the city-weary. But apparently only Vittoria has the serenity to enjoy it; for instance, after she leaves Riccardo, she walks jauntily through the unbuilt areas of the EUR swinging her sweater. We have already noted her happiness at the tranquil airport and her repeated association with the rustle of trees. In *Il deserto rosso,* Giuliana's need for a respite in nature is more desperate, but she is too tied to her neurosis to venture forth except in fantasy. It is interesting to note the textural difference between the beach scenery in the story she tells to her son and the surfaces of her life in Ravenna. Everything near her home is smooth, hard, and cold to the touch, a medley of modern materials—steel, glass, and plastic—whereas the sand and sandstone of the fantasy beach (like the canyons of *Zabriskie Point*) are warm and soft-looking, resembling nothing so much as the limbs and breasts of lovers embracing the sea.

THE FLAT "ABSTRACT" STYLE

During the period of the tetralogy, another new trend appeared in Antonioni's style. The word that sprang to critics' lips was *abstract.* The word must be properly defined. The films are never abstract in the sense that they abandon plot, character, or theme, even in part. The narrative line continues, though it becomes leaner, less busy, less constrained by having to account for events. It is, rather, the visual framing that becomes more designlike and in that sense more abstract. Actors and settings seem more than ever to have been juxtaposed for visual purposes. The new wide-screen format spreads the actors out and unclutters the mise-en-scène. *L'avventura,* though similar to *Le amiche* in theme, character, and ambience, is less crowded, more rarified in its visual impact. Even as some shots favor deep focus, others stress the surface plane of the screen, minimizing the space between figure and ground. The sense in which this renders the film's style "abstract" is explained in a well-known work by the art historian Wilhelm Worringer.[7] Worringer argues that art derives from two polar impulses, one toward empathy, the other toward abstraction. Empathic art is "organic" and modeled (hence "deep-focused"), like Greek sculpture. In looking at such art objects, our eyes delight in caressing the surfaces and depths and hence in experiencing the objects in the round. Empathic art flourishes in historical periods of psychological harmony, when man feels secure and in tune with the universe and sees himself as its rational center. At the other pole, abstract art "is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world."[8] In troubled times, these phenomena become "obscure," "relative," "contingent." The discomfort they cause gets particularized in a widespread "spiritual dread of space . . . of open places." The pure and regular geometry of abstract art then presents an attractive way of controlling, allaying, and sublimating that anxiety.

> Tormented by the entangled inter-relationship and flux of the phenomena of the outer world [civilizations like ancient Egypt] were dominated by an immense need for tranquillity. The happiness they sought from art did not consist in the possibility of projecting themselves into the things of the outer world . . . but in the possibility of taking the individual thing of the external world out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, of eternalising it by approximation to abstract forms and, in this manner, of finding a point of tranquillity and a refuge from appearances.[9]

Is there a better phrase for describing what Lidia, Vittoria, and especially Giuliana seek than "refuge from appearances"?

Like Egyptian art, modern abstract painting can be seen as a reaction to apprehension induced by the destruction of old notions of space and time. It is hard to take spiritual comfort in the physicist's powerful new explanations of the nature and origin of things. As if to demonstrate Worringer's thesis, artists like Mondrian turned to the ancient regularities of plane geometry. Einstein's theory did not prove Euclid's wrong, only that Euclid's geometry does not apply to the realms of interstellar space. So Mondrian decided to tend our own terrestrial geometric garden. The security and stability of simple geometric shapes became the norm in architecture, too: the gleaming triumphs of Mies van der Rohe and Le

Corbusier testify to man's desire for Euclidian harmony. Where Egyptian art corroborated a cosmogony, modern abstract art tries only to reconcile the old discredited cosmogony with a new and, to most people, incomprehensible one. Even to those few who understand something of this new view of the universe, its implications for politics, morality, and behavior in general remain to be drawn, let alone agreed on. Antonioni wrote a treatment about this very subject. Entitled *Un mucchio di bugie* (A Pack of Lies),[10] it concerns a physicist who lives in a community that surrounds a cyclotron. He knows everything about "nuones," "adrones," and "leptones," but he has not the slightest conception of how to deal with the everyday world of family and community. Workers and peasants who live nearby consider him and his colleagues a strange, incomprehensible breed.

In one way or another, all the films of the tetralogy glory in the lines and masses of plane geometry. Characters are frequently pinned to walls, which are either bare or simply but elegantly divided by a vertical line or two. As we have seen, lines and masses suggest moral or psychological entrapment, unbridgeable alienation, or the like. Love is often literally "barred." But whatever the connotation, the lines and masses remain lines and masses, and to ascribe them entirely to local plot symbolism may be to distort the films' intentions. In the Godard interview, Antonioni explained his view of the complexity of human feelings as well as his retreat from the excessively organic:

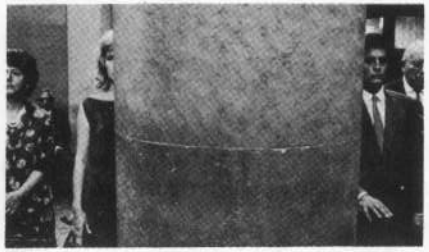
> It is too easy to say, as some critics have, that I am accusing the world of industry, factories, etc. of turning the people who live there into neurotics. My intention was to point out the beauty in this world, where even the factories have an extraordinary esthetic beauty. A line of factories, with their chimneys silhouetted on the skyline, seem [*sic*] to me much more beautiful than a line of trees which one has seen so often that it has become monotonous, to such an extent that we don't even look any more.[11]

Even more pertinent is his answer to another question:

> GODARD: When you begin or end certain shots on more or less abstract shapes, objects or details, do you do it for pictorial reasons?
>
> ANTONIONI: I feel I must express reality in terms that are not completely realistic. Take for instance the abstract white line which comes into the shot at the beginning of the scene in the little grey street [the via Alighieri where Giuliana plans her shop]. This line interests me much more than the car which arrives. It's a way of approaching the character through material objects rather than through her life. Her life basically is only relatively interesting.[12]

Antonioni makes the contours of visible objects speak to the characters' uncertainty about the new order of things. Seeking whatever certainties it can find, all the camera is sure of is the regularity of plane geometry. In such moments, the screen ceases to be a window looking into deep space and becomes a nearby surface of uncertain expanse against which the characters are flattened.[13]

There are several ways in which Antonioni creates flat effects on the screen. One is by posing the character (usually a vulnerable female) flush up against a broad, unrelieved surface. The narrative predicament of characters in this attitude—the nymphomaniac in *La notte,* Vittoria in *L'eclisse,* Giuliana in *Il deserto rosso*—is confirmed by the way they are pinned to the wall. We may be



Frame 76

Frame 77

Frame 78

Frame 79

Frame 80

Frame 81

Frame 82

Frame 83

reminded of Brecht's dramaturgy of alienation, but Antonioni's inspiration comes from graphic design, not from theater. Why does he do things this way? As one of my friends[14] observes, the cool mise-en-scène may function precisely to keep a lid on things. A Pandora's box of seething emotion lies just behind these overcareful compositions. It is not at all surprising that the films make many in the audience uncomfortable. They may say they are bored, but one suspects that they are uneasy, all the more so because they cannot say why.

The reduction of three dimensions to two, to the plane, also implicates the sense of touch. If we are at a distance from things (and depth implies distance), the eye colludes with the tactile sense to reassure us: "It is upon the certitude of tangible impermeability that . . . the conviction of material individuality also depends."[15] The absence of contour and dimension makes imaginative as well as real touching difficult. To touch is to confirm, and people who are out of touch have a desperate need for tactile reassurance. Giuliana clings to walls, expresses terror that the ground is giving way under her feet, wants to have everyone who has ever cared for her surrounding her like a wall. It is easy to believe that she would grab the sandwich out of the worker's hands just to touch something real and to confirm her touch with her mouth, testing reality the way infants do. Her fright reaches its peak when she sees friends and husband disappearing into and emerging from the billowing fog. Even the eye as surrogate for the hand can no longer be trusted to reach out and touch what to her are life's only supports.

In *La notte,* the nymphomaniac is literally dying to touch someone. Her room is filled with cuddly stuffed animals. She clutches anyone within reach. Giovanni staggers out of her room, repelled by the sight of her wildly kissing the hands of the nurses who restrain her. The need to touch—for the filmmaker himself to stay in touch—makes materiality, "tangible impermeability," central. The touched comes to overshadow the touchers. What interested him in 1964, said Antonioni,

was putting the character "in contact with things," because it is material objects that are important.[16] I think he meant *contact* literally, not metaphorically.

The flatness of many scenes in *Il deserto rosso* was effected by using the telephoto lens—not to bring distant objects closer but to reduce depth of field, optically to flatten the distance between foregrounded figures and backgrounded objects. Antonioni told Godard: "I used the telefoto lens a great deal so as not to have any depth of field, which is in itself an indispensable element of realism."[17] He also used strong homogeneous color to promote the flat effect—pure, unshaded, uniform color, unattached to objects.

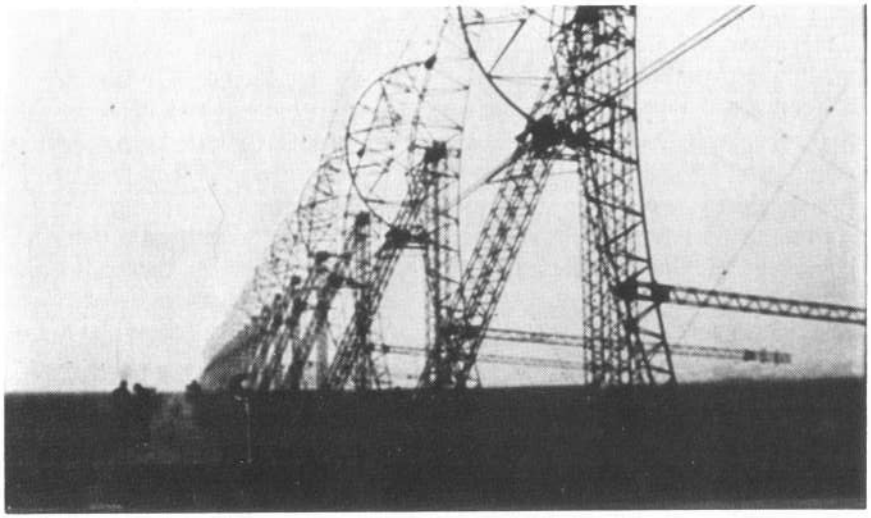
Though troubled characters like the nymphomaniac and Giuliana want to touch, even to grasp the flat walls behind them, they never succeed. There is nothing to hold on to, no traditional handle that will "give them a hand." Psychologists of perception have shown that an object displayed against a uniform background, even a simple line, does not strike us as lying in the plane of that background but as lying upon it. "The empty environment does not border the line—the way two floor tiles border each other—but continues underneath without interruption."[18]

Antonioni's new concern for the plane was accompanied by a new interest in close-ups, to use a traditional term for an untraditional effect. In *L'avventura,* these shots make no concession to standard Hollywood matching: they do not cue reactions, inserts,[19] or the like. They seem random, as the actors move into and out of frame close by. Often the face of one, then another character appears within the same shot, not in shot-countershot. For Antonioni even the space of intimacy is subject to chance. It is under this justification, perhaps, that he often shows mere fragments of his characters' faces for seconds on end. Sandro is asking Claudia why she does not want to make love. As she murmurs, "I want everything you want," her face dominates the screen. The arrangement seems totally random from the story point of view. It avoids the appearance of a standard shot; it is concerned not with framing for easy readability but with evoking a sense that the camera really shares that diegetic space and that it is trying to keep up with the actors, who swirl around it in impossibly close quarters.[20] When they exit the frame suddenly, the camera seems to lose them altogether.

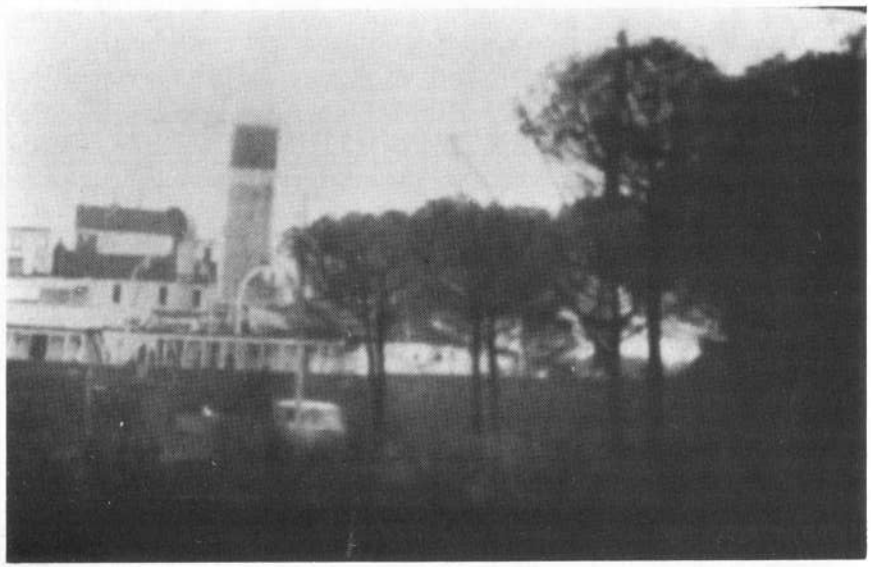
Frame 84

Antonioni's interest in flat surfaces, which he typically rendered with the telephoto lens, did not however lead him to neglect depth effects. Indeed, he often established an interesting rhythm by alternating flat and deeply recessed shots in quick succession. Consider the sequence just after that of the pushcart that Antonioni had painted white (see frames 59 and 60 above). In this sequence, the two lens extremes are used in quick succession. In the first shot, the telephoto lens plasters Giuliana and the peddler against the wall. The next shots are of Giuliana retreating into the depths of the via Alighieri. The yawing verticals signal the switch to the wide-angle lens. The deep perspective is heightened by the converging horizontals of the bricks, street edges, and roofs. Abruptly, the next shot is of a block of modern working-class flats in Ferrara, where the telephoto lens again flattens Giuliana and Corrado against buildings whose clean functional lines frame them in the perfect squares and rectangles that characterize this style. Even when the worker's wife opens the door, there is no sense of depth in the apartment behind her. Life is opaque; you do not know what awaits you: the woman is polite but as unreadable as the blank wall behind her. Another deep shot shows a row of immense radio astronomy antennas that stretch into the distance, and then the camera tilts upward to

Frame 85



Frame 86



Frame 87

suggest vast vertical distances, the dimension of the space age. Finally, reversing again, the camera suddenly reveals the prow of a ship flattened so that it appears to sail among the trees. The rhythm of shallow and deep in *Il deserto rosso* is no less beautiful than its rhythms of color and editing.

THE NEW MONTAGE AND *TEMPS MORT*

The flat camera style is accompanied by a new kind of montage. As we have seen, the shots become shorter, less concerned merely to track characters' movements. The process of cutting becomes more prominent, though not in any traditional way. We continue to read the narrative meanings, but they somehow seem not to be the author's fundamental concern. Pasolini was the first to discuss this effect, singling out two operations that make Antonioni's style seem to predominate over his content. They are

> (1) the close follow-up of two [camera] viewpoints, scarcely different from each other, upon the same object: that is, the succession of two shots which frame the same portion of reality—first from close in, then from *a little* further away; or else first head-on, then *a little* obliquely; or else, finally, quite simply, on the same alignment but with two different lenses. From this arises an insistence which becomes obsessive, as myth of the pure and anguishing autonomous beauty of things. (2) The technique which consists in having characters enter and leave the frame, so that, in a somewhat obsessive way, the montage is the succession of a series of pictures—which I shall call informal—into which the characters enter . . . so that the world appears as ordered by the myth of a pure pictorial beauty, which the characters invade, it is true, but while submitting to . . . this beauty.[21]

The use of two or more slightly variant shots where a single shot would previously have sufficed, especially where the second shot adds no new information, obviously frustrates traditional narrative expectations. We are forced to *notice,* in an instance of what Russian Formalism calls "highlighting." But we do not understand exactly what it is that we are supposed to notice. We are persuaded to assume that it is the surface of the world—again.

Pasolini's second observation concerns the montage implications of Antonioni's belief that each place is in a way pristine and inviolate, independent of the characters and even of the narrative, and that this presence deserves to be featured, made prominent. Pasolini speaks of the prediegetic importance of the space that characters enter. But Antonioni features postdiegetic space even more prominently, by dwelling on what is left after the characters depart. French critics were quick to label the practice *temps mort,* and it has become popular with other avant-garde directors, like Miklos Jancso. The prediegetic instance can often be conventionally attributed to the familiar conventions of the establishing shot, but the postdiegetic lingering is more immediately provocative because it seems on first viewing to be a mistake, a piece of sloppy editing. In either case, the whole meaning of *establishing* has been radically altered. What is established is not "the same place" but the possibility that it is in reality "another place," perhaps even an extradiegetic place. The scene is made portentous by a delay that challenges the whole tissue of fictionality. The film says not that "this is such-and-such a place, in which plot event X occurs" but rather that "this place is important quite independently of the immediate exigencies of plot, and you will sense (if not