Antonioni

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The early 1960s was a great time for cinephiles. There was the old cinema, and there was the new. The old was Hollywood: not the Hollywood of new releases (good new American films were few and far between) but the Hollywood of the recent past - the great backlog of *film noir*, Mann and Boetticher Westerns, Tashlin/Lewis comedies, all still circulating around inner-city fleapits and in gaunt suburban Odeons on Sunday afternoons, to be hunted down relentlessly by neophyte zealots of the *auteur* theory. And the new? The new was also occasionally America (Cassavetes) but mainly Europe (Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, Fellini, Antonioni, Fassbinder), shortly to be joined by Latin America (Rocha) and Japan (Oshima). Hollywood, more than Europe, was where films had been made in the past: Europe and the rest of the world was where films were being made and would be made in the future.

Subsequent history has turned this simple vision upside down, and the *auteur* theory had a lot to do with it. For the *auteur* theory - a *theory*, yet - begat (or was godfather to) the movie brats, and the movie brats begat the New Hollywood, and the New Hollywood, like it or not, is the cinema today. As for what was the new cinema, there's precious little of it around. Some of its protagonists, like Rocha and Fassbinder, died young. Few of its survivors - Godard is the obvious exception - have renewed themselves, and it has few successors: Kieslowski and Kaurismaki, Edward Yang, not many others.

But the films of the now-no-longer-new cinema can still surprise one. 30 years on, they can still look modern; and even if one has seen them before, they can still look new. The pleasure of going back to films from the past is generally that of a return, return to the time one first saw the film or to the time of the film itself. This is especially true of films which have nostalgia built into them, such as those of Ford, Mizoguchi or Ophuls. But there are other films which have (for me) the capacity to annul that sense of a return, and present themselves as if they were completely new. I have had this experience on belatedly catching up with Rocha's *Barravento*, and on re-seeing Cassavetes' *Shadows* and Godard's *A bout de souffle*. Most of all I have it with *L'avventura*.

L'avventura is of course a classic, made 35 years ago. As if to underline its classic status it is in black and white, a sure connotator nowadays of nostalgia. It gets off to a shaky start: a rather stilted conversation between a father and his grown-up daughter. But even that stilted conversation has an uncomfortable ring of truth; the embarrassment conveyed by it is a lifelike embarrassment, that of two characters who have grown apart, as parents and children did and do. From this moment on one is plunged into a world of sporadic, discontinuous conversations, of remarks that miss their target, of looks that do not engage, of relationships that develop erratically and form (rather than conform to) the structure of a plot. In what is shown or in how it is observed, *L'avventura* is a modern film. A modern film, but not, please God, a classic of modernism.

In the years since the early 60s, *L'avventura* - together with the other films

Antonioni made with Monica Vitti, *La notte* (1961), *The Eclipse* (1962) and *The Red Desert* (1964) - has gone through the inevitable cycle: fashionability, neglect, return to fashion. Its re-release in Britain coincides with the premiere of *Beyond the Clouds*, Antonioni's first feature for over ten years, and with a stream of retrospectives of the work that made the director's name an icon. This prompts the question: is Antonioni being revived, or embalmed? Are we looking at films which were destined to become classics and have now achieved their destiny, or at a more labile phenomenon, possibly just a fad, a re-evocation of the 60s similar to the digging up of Beatles outtakes?

Suddenly, nothing happened...

I would not want to take any bets on the success of the Antonioni revival. But then it would have been unwise to take bets on his success in the 60s either. *L'avventura* in fact nearly never made it to the screen at all. Halfway through filming the original producers went bankrupt. Cast and crew were marooned on a volcanic island living on credit from reluctant lodging-house keepers while the director went back to Rome to negotiate a fresh start with a new producer. Shooting was held up for several weeks. Scenes supposed to take place in the summer were not shot until well into the autumn, giving a quite accidental mystery to the eerie light that suffuses the island sequences, as the idle-rich protagonists splash in the no-longer warm waters off the Sicilian coast. Then when the film was premiered in Cannes in May 1960, it was roundly booed by sections of the audience disappointed that the bizarre and unknown Monica Vitti turned out to be the star of the film, rather than Lea Massari (the actress who plays the young woman saying goodbye to her father in the opening sequence). The critics too were divided. Penelope Gilliatt, at the time the recently appointed film critic of the *Observer* (and later a rather good writer on film for the *New Yorker*), proudly claimed to have slept through it and suspected others had done the same. (Though if she had really slept how could she know?) For every person who found the film miraculously exciting there was one who pronounced it deeply boring.

Even among Antonioni's fans, his films of the early 60s provoked puzzlement as well as excitement. What was the fascination of movies in which so little happened, or appeared to happen? And what were they actually about? If they were 'about' anything it was probably alienation - an idea made fashionable by existentialism and by the newly discovered Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of the young Karl Marx. And if they were not about alienation, did this mean they were about nothing - that is to say, not about anything or indeed, about Nothing? There was a quasi-philosophical dimension to the debate which tended to obscure both their originality and the extent to which they remained in many ways quite conventional. *L'avventura* and *The Eclipse* were talked about as if they were *Waiting for Godot*, in which nothing does indeed happen and which is indeed a play about nothing. To understand their wider and more enduring appeal it is therefore necessary to strip away some of the rhetoric that surrounded them at the time they were released.

Real life drama

For a start, they are not films in which nothing happens. In *L'avventura*, over a period of a few days, Claudia (Vitti) experiences the loss of her best friend,

enters into an affair with her friend's lover, and is betrayed by him (as she perhaps has betrayed her friend) but seems prepared to accept a reconciliation. In *La notte*, in less than 24 hours, Giovanni (Marcello Mastroianni) and Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) also experience the loss of a close friend, which triggers off a crisis in their relationship; both are tempted by adultery but decide against it, and they end up dubiously together. In *The Eclipse*, Vittoria (Vitti) terminates a longstanding relationship, enters into a frenzied affair with Piero (slain Delon),but decides (or appears to decide) not to continue it. By the standards of ordinary life (if not necessarily the cinema) this is hardly nothing.

In Antonioni's presentation of them, however, these quite dramatic events are not dramatic at all. The disappearance of Anna in *L'avventura* might be suicide, it might be kidnap or even murder (like the murder of Janet Leigh which dramatically disposes of the heroine early in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which appeared the same year), but we are not shown what happens, nor is the mystery ever explained; nothing is ever more than a possibility, a shadow hanging over the plot. In *La notte* we do not learn that the dying friend, Tommaso, has actually died, until Lidia lets drop in conversation that a phone call she received earlier was to tell her about his death. Nor does any drama attach to the crisis in the marriage or the tempted adulteries. The couple do not row, they are just palpably unhappy. When Lidia goes off in the car with Roberto, we see the car stop outside the hotel, and then move on, but we don't hear their conversation, nor can we even see their faces, which are obscured by the rain beating on the car windows as they talk. As for Giovanni's flirtation with Valentina (Vitti), it is just allowed to peter out after Lidia has eavesdropped on it. And in *The Eclipse* we assume that Vittoria and Piero have each decided to bring their affair to an end, but only because neither of them comes to the rendezvous they have set up.

It is not the case, therefore, that nothing has happened, but that the status of what has happened (and something undoubtedly has happened) remains uncertain. Narrative expectations are set up, and then defeated. (It is this, rather than mere boredom, which provoked the hostile reaction of the Cannes audience.) On the one hand this can be seen as elementary realism, a reproduction of the messiness and uncertainty of everyday life as against the conventional predictability of melodrama, and there is no doubt that part of the appeal of Antonioni's films lies in this lifelikeness.But the lifelikeness is also an effect of art, the result of a deliberate play with film conventions. What holds the rambling plot of *L'avventura* together is not what happens but the expectation of something happening - the return of Anna or an explanation of her disappearance - which if it were to happen would give the narrative sense, but since it doesn't happen leaves the story poised over an uncomfortable void. And in *The Eclipse* it is again the expectation of a resolution - that Piero's and Vittoria's affair will continue and be formally sealed as a 'happy end' - that holds the audience's attention during the extraordinary last sequence, in which time passes and the lovers never show. On the one side, something lifelike, two characters uncertain as to whether the affair they have drifted into is one they would like to continue. On the other, something which has nothing to do with Piero and Vittoria as people at all: a meditation on transience provoked by teasing the audience into expecting the story to do what stories usually do, and then not delivering.

Antonioni may underplay narrative in order to foreground something else, but he most definitely plays with it. From his first feature film, *Cronaca di un amore* in 1950, to *Identification of a Woman* in 1982, passing through *L'avventura* and Blowup (1966), recurrent reference is made to the mystery or detective format, in which the narrative is set in motion by a suspected crime, which the rest of the story then sorts out. The difference, of course, is that in Antonioni films (with the exception of the generally atypical *I vinti* in 1953) the mystery is not sorted out but is left in the air, a possibly important, possibly unimportant shadow hanging over the lives of the characters and keeping the audience in deliberately mild suspense. This could be seen as little more than a device, a thread on which to hang a set of concerns which are not so much non-narrative as anti-narrative. Antonioni's characters tend to live only in the present, carrying with them very little baggage from the past and with few if any ambitions for the future. They don't have historic grudges and they don't make projects. This makes them poor narrative material, since the stuff of narrative is motivation, and Antonioni's characters on the whole don't have it. Hence the need for an external thread on which to hang the story.

Evoking mystery, withholding facts

If this is the case - and I think it is - two questions are then raised. One is a further question about the status of the narrative and the other, which I shall deal with first, concerns the characters. Antonioni's characters are not entirely without motivation, and not entirely languid. Some of the men, in particular, are compulsively active. Piero is a dealer, frenziedly buying and selling shares on behalf of clients. But the deals mean nothing to him and there is more than a hint that his sex life is like his work; he picks up women and drops them as easily as he trades in and out of any other commodity. Thomas in *Blowup* is equally compulsive; life for him is a flurry of photo sessions, of bending objects - especially models - to his will. But none of these characters, whether active or passive, blind or observant, knows where they are going, unless something happens, provoked by the narrative, to give them pause. They have few social, family, or workplace ties and live relatively unconstrained by conventional moral codes. This does not mean that they have no morality, but rather that they have to make their own moral choices as they go along, which they sometimes do and sometimes don't. It is the seeming rootlessness of these characters, accentuated by a mise-en-scène which isolates them within the frame, which has given rise to the label attached to them: 'alienated'. There is also something distinctively modern about it, in the sense that they inhabit situations which sociologists, then as now, characterise as typical of modern societies.

The modernity of Antonioni's characters may have reflected a sociological commonplace, but for the cinema it was something new. For reasons too complicated to go into here, the mainstream cinema was deeply resistant to modernity in this form. A kind of existential listlessness occasionally surfaces in American films of the 40s and 50s (in *They Live by Night* and other Nicholas Ray films, for example), but only as a property of lone individuals. It is not generalised across an entire social world, nor is it disabling to individuals. The American hero remains an action hero and his actions are endowed with meaning. But in the entropic world of Antonioni's films there is little scope for meaningful action for the hero or heroine (if indeed there are heroes and heroines in these films) to engage in - unless, of course, like Mark in *Zabriskie*

Point or Robertson in *The Passenger*, they invent new roles for themselves to perform.

Antonioni's characters are not free standing entities. They are brought into being by story and mise-en-scène, and it is to these levels that we must return to explain what in fact makes the films distinctive. Narrative tends to be described at two levels: that of a narrated content, and that of the way it is narrated. The classic examples of a disjunction between these two levels are the Oedipus myth and the detective story, in each of which there is an order of events (a murder is committed and the murderer is brought to justice) and an order of presentation (there has been a killing and the nature of it has to be investigated). The resolution of the narrative comes when the two levels are brought together and the truth is revealed.

Antonioni, as already mentioned, enjoys playing with the detective story format. But he plays with it sceptically. Mysteries are evoked but never solved and the narration never reaches a moment of truth produced by the solution. The audience never learns what happened to Anna in *L'avventura* (nor do the other characters) or who killed Locke and kills Robertson in *The Passenger*. Even in films which do not use the detective story format, facts are withheld from the audience or the characters or both - not so that they can be revealed in due time but because they have no real pertinent existence. The world of the films is the transient world the audience sees, not a more solid world underlying it and acting as guarantor of its truth. In the epigraph to Sam Rohdie's book on Antonioni, the director is quoted as saying 'the world, the reality in which we live... is invisible, hence we have to be satisfied with what we see.' Or in computer language, What You See Is What You Get.

Space is the place

What you get is a narration, and a narration of a very pared down kind which consists of a series of views of spaces where characters enter, perform their actions and depart. In conventional film narration, spaces are defined by the characters who occupy them and by the actions performed in them, and the succession of spaces (the editing of shots) is determined by the continuity of the action. In Antonioni's films space pre-exists the action, and asserts its reality independently of the action performed within it. Although there are conventional matched-action cuts in the films, there are also many shots which begin or end with no character in frame at all (most notably in *The Eclipse*). The character makes an appearance in the shot, redefines the space as the space of an action then disappears, restoring to the space its original independent reality. What anchors the narration is not a story but a composition.

This foundational quality of the filmic space means that the action of the film often takes the form of an interaction between the character and the spaces they move in and out of. Characters are often presented as more sensitive to theirenvironment than to other characters. Landscape and the elements - mud, rain, deserts - are powerful determinants of the action, but so are smaller spaces, the emptiness or constriction of a room, the closeness of a blank wall. The physical prevails over the social, and landscape cuts characters down to size. In *The Red Desert* Corrado (Richard Harris) tries to persuade a group of refinery workers to join him on a drilling expedition to Patagonia. The workers listen but

are not convinced. The camera lingers on their faces, traces the lines of brightly painted pipework, focuses on huge glass jars used for storing acid. The sheer presence of the immediate environment is overpowering, and against it Corrado's vision seems insubstantial, a mere will-o'-the-wisp.

Many of the features of Antonioni's films can be found in other films of the 60s and after. Just occasionally they can be found earlier. The listless characters of *L'avventura*, *La notte* and *The Eclipse* are to some extent prefigured in Fellini's films of the 50s (particularly strong is the similarity between Mastroianni-Marcello in *La dolce vita* and Mastroianni-Giovanni in *La notte*). The *Nouvelle Vague* also brought in its crop of existential heroes who invent their own morality. The sense of landscape and filmic space as preceding narrative is prevalent in Ozu. Narratives which do not resolve can be found in *film noir*. But so concentrated a challenge to the norms of narrative-as-action is unique in the cinema (or at least in the kind of cinema that gets theatrical release). Antonioni in a real sense invented a new cinema, and very often where features of that cinema recur, it is (for good or ill) a result of his influence. Yet his influence has been indirect. Other directors of his generation have been successfully plundered for ideas and mannerisms, and something of their work survives in the work of their imitators - Bergman in Woody Allen, early Godard in Tarantino, the Godard of '68 in a whole host of film-makers who took up his slogan of 'making films politically'. Antonioni, however, has not proved easy to imitate. His films represent an opening up of cinema to new possibilities of vision, but they also involve a closing down, since the vision they embody is so precise, and that precision cannot be manneristically reproduced. Little bits of what might seem to be his manner permeate a number of the art films of the 60s, as part of a generalised rebellion against the tyranny of the rule-book. But when audiences in the late 70s rebelled in their turn against unfocused artiness, the valuable part of Antonioni's lesson could not be absorbed. His was very much a cinema of its time, marked by the emergence of a public which had begun to grow tired of conventional cinema and expected something different. The world into which *Beyond the Clouds* is being released is a different one. Audiences are smaller, and their demands are more focused, though also less ambitious. But in other respects the way the world has changed only confirms the vision of it prospected in Antonioni's films of the 60s and 70s. The films may be a throwback to a past era of cinema. But what they propose is still new.