

Contents

Acknowledgments— vii
Notes on Contributors— ix

Interstitial, Pretentious, Alienated, Dead: Antonioni at 100
Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes— 1

Modernities

Identification of a City: Antonioni and Rome, 1940–62
Jacopo Benci— 21

Modernity, Put into Form: *Blow-Up*, Objectuality, 1960s
Antonioni
Laura Rascaroli— 64

Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*
Angelo Restivo— 82

Reporter, Soldier, Detective, Spy: Watching *The Passenger*
Robert S. C. Gordon— 98

Aesthetics

‘Making Love on the Shores of the River Po’: Antonioni’s
Documentaries
Leonardo Quaresima— 115

On *L’avventura* and the Picturesque
Rosalind Galt— 134

Quasi: Antonioni and Participation in Art
Alexander García Düttmann— 154

Face, Body, Voice, Movement: Antonioni and Actors
David Forgacs— 167

<i>Medium Specifics</i>	<i>Blow-Up</i> and the Plurality of Photography Matilde Nardelli— 185
	Ten Footnotes to a Mystery Francesco Casetti— 206
	Identification of a Medium: <i>Identificazione di una donna</i> and the Rise of Commercial Television in Italy Michael Loren Siegel— 216

<i>Ecologies</i>	Antonioni's Waste Management Karl Schoonover— 235
	Antonioni's Cinematic Poetics of Climate Change Karen Pinkus— 254
	Antonioni and the Development of Style John David Rhodes— 276

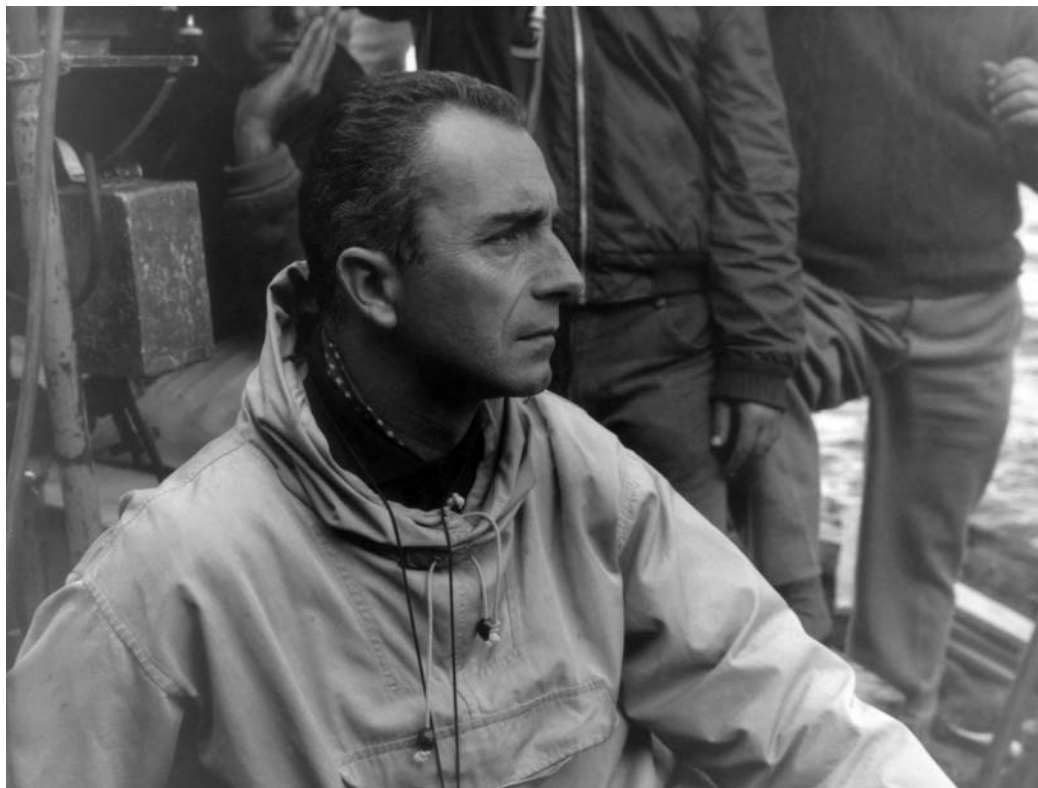
Bibliography— 301

Index— 320

INTERSTITIAL, PRETENTIOUS, ALIENATED, DEAD: Antonioni at 100

At a moment at which we might yearn for the death of the conversation about the ‘death of cinema’, about the medium’s replacement by any number of audiovisual technologies, platforms and regimes, we feel that there might be something productively untimely in turning our attention to Antonioni. (Timely for us, the present moment marks the hundredth anniversary of his birth.) His films were, we might say – the best of them anyway – unfashionably fashionable. Unlike the raw and nervous edges of the new wave cinemas that dominated the period in which he graduated into artistic maturity, Antonioni’s films were highly polished, sculpted, expertly joined together – but nonetheless shocking, jarring and ‘difficult’. They were – like fashion – entirely of their moment, drenched in contemporaneity, documents of a time and place, and of a way of being. But by saying this we also mean to suggest that – like fashion – they risked their own obsolescence. By taking this risk in the most radical terms, they became timeless. That is to say, they did not become eternally relevant: rather, they became stubborn monuments of aesthetic will, documents of a hard-headed – even embarrassing – insistence on posing the largest, most universal questions (who are we? where are we? why are we?) in the concrete materials of an artistic medium and in the language and materiality of the historical moment of their making.

Approaching the figure and work of Michelangelo Antonioni a century after his birth, one is confronted with a number of persistent critical tropes about his oeuvre, with a substantial, if in great part dated, body of critical work and, perhaps, also with the sense that all has already been said and written on the director of the malady of feelings, of filmic slowness and *temps mort*, of the crisis of the postwar bourgeoisie, of epistemological uncertainties, of modernist difficulty and even boredom, of aestheticism and the hypertrophy of style, of narrative opacity. And yet, Antonioni today powerfully escapes the reach of old categorisations that have attempted to congeal his figure once and for all into an inert monument of modern cinema. His continued influence on world film-makers and the new pressing questions that his films raise today for contemporary audiences call for a renewed critical effort.



This volume of new essays takes on the task in the knowledge of the need and importance of approaching Antonioni's work with the eyes of a new century, from the vantage point of new methodological approaches, and with the sense that his position in the history of modern cinema is not fixed once and forever, but is mutating and still uncharted in its extraordinary richness and propulsive, experimental innovativeness. At each viewing, Antonioni's films renew the sense of a profound enigma, which the critical paradigms listed above attempt unsuccessfully to demystify and crystallise in established and definitive 'explanations' and categories.

Such an enigma, coupled with the impression of a commanding significance and import, was also experienced by Antonioni's early audiences, and is epitomised by spectatorial and critical reactions to the groundbreaking *L'avventura* (1960) – the film that single-handedly propelled Antonioni into the gotha of the 'difficult modernists' and that seemed instantly to win him an enduring place in the history of the cinema, while also attracting derision and gaining him many detractors. *L'avventura* was a defining moment in the history of film, as it became immediately evident; but the problem of capturing and, precisely, defining the essence of such uniqueness and importance is at the core of the question of the history of scholarly efforts on Antonioni's cinema.

In order to investigate this question, one could turn to the open letter that was addressed to Antonioni with the aim of communicating to the director its authors' own understanding of the features of his unique achievements. The letter is evidence of a tear opened by *L'avventura* at its first appearance, of the rupture and interruption that the film inflicted on its unsuspecting cosmopolitan audience, of a crisis in the language of criticism.

Let us begin by recalling the famous episode of the first screening of *L'avventura* at the 13th Cannes Film Festival. Michelangelo Antonioni and Monica Vitti, director and protagonist of the film, emerged from the projection in tears, devastated by the audience's scathing reaction, but awoke the following morning to find, hanging from a wall in the hall of their hotel, a typewritten letter of support signed by a long list of directors, technicians, actors and critics (among many others, Roberto Rossellini, Georges Sadoul, Janine Bazin, Anatole Dauman, André S. Labarthe and Alain Cuny). The short letter read:

Conscious of the exceptional importance of Michelangelo Antonioni's film, *L'avventura*, and appalled by the demonstrations of hostility it has aroused, the undersigned professionals and critics wish to express all their admiration to the author of this film.¹

This brief letter suggests that the significance of *L'avventura* was immediately detected and acknowledged by the people who were in the know; in other words, by those who made films and wrote about them. The professionals of the cinema found the reaction of the rest of the audience revolting, so much so that they were compelled to dissociate themselves publicly from it and express their admiration for the director through a signed letter of testimony.

Antonioni's ideal spectator of the 1960s, the one he had fully addressed for the first time only with *L'avventura*, was certainly not the acritical consumer who is often associated with mainstream cinema; but, as it became apparent, neither was she the keen patron of Cannes – a festival which, while traditionally sensitive to both the glamorous and the commercial sides of the cinema, had also always prized quality and indeed overindulged the auteurs (symptomatically, Fellini's *La dolce vita* won the Palme d'or in 1960, followed by Buñuel's *Viridiana* the year after). If Cannes' habitués booed it, *L'avventura*, in 1960, must have truly looked like an alien object. What is striking in this letter, which according to accepted historiography precipitated the decision to arrange a second screening and, subsequently, of awarding to Antonioni the Prix du Jury (shared with *Kagi* by Kon Ichikawa), is that the film is not compared to other films that were shown at the same festival, nor is it described as beautiful, powerful, moving or aesthetically striking, but purely and epigrammatically as a work of 'exceptional importance', and, therefore, as a unique, incomparable and arresting work, a watershed, after which – one is tempted to extrapolate from the short testimonial – the cinema will never be the

same. The reasons, however, are not explained; arguably, because it was impossible – the film defied definition. All the emphasis in the letter is, tellingly, on *L'avventura*'s exceptionalism and uniqueness, thus on the experience of seeing it for the first time without firm points of reference. It is a film that produces a void, hollows out the space around it, demands new forms of language with which to address it.

That experience cannot, of course, be fully repeated; *L'avventura*, after rapidly entering all critics' 'top tens' of best films of the decade (and beyond), has been seen, written about and anatomised countless times, and has been referenced and alluded to directly and indirectly by generations of film-makers. The committed young cinephile/critic/film professional of today, in many ways the heir to Antonioni's ideal spectator of the early 1960s, will be able to rely on a complex network of meanings and expectations when encountering the film for the first time. The sensation of the lack of artistic references and of the cultural void that made of *L'avventura* an alien object in 1960 has been tempered by decades of film-making, as well as of scholarship and criticism on the film and on Antonioni's oeuvre. Yet, arguably, some of the same effect of striking alienness continues to be part of each viewing of *L'avventura*.

In what follows we address some thinking to Antonioni's work under the terms by which it has been both abused and praised, terms that have served to name and categorise his work. We turn (and return) to these so as to orientate readers to some of the major conceptual tendencies in Antonioni's reception, but we do so in a spirit of dialectical engagement in order to understand what truth content might still be found lurking in these terms.

4

Interstitial

While the early connoisseurs did not even attempt in their letter to articulate *L'avventura*'s 'exceptional importance', another open letter addressed to the director by an intellectual twenty years and eight films later tried by contrast to deal directly with this issue. Roland Barthes wrote his famed encomium 'Cher Antonioni ...' in 1980 to mark a prize presented to the director by the City of Bologna. The letter, first published posthumously in *Cahiers du cinéma* in the same year, is a reflection on the role of the artist. Barthes borrows what he sees as some of the features of Antonioni's work to define the three virtues that, in his mind, define the artist: vigilance, wisdom and fragility. Antonioni, then, becomes the ideal artist for Barthes, whose tribute is simultaneously a succinct appraisal of the director's entire oeuvre.

Barthes's text is at times rather dense and allusive; this is perhaps unsurprising, given the difficulty of the task at hand. And the word 'difficulty', indeed, surfaces already in the second paragraph, with specific reference to the Modern's difficulty

at following the mutations of history.² The argument is that Antonioni is a true Modern because of his treatment of thirty years of history; Barthes uses one term in particular to characterise such a treatment: 'subtlety'. Antonioni's subtlety has to do with openness ('your art consists in leaving the road to meaning open'),³ ambiguity and instability of meaning. Barthes works here with concepts that have been regularly associated with Antonioni's cinema, such as epistemological doubt, the vertigo of the uncertainty of subjectivity, the intensity and persistence of a gaze that insists on looking at things that the artist was not asked to look at, and for longer than seemed necessary. Antonioni is thus said to epitomise the artist who challenges conventional ways of seeing and disturbs the safety of established modes of perception.

While these concepts are not new, and indeed form the better part of much of the existing scholarship on Antonioni's oeuvre, something exciting animates Barthes's letter; this something lies in the point at which Barthes tries to capture the essence of Antonioni's 'exceptional importance', to use the Cannes letter's expression. Barthes declares he will not discuss the 'how' (the scenes, the shots, the montage, whose analysis he leaves to the true film experts), but does engage with the effects of Antonioni's subtle openness, which, he proposes, produces a 'vacillation', a 'vibration' of the represented object. The object – and, one could argue, the film itself – vibrates. Barthes compares this vibration to the work of painters such as Matisse or Braque, who observe the object until the idea itself of the object disappears; or, even better, to Oriental art, which captures the object 'in that rare moment in which the whole of its identity falls brusquely into a new space – that of the Interstice'.⁴ While Barthes is here talking of Antonioni's entire oeuvre, he also indicates the film which gives a 'stupefying demonstration' of the Interstice: *L'avventura*, needless to say.

It is the alienness of the interstitial space created by *L'avventura* in 1960 that made its bodies, landscapes, objects – indeed, the screen itself – vibrate. The film's vibration, in other words, is that of an art object that is in the plenitude of its identity, and yet that also falls into a void, because of an obstinate, subtle, open gaze that is directed to the world. And it is these same qualities of obstinacy, subtlety and openness that continue to vibrate at each viewing of Antonioni's films, and that today take on a novel relevance at the turn of a new century.

Preentious

Manny Farber, in his famous essay 'White Elephant Art vs Termite Art', takes Antonioni up as a major example of the pejorative category (that of the 'white elephant'). 'Termite' art 'feels its way through walls of particularisation, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement'.⁵

European art cinema, however, fares badly in this polarised discursive context; it is too indebted, in Farber's terms, to the tradition of the 'densely overwrought European masterpiece'.⁶ Most of Farber's examples of the 'termite' tendency are collected from Hollywood genre film-making. His emphasis on the 'ornery', 'go-for-broke' ethos from which 'termite' art will issue leads him even – albeit it with some ambivalence – to include in his canon 'the TV debating of William Buckley'.⁷ Obnoxious neo-conservatism thus wins entry into Farber's reverse-snobish demotic-elite; European 'artiness', however, bars one access to this boys' club.

Farber claims that 'the common quality or defect' of 'white elephant' art (his favourite examples are Antonioni, François Truffaut and Tony Richardson) is 'fear, a fear of the potential life, rudeness, and outrageousness of a film'.⁸ Thus, Antonioni sins against his medium by approaching it like painting: 'Antonioni gets his odd, clarity-is-all effects from his taste for chic mannerist art that results in a screen that is glassy, has a side-sliding motion, the feeling of people plastered against stripes or divided by verticals and horizontals.'⁹ When, at the beginning of *La notte* (1961), Antonioni pictures the nymphomaniac's encounter with Giovanni, he has her, in Farber's terms, 'backed against a large horizontal stripe of a white wall'. The result: 'a pretentiously handsome image that compromises the harrowing effect of the scene'.¹⁰

It is worth returning to this jaundiced take on Antonioni's work not only because Farber's terms of abuse have remained consistent in negative appraisals of the director's oeuvre, but also because they permit us to see something that is true about this work. Farber is right: Antonioni does approach cinema like a painter, which is to say that, despite the stylishness of the surfaces of his images, his cinema is impure – it is derived from a variety of artistic and cultural sources and intervenes not only in the history of cinema, but in the history of aesthetic modernism. Farber is right: Antonioni's cinema takes itself too seriously, and the problem of its doing so extends from its desire to want to be something other than cinema – not more than cinema, just not cinema on its own or *purely* on its own terms.

Of course, the title of one of Antonioni's most famous essays would seem to undercut this assertion: 'Making a Film is My Way of Life'.¹¹ We might assume that the title implies that cinema – the specific medium of film – becomes the true, unique path to the real, the authentic. And yet what does Antonioni actually intend by this title? He says: 'Making a film ... is living ... While I am shooting a film, my personal life is not interrupted; in fact, it is intensified.'¹² Film and life name permeable boundaries, modes of being. Thus, if painterliness – by which we might mean a keen interest in the visual and spatial relations among bodies, objects, surfaces and monuments – is something that preoccupied the living Antonioni, then it will be no surprise that it preoccupies his cinema. His cinema – despite the frequent severity of his forms, a severity that would seem to limit what can be on-screen, in the frame – declares its openness to the world and the world's influence; in making

this declaration it runs the risk of being, at times, rather uncinematic – too fascinated by other forms, and of using cinema less as a specific medium (with its ‘own’ laws) and more as a way of bringing various media into contact with one another. Cinema, like life, is radically impure: this is what Antonioni means. For Farber, this is pomposity, ‘wet towels of artiness and significance’.¹³ We prefer to see this, instead, as a serious form of humility: of taking the film’s relation to the world seriously. Such seriousness will mean that the film that results will exhibit – even theatricalise, perhaps – its madeness, its obvious investment in the aesthetic, in the other arts, and in film’s relation to them. We don’t intend to suggest that there are not moments in some Antonioni films (or indeed, entire films in his oeuvre) when we wince with the recognition that his self-consciousness has missed its target. But such are the wagers of an intentional comportment towards art-making. Why is seriousness sometimes so embarrassing? Because it so obviously risks exposure, failure, bathos? If so, then seriousness – pretentiousness, even – may actually be the mode in which we (like Antonioni) run the greatest risk of encountering our humble position vis-à-vis the world’s complex immensity.

Alienated

Along with ennui, uncertainty, solitude, separation, emptiness, misapprehension, malady, crisis (but – also – painful slowness, tediousness, boredom), alienation is one of the most frequently encountered terms (and tropes) in critical writings on Antonioni. Notoriously, Andrew Sarris coined a neologism that neatly (and somewhat dismissively inasmuch as it is suggestive almost of a trade name or a brand) captures and synthesises all these semantic and discursive fields: *Antoniennui*.¹⁴

Critical explorations of alienation in Antonioni have broadly followed two routes: one sociological, which readily associates his plots, settings and characters with a historically specific postwar bourgeois existential crisis; and the other modernist, which sees alienation as one of the prime thematic preoccupations of an entire cultural and artistic epoch. The two areas, of course, conflate and overlap. When attempting to capture the essence of Western European modernist cinema, John Orr points to its bourgeois class formation and interests, factors which are deemed to be responsible for the sense of frailty and anxiety of its images – ‘For the central problem of the post-war bourgeoisie lies in its profound crisis of values.’ Of course, it is at this point that Orr gestures precisely towards Antonioni.¹⁵

Without proposing to reject historicist and sociological approaches, or to deny Antonioni’s belonging to a specific transnational cultural and artistic milieu, which indeed he both profoundly shaped and represented in an exemplary fashion, one does experience an urge to move beyond this established critical framework and think about *Antoniennui* as something highly distinctive and yet difficult to locate

and demarcate; and also to go beyond the mere naming of the set of filmic techniques and procedures that the critical literature tends to see as directly responsible for the production of ‘alienation’ (a camera that shuns emotional proximity, a decentred human figure, gazes directed off-screen, rarefaction of dialogue, narrative ellipses, long sequence shots and slow camera movements).

Alienation in Antonioni has to do both with the subject and with aesthetics. On the one hand, the on-screen subject appears to experience a displacement, a separation from herself and the world, an awkwardness of being, a tangible discomfort in the face of the raw presence of space and the palpable flow of time; on the other hand, we witness equally the emergence of an aesthetic of anxiety somewhere, inefably, amid the rigorous formalism of the frame, the pictorial flatness of the surface, the sophisticated texture of the image, the orchestrated disposition of bodies and objects, the deliberate vectors of gazes and movements. Antonioni’s aesthetics are at once arresting and perturbing; the characters’ anxiety, expressed through the tension of bodies and gazes, reflects a broader disquiet that resides in unfathomable ways in the categories of form, of the distribution of objects and of the grain of both sounds and images.

Sigmund Freud’s essay of 1919 on the uncanny is an attempt to conceptualise an aesthetic of anxiety, one which has to do precisely with the subject and with the art form.¹⁶ Far from wanting to psychoanalyse Antonioni and his characters, there may be something to be gained by briefly recalling that Freud’s description of the *unheimlich* as that which is strangely familiar may resonate with Antonioni’s aesthetics. Yet, rather than focusing on Antonioni’s frequent use of the double (a figure that Freud discusses in his essay as a typical occurrence of the uncanny in art), one could productively turn to the evocative passage in which Freud recalls walking, on a hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial Italian town which was unfamiliar to him, and finding himself unable, in spite of repeated detours, to avoid returning to a particular street. Freud reads his own uncanny feelings triggered by this experience in light of the compulsion to repeat. But what is most interesting here is undoubtedly the sense of a human habitat from which he wishes to separate himself, but which defies all his efforts to do so, as well as his awareness that his presence was beginning to be noted – that he felt uneasy about becoming the object of insistent gazes.

Over and over again, Antonioni’s characters, not unlike Freud, find themselves in spaces that similarly elicit uncanny feelings. They walk through deserted streets in the morning light, accompanied by the distinct sound of their steps on the tarmac; stand in the abstract darkness of the night next to tall, rattling flagpoles; uneasily survey a storm approaching on the horizon; look from a balcony at surrounding anonymous buildings, and wince when they notice a man at an open window; happen to walk in the middle of a frightening, violent fight in the suburban periphery; stand awkwardly in a square, objectified by searching sexualised gazes; are

compelled to run away after hearing a scream coming from a boat hidden in the fog. In all of these and in countless other examples, these characters harbour the violent desire to separate themselves from the environment that contains them and in which (by which?) they feel scrutinised. It is their embodied presence that turns urban and natural habitats into uncanny and mysterious compositions of buildings, objects and bodies; and it is the obstinate, subtle, open gaze directed at them that makes them vibrate and fall – as Barthes put it in his letter to Antonioni – into the space of an interstice.

In the affective sphere produced by the unfamiliar familiar, what is not at home for Freud is – of course – the human ego, which is thus alienated from itself, from its own embodied experience. Antoniennui may well be the alienation of the subject from itself; but it is also and decidedly the distinctive way in which this alienation is cinematically generated by forms distributed in spaces, by relationships between images and sounds, by directions of gazes and trajectories of bodies, by the rhythm of presences and voids, and by the obstinate look of the camera – all of which combine to materialise a true aesthetics of anxiety, one which reveals to us the foreignness of our home (and our foreignness to our world).

Dead

Another term that is frequently invoked in Antonioni's cinema is *le temps mort*: dead time.¹⁷ Antonioni's films are 'full' of empty moments, directionless passages in which the seconds and minutes crawl by. The term, borrowed from the French, abuts on another borrowed from the history of painting: *la nature morte*, or 'still life', in English. These terms – *le temps mort* and still life – point to an important nexus of concerns in Antonioni's work.

If we take the French term literally, then it might be said to name something about narrative temporality, or an attitude towards narrative in Antonioni's cinema. Antonioni's cinema is one in which, very often, too little, or nothing at all seems to be happening. Places are shown before and after human actors arrive at and depart from them. The camera may seem to absorb itself in the pictorial interest of an object, building, or place, irrespective of what is meant to be happening near, in, or at it. Or else we follow a character who seems to be 'killing time', just existing, fiddling with the edges of things. The most famous sequence in which all of these tendencies come together might be the opening of *L'eclisse* (1962) in which the film establishes its own autonomous interest in certain complexities of the visual and material array of Riccardo's house. There are times when the camera and the character seem to be absorbed in looking at the same object, although we never learn what the character thinks about what she is looking at. And then there is the wonderful moment – one that detractors of Antonioni's cinema might find

too obvious – when Vittoria idly plays with an empty picture frame on Riccardo’s desk, inserting one object (an ashtray) and then another (a small abstract sculpture) into the empty frame, trying out the possibilities of framing.

If too little is happening in such a passage of *temps mort*, then *temps mort* names a problem of narrative economy. *Temps vivant*¹⁸ would be time animated by human eventfulness – or at the very least by the character’s telling us what she feels while she goes on doing nothing, killing time. In these dead moments ‘nothing happens’. Time passes, but only passes, which is what makes it dead. The sheer passage of time in the film seems to mark or materialise time as time, time as the index of our common finitude, our fealty *to* time as we move, minute by minute towards non-existence.

However, as all of the foregoing examples, but in particular, Vittoria’s pointless rearrangement of objects in an empty frame – itself obviously an analogy of Antonioni’s own labour – suggest *temps mort* is not just a matter of narrative economy but of pictorial economy, as well, like *la nature morte*, the still life. This genre of painting (in many historical periods the lowliest, the least prized in the history of the arts, at least up until modernism) names the way in which representation meets its own specular allegory. Pictorial representation, broadly speaking, seeks to still, to abstract, to cut from the flow of time some small piece of the real and to deliver it out of time, and over to human consciousness, which might just have overlooked it. In the still life, painting chooses to focus its attention on things (not on the actions of humans appropriate to history painting) – and on things, moreover, that have been abstracted from human presence which may be felt to linger behind in the image in some purely indexical way (a half-drunk glass of wine, a half-eaten joint of meat, used, soiled cutlery). These things are either inorganic, or doomed to become thus – to be consumed and excreted, or else to rot, decay, become mere matter, formless, dead. The dead things arranged for our consumption – for our visual pleasure (which is itself predicated on or against death) – reflect on and embody the deadness of representation itself, the abstraction involved in any act of picturing. The term ‘still life’ touches on the oxymoronic heart of visual representation, which, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s terms, *can only be* representation in its attempt both to touch and to withdraw from the world.¹⁹ In theatricalising – in a moving image (one that too-notoriously consists of so many countless still lives, so many still frames per second) – the condition of the still life as Antonioni does at the beginning of *L’eclisse*, his cinema asks us that we consider the cinema as itself something dead – not dead in the sense of having ‘outlived’ its usefulness or currency as a medium, but dead in that it participates in the inorganic nature of the aesthetic itself.

What claims do the dead make on us? In moral or historical terms, the dead – who in truth demand nothing – mutely ask to be reckoned with, or at least remembered. But we can easily ignore them; most often we do. Their demands, in fact,

exert appallingly little claim on our attention. Antonioni's still lives and dead times, however, *do* make demands on us. When his cinema asks us to look for longer than might otherwise have been comfortable at this or that object, we feel that we are being asked to work, to participate in, to share in the dead life of the film. Such a sharing of labour is what is being talked about when his films are described as 'demanding'.²⁰ They would not demand so much of us were they not already dead, did they not already insist on their deathliness as one of their major preoccupations. We do not mean, in any strict sense, that it is only the 'difficult' modernist text – with its durations, dilations and disjunctions – that can bring the spectator back to life, as Brechtian film theory might teach us. And yet, we do not disavow that these films may promise exactly such revivification: surely the hisses at Cannes are the rumours of indignant human life – an indignation, however, that addresses itself to a surface that cannot hear or respond to its complaints. Antonioni's dead times and still lives run the risk of boring us – boring us by making us feel like we are doing too much work, work that might be better done by his films telling us what to think or believe, what to grant importance to, what to ignore or let go. The sophisticated spectator who does not experience – or who disavows – boredom in Antonioni's dead cinema misses something important. The tedious work we feel like we are doing – a kind of muted, sedate busyness in front of the screen – *is* frustrating, for the cosmopolite cinephile who is willing to be challenged, as well as for the 'average' viewer who expects to be entertained. Here is a sensitive critic, Norman N. Holland, writing on Antonioni's mature work of the early 1960s at close historical range: 'When I first saw *L'avventura*, the film bored, annoyed, frustrated, and infuriated me. Inspired by the critics, I tried again. The second time, knowing nothing was going to happen, I made what turns out to be the necessary gesture of surrender to Antonioni: waiting without hope or expectation. Then I loved the film.'²¹ Holland's account gives us the busyness required by the film, but a busyness that must turn into its opposite – a kind of death, or in Holland's terms a 'surrender' – in order for pleasure, insight, knowledge – that is to say, a living engagement with the film and its world, and the film as a part of our world – to be achieved. Adam Phillips has said that the value of frustration is that it 'contains the possibility of discovering a new want'.²² Antonioni's dead time aporetically summons a lively participation whose obverse is a kind of deathly stillness, that produces – in another turn, or following an interval – a means towards a lively re-cathexis of the world, its objects, persons and things – those still living and those already dead.

The lessons of Antonioni's intersituality, pretentiousness, alienation and deathliness are felt in many of those forms of cinema and audiovisual representation that today feel most alive. We think especially of contemporary East Asian cinema, the work of auteurs like Apitchatpong Weeresethakul, Jia Zhangke, Tsai Ming-liang and many others.²³ The 'slow' cinema of these and other directors clearly owes a

debt to Antonioni's formal vocabulary, and what is certainly compelling about these artists is that they draw on Antonioni's work as a reservoir of formal technique. But much more powerfully they appeal to it also as a means of recording, reckoning with and intervening in East Asian economies, revealing them to be over-determined and dizzying modernisations, with their own concomitant hypertrophy of cities and radical urbanisation of the countryside. After all, the contexts of Antonioni's own stylistic development were comparable – namely the rapid changes in Italian life in the postwar period. His patient and often obtuse way of looking not only searched for the odd juxtapositions of Italy's uneven development, it also sought to dilate time, to introduce a kind of languor into a historical context that had sold its soul to speed. In adopting and adapting Antonioni's strategies, contemporary East Asian directors are not merely declaring a cinephiliac love of European art cinema; rather, they are inserting their films into the social materiality of the political and economic history that links 1950s Italy to twenty-first-century China. What we witness, uncannily, is the recurrence of an insistent, enigmatic, unpredictable gaze.

* * *

Because Antonioni's cinema is, in our view, so richly and complexly imbricated in history, in a thinking of history, and in thinking, it is all the more urgent to revise commonly held perceptions that his work is frozen in time, apolitically stylised and stylish to the point of insipidity. Like the contemporary directors who make so much of his example in so many unexpected ways, we believe that Antonioni's work is still capable of teaching us, precisely, unpredictable lessons, of teaching us how to look again – not only at the films themselves, but at the world, its places and peoples.

The first section of the volume, 'Modernities', identifies a set of ways in which Antonioni's films may be said to illuminate specific areas of their precise historical moments, while simultaneously being profoundly shaped by its material embodiments and discursive expressions. By turning their gaze with keen attention to the relationship of his work inside distinct social, ideological and artistic contexts, the four chapters in this section bring to light instances of Antonioni's profound engagement with the contingent nature of historical processes. Read together, they present us with the image of an artist deeply embedded in his own time, and yet endowed with a powerful capacity for synthesis that produces essential and commanding visions of our shared modernities.

Starting from a careful examination of previously undetected sources, Jacopo Benci traces the reasons for the path that, in the early 1940s, brought Antonioni from his native Ferrara to Rome, thus illuminating a period of the director's biography that has hitherto remained rather nebulous. The connections and relationships unearthed by Benci resonate in compelling ways with the outcomes of Antonioni's artistic and intellectual development; against a biographical backdrop, Benci turns his attention to the embeddedness of Antonioni's developing cinematic

practice in two decades of social, economic and architectural life in Rome. While clarifying the ways in which Rome shaped Antonioni's early career, Benci also identifies the contours of a (cinematic) city that is specifically his. It is precisely by challenging the critical trope of Antonioni's formalism as timeless abstraction that Laura Rascaroli's chapter tackles the historical resonances of the inorganic in his cinema. The essay identifies a progression in the attention devoted by Antonioni to the object in his work of the 1960s, and comes to focus on *Blow-Up*'s (1966) complex imbrication with precise transnational artistic discourses of the decade. Formalism is elucidated as a framing that is not abstracted from the world, but that in fact produces a range of aesthetic, critical and ideological discourses which speak to and of the world's presentness; Antonioni's understanding of the modern condition is thus understood as developing within a specific set of current artistic and sociological preoccupations.

Angelo Restivo takes issue in his chapter with the overriding reception of *Zabriskie Point* (1970) as the disappointing and preposterous product of the director's utter misunderstanding of the US circa 1970 (and as a failure of all the tenets of art cinema); the chapter compellingly argues that – far from being unrealistic, clichéd and simplistic, as it was then characterised by its critics – the film reveals today an extraordinary appreciation of the social and ideological tensions and contradictions of its present time and society. While somewhat dated even in its day, *Zabriskie Point* has now come to express in powerful ways the revolutionary potential that Benjamin recognised in the outmoded. Through a broad engagement with the figures of the detective and the reporter in narrative cinema, especially that of Hollywood, Robert S. C. Gordon uncovers the popular tropes mobilised by *The Passenger* (1975) both in character construction and narrative development, and points to a field of transgeneric meanings and archetypes which destabilises, but also paradoxically reinforces, the 'art-house' reading of this film. *The Passenger* thus comes to be situated in a dialogical relationship with popular culture, while Antonioni's play with cross-generic hybridisations and deconstructions is shown to resonate with the specific development of New Hollywood modernism.

Aesthetic concerns are central to the understanding of an author whose work has profoundly challenged and changed the limits of cinema as a popular art and medium, and continues to be a focus for connections and echoes within multiple artistic fields today. The chapters collected in the second section, 'Aesthetics', engage with the category of art in ways that highlight the configurations of Antonioni's specific working practices, and simultaneously make claims as to how his films may be said to shape, challenge and refigure our understanding of the principles of art and beauty.

Turning to Antonioni's early documentaries, Leonardo Quaresima argues against their status as 'minor works' and also their assignment to the sphere of neo-realist humanism, showing through meticulous investigation how their iconographical

sources and their visual emphases reveal a tendency to abstraction that tempers their ostensibly realist aesthetics and that produces effects of destabilisation and uncertainty. Thus reconsidered and refigured, Antonioni's early non-fictions point to the future stylistic developments of his artistic maturity, but are also fully restored to their aesthetic autonomy. In Rosalind Galt's contribution, the picturesque is characterised according to its double value as representational strategy and as mode of experience; redeemed from the traditional accusations of aesthetic inferiority and political backwardness, it reveals its centrality in historical debates on class, landscape and social change. By articulating the visible and the invisible in the image, and by capturing instances of personal and social anxiety, the picturesque in *L'avventura* brings to the fore states of class tension and fears of revolution, and catalyses key discourses on the transformation of space in capitalist development. Contending with the concept of participation in art as it impinges on questions of aesthetic seriousness, Alexander García Düttmann interrogates the manner in which spectatorial participation occurs in between immediacy and mediation. While Antonioni's *Il provino* (1965) never allows the spectator to forget the constructedness of its subject matter – a screen test in a film studio – it also elicits unmediated participation as an abstract remainder of melodrama. In its rendering of the quasi-simultaneity of participation and observation, the film thus demonstrates Antonioni's acute sense of the possibility and the impossibility of art. Writing against the grain of the established critical understanding of Antonioni's attitude towards actors, and arguing for his deep interest in developing the expressiveness of their bodies, voices and faces, David Forgacs reconstructs the specificity of Antonioni's directorial practice both from interviews and through textual exegesis. The focus on Antonioni's use of actors reveals new depths to his developing aesthetic approach, which also finds an echo in his uninterrupted interest in the foregrounding of both acting and performance.

14

The book's third section, 'Medium Specifics', brings a powerfully revisionist urge to bear on the encounter with Antonioni. These three essays ask us to reconsider Antonioni's relation to the media in which he worked. Whereas it is all too seductive to think of Antonioni as devotee of 'the cinematic', in fact, as these essays reveal, his work is impure. His films play with and bear the traces of the conditions of a historical reality which proves to be multi-mediatic. Matilde Nardelli calls into question the typical critical tendency to view *Blow-Up* as little more than a treatise on the vagaries of photographic indexicality and instead asks us to consider the film's insistence on photography's reproducible 'plurality'. In doing so, Nardelli transforms our understanding of this film. By grounding its discourse on photography in sharply defined historical and art historical contexts, Nardelli reminds us that one of *Blow-Up*'s major lessons is that photographs never exist singly, but plurally, and, therefore, in a condition of unruly difference, not in the supposed veracity of the singular. Francesco Casetti's essay on Antonioni's experiment in video and

colour, *Il mistero di Oberwald* (1980), made for Italian television, asks us to restore what has often been considered as nothing more than an idiosyncrasy back to the heart of Antonioni's canon. This film's strange itinerary through electronic and analogue modes of registration, storage and exhibition illustrates an anti-systemacity that was always at the heart of Antonioni's production. Moreover, in Casetti's provocative reading, *Il mistero di Oberwald* illustrates and anticipates cinema's contemporary susceptibility to what he calls 'relocation': its tendency to migrate across platforms, exhibition sites and aesthetic categories. Michael Loren Siegel compels us to look again at one of Antonioni's least-loved films, *Identificazione di una donna* (1982). Whereas most critics have been somewhat embarrassed by this film's failure to meet the standards of Antonioni's earlier work, Siegel forces us to encounter the film in its historical context, one characterised by what he calls 'the image and media saturation' of Italian culture in the early 1980s. Contrary to critics who have tried to recuperate *Identificazione* aesthetically, Siegel argues for the historical necessity of recognising and embracing (at least critically) the film's vulgarity. For what it puts on display is just how the deregulation of Italian television made itself felt in the texture of everyday life.

The book's final section is titled 'Ecologies', and the essays gathered here all prompt a consideration of how Antonioni's cinema continues to matter in our contemporary era of looming and already present environmental disaster, of accelerated – and frequently interrupted – economic development. Karl Schoonover examines how Antonioni's interest in the visual poetics of waste summons a critique of Italian neo-realism's rhetoric of (but impatience with) contingency. According to Schoonover, Antonioni's films are willing to waste time and to traffic with waste in order to question a modern and modernist interest in productivity and the production of value. Karen Pinkus invites us to acknowledge Antonioni as the 'poet laureate of climate change'. Pinkus's argument is that Antonioni's work forces us to question many of the bromides and comfortable truisms of climate change discourse, in particular our belief that 'the natural' and 'the human' constitute separate or separable categories. In a fascinating reading of *Il deserto rosso* (1964) as proleptically attuned to the problem of climate change, Pinkus argues that Antonioni's blurring of the boundaries between the natural and the technological obliges us to return to a more radically human perspective on our place in the world. Last, John David Rhodes traces how Antonioni's style develops inside and in relation to a landscape of intensive postwar development in the Italy of the 'economic miracle'. Antonioni was consistently interested in the potential of urban and industrial development to offer rich materials for the purposes of stylistic visual abstraction. Style becomes, for Antonioni, not merely a by-product of development, but a means of critically apprehending its mediation of near and far, a way of understanding film's place and intervention in the abusive landscapes of late capitalism.

These essays do not seek, by any means, to exhaust Antonioni's work nor to offer a summation of its enduring influence. We have not tried to curate this collection so as to treat his oeuvre with any claim to systematicity, or with any overarching narrative framework in mind. We have sought to illustrate the vividness of a certain centenary look motivated by a fascination with Michelangelo Antonioni and with conditions of how, in a cultural moment different from his, we encounter him today. The uses to which Antonioni has been and continues to be put are a cultural fact. But, of course, what we unfailingly find in his work is a signature resistance. Antonioni is indissociable from the scholarship which has marked the reception of his oeuvre, and the essays collected here testify to his continuing influence on each of us as we view his films. But what we seek to identify here also are the conditions of a fragile and contingent new beginning. These essays, then, represent a point of departure for new adventures in understanding his work and its place in world culture.

Antonioni's world remains ours. Night is forever falling at the intersection where Vittoria and Piero fail to meet at the end of *L'eclisse*. The yellow fumes are still being exhaled from the factory we see at the end of *Il deserto rosso*. Antonioni's cinema is concerned with the world. Our concern with his cinema will embody, at best, a passionate concern for the world that this cinema has made us see, so beautifully and so strangely.

16

Notes

1. Transcribed from the documentary by Gianfranco Migozzi, *Michelangelo Antonioni. Storia di un autore (Antonioni: Documents and Testimonials, 1966)*, trans. LR and JDR.
2. Roland Barthes, 'Cher Antonioni ...', *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 311 (May 1980), pp. 9–11; reprinted in English translation in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed.), *L'avventura* (London: BFI, 1997), pp. 209–13 (p. 209).
3. Barthes, 'Cher Antonioni', p. 210.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
5. Manny Farber, *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 135–6.
6. Farber, *Negative Space*, p. 134.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 136–7.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
11. Michelangelo Antonioni, 'Making a Film is My Way of Life', in Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, ed. Giorgio Tinazzi and

- Carlo Di Carlo, trans. Marga Cottino-Jones (New York: Marsilio, 1996), pp. 14–17. The essay was originally published in Italian as ‘Fare un film è per me vivere’, in *Cinema nuovo* no. 138 (March–April 1959).
12. Antonioni, ‘Making a Film is My Way of Life’, p. 15.
 13. Farber, *Negative Space*, p. 143.
 14. In ‘No Antoniennui’, a review originally published in *The Village Voice* on 29 December 1966; reprinted in Roy Huss (ed.), *Focus on Blow-Up* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 31–5.
 15. John Orr, *Cinema and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 7.
 16. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII: *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1917–19), pp. 217–56.
 17. Seymour Chatman titles a section of one his chapters on the ‘great tetralogy’ (*L’avventura, La notte, L’eclisse* and *Il deserto rosso*) ‘The New Montage and *Temps Mort*’, *Antonioni, or the Surface of the World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 125–31.
 18. We realise that one misses the definite article in this case, whereas its lack has been naturalised in the English appropriation of *temps mort*.
 19. ‘The distinction of the distinct is therefore its separation: its tension is that of a setting apart and keeping separate which at the same time is a crossing of this separation.’ Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘The Image – the Distinct’, in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 1–14 (p. 3).
 20. Karl Schoonover has brilliantly linked art-cinema performance and spectatorship to questions of labour (that of the film actor *and* the film spectator). Cf. ‘Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema and Its Laboring Subjects’, paper delivered at 2011 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana.
 21. Norman N. Holland, ‘Not Having Antonioni’, *The Hudson Review* vol. 16 no. 1 (Spring 1963), pp. 94–5.
 22. Adam Phillips, ‘The Value of Frustration: An Interview with Adam Phillips’, with Jane Elliott and John David Rhodes, *World Picture* no. 3 (Summer 2009), <http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_3/Phillips.html>
 23. For a discussion of the mobilisation of Antonioni in the Taiwanese new wave, and especially in Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-liang, see Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 159–64.

Index

320

- 8½ (Federico Fellini), 217
2001: *A Space Odyssey*
(Stanley Kubrick), 216
- Accattone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini), 43
Acciaio (Walter Ruttmann), 128
Adventure, The, see *Avventura, L'*
A.I. (Steven Spielberg), 255
Aigle à deux têtes, L' (Jean Cocteau), 207
Alicata, Mario, 23, 28, 38
All the President's Men
(Alan Pakula), 102, 106
Amiche, Le (Michelangelo Antonioni), 21, 32, 99
Amore in città, L' (Cesare Zavattini et al.), 45, 47, 124, 125, 241; see also *Tentato Suicidio*
Amorosa menzogna, L'
(Michelangelo Antonioni), 31, 36, 38–40, 38, 39, 115, 120, 123, 123, 127, 129, 178, 179, 190
Amelio, Gianni, 206
Amidei, Sergio, 31
Andrew, Dudley, 247
Apocalypse Now (Francis Ford Coppola), 82, 103
Apple, The (Samira Makhmalbaf), 240
- Appunti su un fatto di cronaca* (Luchino Visconti), 45
Arata, Ubaldo, 29
Arcalli, Franco, 100
Ariadne auf Naxos (Richard Strauss), 161
Arlecchino (Giuliano Montaldo), 206
Arnheim, Rudolf, 23, 28
Arrowsmith, William, 69, 282–3
Avventura, L' (Michelangelo Antonioni), 2–4, 5, 11, 21, 32, 33, 45, 48, 66, 74, 86, 99, 134–53
passim, 137, 141, 146, 167, 169, 172, 173, 179, 216, 229n4, 238, 284–5, 285
- Bacon, Francis, 74
Badger, Gerry, 189
Bailey, David, 69, 186
Balázs, Béla, 23
Balbo, Italo, 22, 25, 27, 50, 53n19, 54n33, 55n34, 55n42
Balboni, Letizia, 28, 32, 58n63
Balboni, Loredana, 28, 32, 56n52
Balla, Giacomo, 22
Barbarella (Roger Vadim), 249
Barbaro, Umberto, 23, 27, 30, 60n98
- Barthes, Roland, 4, 5, 240, 243, 251
Bartolini, Elio, 172
Bassani, Giorgio, 22
Bataille, Georges, 240
Baudrillard, Jean, 89, 91
Bazin, André, 203n3, 207
Becher, Bernd and Hilla, 198, 199
Becky Sharp (Rouben Mamoulian), 212
Beggar's Opera, The (John Gay), 124
Belmondo, Jean-Paul, 207
Benjamin, Walter, 87, 213
Berger, John, 143
Bergman, Ingmar, 227, 278
Bergman, Ingrid, 170
Berlusconi, Silvio, 219, 220
Bicycle Thieves (Vittorio De Sica), 30, 35, 43, 47
Blair, Betsy, 167, 174
Blow-Up (Michelangelo Antonioni), 64–81
passim, 71, 72, 73, 77, 78, 82, 88, 90, 90, 149, 174, 176–7, 177, 180, 182n14, 185–205
passim, 189, 191, 193, 194, 228, 278
- Boccioni, Umberto, 22
Bois, Yve-Alain, 145
Boisson, Christine, 168
Bongiorno, Mike, 222, 231n23
Bonitzer, Pascal, 142–3
Bordwell, David, 240

- Bosé, Lucia, 167, 178
 Bosworth, Richard, 41
 Bottai, Giuseppe, 55n34
 Bourdieu, Pierre, 71
 Branciroli, Franco, 207
 Brando, Marlon, 99
 Braque, Georges, 5
 Braun, Emily, 256
 Bresson, Robert, 172
 Brown, Lancelot
 'Capability', 140, 144
 Brueghel, Pieter, 255
 Brunette, Peter, 142
 Burks, John, 85, 86
 Buskirk, Martha, 80n27
- Caccia tragica* (Giuseppe De Santis), 28, 30
Cagney and Lacey (television series), 224
 Caillois, Roger, 88
 Calvino, Italo, 75, 139, 142
 Camerini, Mario, 30
 Campy, David, 197
 Camus, Albert, 57n59, 142
 Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal), 255
 Canby, Vincent, 82, 84, 242
 Canudo, Ricciotto, 23
 Capra, Frank, 107
 Caretti, Lanfranco, 22, 23, 53n16
 Carné, Marcel, 29, 36, 37, 167, 172, 295
Caro diario (Nanni Moretti), 139
Caro Ivan (Michelangelo Antonioni), 38
Caso Mattei, Il (Francesco Rosi), 274n48
 Cederna, Antonio, 48
Charlie is My Darling (Peter Whitehead), 69
 Chatman, Seymour, 32, 68, 74, 141–2, 169, 186–7, 217, 223, 229n2, 247, 276, 284
 Checchi, Andrea, 30
 Chiaretti, Tommaso, 142
 Chiarini, Luigi, 23, 27
- Chinatown* (Roman Polanski), 88, 110, 111n12
 Chionetti, Carlo, 179
 Cimino, Michael, 83
Cina Chung Kuo (Michelangelo Antonioni), 111n7, 296–7
 Cini, Vittorio, 24, 25, 50
Citizen Kane (Orson Welles), 101, 104
 Cleaver, Kathleen, 85
 Cochran, Steve, 167, 172, 174
 Cocteau, Jean, 30, 207, 208
 Cole, Ernest, 192
Commare secca, La (Bernardo Bertolucci), 43
 Coppola, Francis Ford, 96n3
 Cortázar, Julio, 188, 203n12
 Craxi, Bettino, 219
Cronaca di un amore (Michelangelo Antonioni), 29, 32, 66, 99, 115, 117, 123, 123, 125, 167, 208, 280–1, 280
 Cuccu, Lorenzo, 280
 Cuny, Alain, 3
- Dallas* (television series), 224
 Dalle Vacche, Angela, 248, 251
 D'Amico, Suso Cecchi, 31
 D'Annunzio, Gabriele, 41
 Daumier, Honoré, 155, 157
Day After Tomorrow, The (Roland Emmerich), 255
 De Chirico, Giorgio, 22, 30, 39
 De Laurentiis, Dino, 158, 159, 162, 177
 Deleuze, Gilles, 89–90, 92, 154, 263
 Depero, Fortunato, 22
 De Pisis, Filippo, 22
 Derry, Charles, 108–9
- De Santis, Giuseppe, 23, 27, 29, 30, 31, 38
Deserto rosso, Il (Michelangelo Antonioni), 16, 50, 65, 66–7, 67, 87, 88, 117, 122, 131n3, 168, 173, 179, 180, 216, 225, 227, 230n7, 237, 238, 239, 241, 245, 247–51, 258, 259, 261, 262, 263–70, 267, 269, 270, 282, 287–94, 288, 289, 291, 292
 De Sica, Vittorio, 30, 35, 43, 45, 47, 59n88
 Di Carlo, Carlo, 37, 45, 167, 174, 181n7
 Di Cocco, Francesco, 36
 Diffrient, David Scott, 139
 Dith, Pran, 106
 Dixon, Ivan, 93
Dolce vita, La (Federico Fellini), 3, 102, 103
Dr. No (Terence Young), 107
 Duchamp, Marcel, 74, 75
- Earth Trembles, The*, see *Terra trema, La*
Eclipse, see *Eclisse, L'*
Eclisse, L' (Michelangelo Antonioni), 9, 10, 16, 25, 29, 32, 35, 48, 49, 50, 65, 66, 70, 73, 88, 143, 167, 170, 171, 171, 172, 173–4, 175, 179, 180, 210, 216, 226, 229n1, 238, 241, 242, 268, 276, 277, 277, 281, 284, 285–6, 286, 290
 Eisenstein, Sergei, 211–12
 Ellis, John, 226–7
 Emmerich, Roland, 255
 Epstein, Jean, 213
Esposizione in tempo reale (Franco Vaccari), 196, 201
Europa '51 (Roberto Rossellini), 43
 Evans, Walker, 197

- 322
- Fabbri, Diego, 41
 Farber, Manny, 5–6
 Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, 107
 Fellini, Federico, 31, 38, 169, 190
 Ferreri, Marco, 32
 Ferzetti, Gabriele, 179
 Fioroni, Giosetta, 74
 Fischinger, Oskar, 249
 Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 28
 Flatley, Guy, 84
 Fox, John, 223, 224, 225
 Frampton, Hollis, 201, 205n38
 Franchetti, Leopoldo, 138
 Frank, Robert, 197
 Frechette, Mark, 84, 181n8
 Freud, Sigmund, 8, 9
 Funi, Achille, 22
Funivia di Faloria, La, see *Vertigine*
Funny Face (Stanley Donen), 188, 189
- Galt, Rosalind, 278, 298n5
 Gambazzi, Paolo, 66
 Gandy, Matthew, 142
 Gelmetti, Vittorio, 266
 Gendel, Milton, 33
 Genina, Augusto, 29
Gente del Po (Michelangelo Antonioni), 24, 29, 31, 36, 115–16, 118, 119, 121, 121, 122, 125–6, 127, 128, 129, 130, 179, 209, 241, 257, 261, 262, 262, 263, 265, 279
 Giacci, Vittorio, 66
 Gide, André, 23
 Gilpin, William, 134, 143, 148
 Giorgione (Giorgio Barbarelli), 149
 Ginsberg, Allen, 69
 Ginsburg, Paul, 146
 Ginzburg, Carlo, 111n11
 Giovanetti, Eugenio, 213
 Girotti, Massimo, 30
Giulia e Giulia (Peter dal Monte), 206
- Godard, Jean-Luc, 107, 148, 169, 179, 211, 239, 248, 250, 278
Good Morning America (television show), 222
Good Night and Good Luck (George Clooney), 102
 Gore, Charles, 136
Graduate, The (Mike Nichols), 94
 Grateful Dead, 92, 223
 Gray, Dorian, 173, 174
 ‘Green Land’ (Michelangelo Antonioni), 259–60, 262
Greed (Erich von Stroheim), 92
Grido, Il (Michelangelo Antonioni), 117, 167, 169, 172, 173, 179, 180, 241, 268, 281–4, 283, 285, 286, 290, 291–2
 Grierson, John, 37
 Grossberg, Lawrence, 92
 Groys, Boris, 213
- Hackert, Jakob Philipp, 136, 137
 Halprin, Daria, 84, 179, 181n8
 Hamilton, Richard, 69, 74
 Harris, Richard, 67, 168, 174
Hart to Hart (television show), 224
 Harvey, David, 280, 282–3
Heaven’s Gate (Michael Cimino), 82, 83
 Hecht, Ben, 102
 Heidegger, Martin, 223, 225, 261, 271n4
 Hemmings, David, 176, 177, 177
 Hepburn, Audrey, 107
His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks), 102
 Hitchcock, Alfred, 107, 108, 109, 111n7, 111n12, 243
 Holland, Norman N., 11
 Hopper, Dennis, 103
- Hunters in the Snow* (Pieter Brueghel), 255
 Ichikawa, Kon, 3
Identification of a Woman, see *Identificazione di una donna*
Identificazione di una donna (Michelangelo Antonioni), 50, 65, 168, 180, 216–32
In the Theatre (Melodrama) (Honoré Daumier), 155
 Ingraio, Pietro, 23
 Insolera, Italo, 34
It’s a Wonderful Life (Capra), 108
- Jameson, Fredric, 277, 297–8n4
 Jeunet, Pierre, 247
 Jia Zhangke, 11
 Jones, Amelia, 187
- Kafka, Franz, 23
 Karina, Anna, 179
 Kauffmann, Stanley, 82
 Kelly, William, 216, 217
Killing Fields, The (Roland Joffé), 102, 103, 106
 Kinder, Marsha, 83, 97n33
 Knight, Richard Payne, 134, 136–7, 139, 140, 141, 144, 148–50
 Koch, Carl, 33
 Kracauer, Siegfried, 254, 260, 272n26
 Kral, Petr, 142
 Krauss, Rosalind, 88
 Kristeva, Julia, 77
- Lacan, Jacques, 88
Ladri di biciclette, see *Bicycle Thieves*
Last Tango in Paris (Bernardo Bertolucci), 99
Late Mattia Pascal, The (Luigi Pirandello), 108
 Lattuada, Alberto, 30, 118–19, 119, 120, 122
 Lauper, Cyndi, 226
 Leary, Timothy, 94

- Leone, Rosario, 26, 28
 Libera, Adalberto, 49
 Ligeti, György, 216
 Lizzani, Carlo, 23, 30, 38
 Longanesi, Leo, 256
 Lotman, Jurij, 187
Louisiana Story (Robert Flaherty), 240
 Lumières Brothers, 249

 Macarthur, John, 144, 145
Macchine inutili
 (Michelangelo Antonioni), 119, 132n8
Malavoglia, I (Giovanni Verga), 138
 Mambor, Renato, 74
 Mangano, Silvana, 162
 Mann, Thomas, 23
 Manzini, Ezio, 246–7
 Martini, Arturo, 23
 Marx, Karl, 280
 Maselli, Francesco, 28, 31, 32, 36, 44, 132n7
 Mastroianni, Marcello, 103, 167
 Matisse, Henri, 5
 Mattei, Enrico, 264–5, 274n48
 Matthau, Walter, 102
 Maynard, Patrick, 190, 192
 McCann, Frances, 33
 McCullin, Don, 189
 Mellor, David, 69, 74, 78
 Messenger, Annette, 64
 Mida, Massimo, 27, 28, 30
 Michelucci, Giovanni, 49
 Milian, Tomas, 216
Mistero di Oberwald, Il
 (Antonioni), 206–15
 passim, 207, 217
 Moe, Nelson, 138
 Moholy-Nagy, László, 122, 124, 127, 127, 129
 Montagu, Lady Judy, 33
 Montale, Eugenio, 23
 Moog, Robert, 275n51
 Morand, Paul, 29
 Morandi, Giorgio, 39, 256
 Moravia, Alberto, 48–9
 Moreau, Jeanne, 66, 167, 174, 175, 175

 Moretti, Nanni, 139, 141
 Moro, Aldo, 209
 Morton, Timothy, 258
 Mulvey, Laura, 110n2
 Munari, Bruno, 119–21, 132n8
 Mussolini, Benito, 22, 50, 264
 Mussolini, Vittorio, 23, 28, 50

 Nabokov, Vladimir, 161
 Nancy, Jean-Luc, 10
 Nannini, Gianna, 225, 232n30
 Natoli, Aldo, 48
 Nicholson, Jack, 99, 103, 110, 111n9, 111n12, 167, 180, 181n5, 242
Nine Swimming Pools
 (Edward Ruscha), 205n34
 Nixon, Richard, 84
nostalgia (Hollis Frampton), 201–2
 Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey, 141, 300n43
 N.U. (Michelangelo Antonioni), 21, 31, 35–8, 37, 43, 50, 59n72, 60n93, 60n97, 115–18, 118, 120, 123, 123–5, 125, 127, 129, 129, 179, 235, 236, 237, 238, 241, 252n2
Nulla si distrugge, 36

O di uno o di nessuno, 53n22
Odd Couple, The (Gene Saks), 102
 Oiticica, Hélio, 240
 Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, 225
Osessione (Luchino Visconti), 28, 133n15, 257, 257, 271n12, 299n17

 Pagano, Giuseppe, 132n11
Paisà (Roberto Rossellini), 299n17

Pale Fire (Vladimir Nabokov), 161
 Papini, Giovanni, 22
 Parigi, Stefania, 40
 Pasinetti, Francesco, 23, 27, 28, 29, 32
 Pasinetti, Pier Maria, 28, 32
 Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 43, 62n133, 150, 278, 293, 294
Passenger, The
 (Michelangelo Antonioni), 13, 167, 180, 211, 216, 227, 228, 229n1, 242, 243, 278
 Paton, William Agnew, 137, 139, 141
 Pavese, Cesare, 23, 53n18, 63n143
 Peck, Gregory, 101, 102, 106, 107
 Pellizzari, Antonio, 32
 Penna, Sandro, 23
People of the Po, see *Gente del Po*
 Peploe, Mark, 99, 101, 110
 Phillips, Adam, 11
 Piacentini, Marcello, 44, 49, 58n67, 63n141
Piazza San Marco
 (Francesco Pasinetti), 59n72
 Pietrangeli, Antonio, 29, 30
Pilot Returns, A, see *Pilota ritorna, Un*
Pilota ritorna, Un (Roberto Rossellini), 28
 Pink Floyd, 223, 229n1
 Piovene, Guido, 30, 258–60
 Pirandello, Luigi, 22, 53n22, 108, 110n6, 213, 215n8
Plein soleil, see *Purple Noon*
 Poletto, Piero, 256
 Ponti, Carlo, 38
 Ponti, Gio, 29, 286
Popcorn (television show), 224
 Pope, Alexander, 276
Prefazione, see *provino, Il*
Processo di Maria Tarnowska, Il (Luchino Visconti et al.), 30, 162

- Professione: Reporter*, see *Passenger, The*
- Proust, Marcel, 23
- Provino, Il* (Michelangelo Antonioni) 14, 154–66 passim, 177
- Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock), 99
- Puccini, Giacomo, 23, 27, 29, 30
- Purple Noon* (René Clément), 112n16
- Quaid, Dennis, 271n5
- Quilici, Nello, 22–4, 27, 32, 50
- Rabal, Paco, 170, 174
- Racconti romani* (Alberto Moravia), 63n137
- Raimondi, Sergio, 39
- Rauschenberg, Robert, 75
- Ravenna, Renzo, 22
- Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock), 111n7
- Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock), 112n14
- Red Desert*, see *Deserto rosso, Il*
- Redgrave, Vanessa, 176, 177, 203n8
- Reed, Rex, 181n8
- Renoir, Jean, 33
- Resnais, Alain, 278
- Restivo, Angelo, 17n23, 138–9, 150, 241, 244, 282, 287
- Richardson, Tony, 6
- Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* (Michelangelo Antonioni), 139
- Rivette, Jacques, 169
- Rohdie, Sam, 218, 273n33
- Rohmer, Eric, 169
- Rolling Stones, 69, 223
- Roman Holiday* (William Wyler), 102, 105–7
- Roncagli, Elisabetta, 51n5
- Rosi, Francesco, 34, 42, 62n133, 111n11
- Rossellini, Roberto, 3, 35, 43, 45, 138, 170
- Royal Road Test* (Ed Ruscha), 195, 198
- Running Man, The* (Carol Reed), 112n16
- Ruscha, Ed, 191, 195, 198, 199
- Russell, Rosalind, 102
- Ruttman, Walter, 128
- Sacca, Ammonio (journalistic pseudonym for Michelangelo Antonioni), 55n42, 57n54
- Sadoul, Georges, 3
- Safe* (Todd Haynes), 240
- Salvador* (Oliver Stone), 103
- Sanders, August, 197
- Sanders, George, 170
- Sanxia haoren*, see *Still Life*
- Sarris, Andrew, 7
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 88, 210
- Savinio, Alberto, 31
- Sbragia, Giancarlo, 169, 172
- Scalera, Michele, 29
- Scandali segreti* (Michelangelo Antonioni and Elio Bartolini), 172
- Sciecchio bianco, Lo* (Federico Fellini), 38, 190
- Schanberg, Sidney, 106
- Schifano, Mario, 74
- Schneider, Maria, 99, 105, 106, 110n2, 111n9
- Schoonover, Karl, 278
- Sciascia, Leonardo, 111n11
- Sciuscià* (Vittorio De Sica), 43
- Seconds* (John Frankenheimer), 112n16
- Senso* (Luchino Visconti), 179
- Serra, Richard, 145
- Sette canne, un vestito* (Michelangelo Antonioni), 31, 115, 117, 118, 122, 122, 127, 128, 129, 129, 130, 130, 249, 279, 292, 293
- Shepard, Sam, 92
- Shining, The* (Stanley Kubrick), 111n12
- Shooting Stars* (Anthony Asquith), 162
- Siamo donne* (Gianni Franciolini et al.), 162
- Sib*, see *Apple, The*
- Signora senza camelia, La* (Michelangelo Antonioni), 31, 32, 44, 44, 45, 49, 50, 178, 208
- Silly Symphonies* (Walt Disney), 212
- Sintesi di paesaggio urbano* (Mario Sironi), 128
- Sironi, Mario, 36, 39, 40, 127
- Soffici, Ardengo, 22
- Soldati, Mario, 30
- Some Los Angeles Apartments* (Ed Ruscha), 191
- Someone Behind the Door* (Nicolas Gessner), 112n16
- Sontag, Susan, 196–8, 276, 277
- Soraya (Princess Soraya Esfandiary-Bakhtiari), 155, 158–62, 166, 177
- Spider's Stratagem*, see *Strategia del ragno*
- Spinoza, Baruch, 92
- Spook Who Sat By the Door, The* (Ivan Dixon), 93
- Spottiswoode, Roger, 211
- Stadion in Lyon* (László Moholy-Nagy), 124
- Steel*, see *Acciaio*
- Steimatsky, Noa, 25, 126, 142, 143, 241, 244, 261, 279, 298n12
- Stephenson, Ian, 69
- Sternberg, Josef von, 167, 172
- Stewart, James, 108, 111n7
- Stieglitz, Alfred, 197
- Still Life* (Jia Zhangke), 240
- Stock, Kathleen, 165
- Story of a Love Affair*, see *Cronaca di un amore*

- Strategia del ragno*
(Bernardo Bertolucci), 206
- Strauss, Richard, 161
- Strega bruciata viva, La*
(Luchino Visconti), 162
- Strehler, Giorgio, 175
- Strindberg, August, 175
- Stroheim, Erich von, 92
- Stromboli* (Roberto Rossellini), 139
- Superstizione* (Michelangelo Antonioni), 31, 120, 123, 179, 279
- Svevo, Italo, 23, 63n143
- Sweet Smell of Success, The*
(Alexander McKendrick), 102, 106
- Talbot, Henry Fox, 197
- Tangerine Dream, 225
- Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni), 22
- Tavoularis, Dean, 83
- Tentato suicidio*
(Michelangelo Antonioni), 45–8, 46, 62n128, 124, 125, 178, 179, 241; see also *Amore in città, L'*
- Terra trema, La*, 138
- Terragni, Giuseppe, 132n11
- Testa, Virgilio, 44, 45
- Third Man, The* (Carol Reed), 179
- Thompson, Kristin, 240
- Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), 149
- Tofano, Sergio, 172
- Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* (Peter Whitehead), 79n15
- Tosca* (Jean Renoir), 33
- Towne, Robert, 88
- Tragic Pursuit*, see *Caccia tragica*
- Treccani, Ernesto, 118
- Truffaut, François, 169, 247
- Tsai Ming-Liang, 11, 240
- Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* (Ed Ruscha), 191
- Ultimo tango a Parigi*, see *Last Tango in Paris*
- Ungaretti, Giuseppe, 31
- Ultravox, 223
- Vaccari, Franco, 196, 201, 202
- Vadim, Roger, 249
- Valéry, Paul, 23
- Vangelis, 216
- Vanquished, The*, see *Vinti, I*
- Various Small Fires* (Edward Ruscha), 205n34
- Vasile, Turi, 41
- Ventre della città, Il*
(Francesco Di Cocco), 36
- Verga, Giovanni, 38, 138, 139
- Vertigine* (Michelangelo Antonioni), 31, 117, 118
- Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock), 112n14
- Vertov, Dziga, 23
- Verushka, 193
- Vespignani, Lorenzo, 36, 37, 37
- View of Lipari and Stromboli* (Jakob Philipp Hackert), 137
- Vigo, Jean, 36
- Vinti, I* (Michelangelo Antonioni), 34, 40–2, 42, 43, 44, 45, 48, 157, 241, 244, 256, 245, 246
- Viridiana* (Luis Buñuel), 3
- Virno, Paolo, 94
- Visconti, Luchino, 28, 29, 30, 33, 34, 138, 162, 169, 179, 227, 257
- Visentini, Gino, 26
- Visiteurs du soir, Les*
(Marcel Carné), 129, 130, 167
- Vita dei campi* (Giovanni Verga), 138
- Vitti, Monica, 3, 66, 67, 70, 88, 167, 169, 170, 171, 172–4, 179, 207, 276
- Volonté, Gian Maria, 274
- Walker, Beverly, 83
- Walpole, Horace, 144
- Walton, Kendall L., 163–5, 166n4
- Warhol, Andy, 75
- Weeresethakul, Apitchatpong, 11
- West, Nathaniel, 88
- Whitehead, Peter, 69, 79n15
- Wholly Communion* (Peter Whitehead), 69
- White Sheik, The*, see *Sceicco bianco, Lo*
- Wollen, Peter, 99, 110
- Woods, James, 103
- Woodward, Robert, 106
- Woolf, Virginia, 98
- Wyler, William, 102, 107
- Xala* (Ousmane Sembene), 240
- Yang, Edward, 17n23
- Yardbirds, 81n36, 223
- Zabriskie Point*
(Michelangelo Antonioni), 13, 25, 65, 82–97 passim, 91, 107, 168, 179, 211, 216, 217, 223, 229n1, 278, 296
- Zavattini, Cesare, 30, 47, 124, 125, 130, 178
- Zinneman, Fred, 172

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