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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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Contents

Michelangelo Antonioni
1913-

Italian film director, screenwriter, short story writer, and painter.

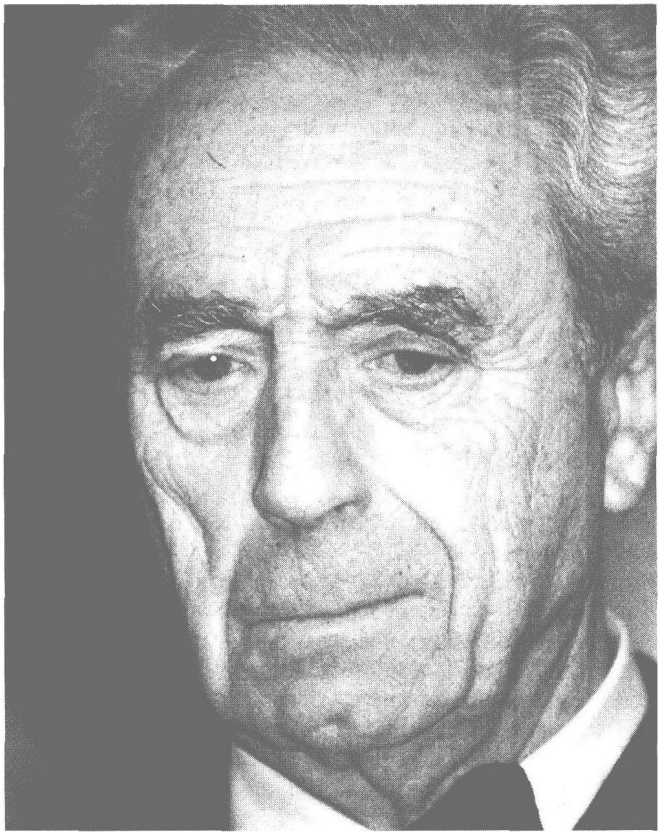
The following entry presents an overview of Antonioni's career through 1999. For further information about his life and works, see *CLC,* Volume 20.

INTRODUCTION

Ranked among the world's great film directors, Antonioni is noted for the meticulous artistry with which he composes his films. Reviewers commend the visual grace of his camera work, his painterly use of color to express meaning, and his slow and thorough probing of the psychology of interpersonal relationships. He achieved the peak of his fame during the 1960s with films exploring issues such as the travels of the Italian Jet Set; the alienation and anomie caused by industrial capitalism; the unreliability of perception; and the loss of identity.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Antonioni was born in Ferrara, Italy, the son of a landowner. He attended the University of Bologna from 1931 through 1935, studying architecture and economics. Between 1935 and 1939, he worked as a journalist and a bank teller. He moved to Rome in 1939, where he reviewed films for *Cinema* and studied filmmaking at the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografica.* He worked with Roberto Rosselini and Marcel Carne in the early 1940s, but was drafted into mandatory service in the Italian army in 1942, which prevented him from continuing to work in film. After the war, he joined with the neo-realists, writing the script for Federico Fellini's *The White Shiek,* and directing short documentaries and feature films. As early as 1950, with *Cronaca di un amore* (*Story of a Love Affair,* 1975), he began to move away from neo-realism and its nearly exclusive social focus, to concentrate on his characters' psychology. With *L'avventura* (*The Adventure,* 1960), he abandoned neo-realism entirely for introspective meditations on the interpersonal effects of the economic boom in Italy during the 1960s. After the 1960s, Antonioni continued to make movies but remained out of the public eye. In the late 1980s, he suffered a debilitating stroke that left him unable to speak. Nevertheless, with assistance from German director Wim Wenders, Antonioni directed *Beyond the Clouds* in 1996, and continued to make movies, directing *Destinazione Verna* and *Just to Be Together* in 1999. In 1995, Antonioni was awarded an Academy



Award for lifetime achievement. Among his other awards are the Grand Prize from the Punta del este Festival in 1951 for direction of *Cronaca di un amore;* the Silver Lion award in 1955, at Venice for *Le amiche* (*The Girlfriends,* 1955); the Golden Bear from the Berlin International Festival for *La notte* (*The Night,* 1961); prizes at the Cannes and Venice film festivals for *L'avventura, Il deserto rosso,* (1964), and *Blow-Up* (1966) and the Settembrini-Mestre Award for the best book of short stories, for his 1982 collection *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber.*

MAJOR WORKS

Although he had been working in film since the early 1940s, serving as an assistant to directors such as Marcel Carne, Roberto Rosselini, and Luchino Visconti, Antonioni came to prominence in the 1960s with his own films such as *The Adventure, The Night,* and *L'eclisse* (*The Eclipse,* 1962). These features explore many of the typical themes Antonioni favors, such as the vacuous life of people who

betray themselves and the lives of those who have been betrayed. *Red Desert* depicts the torments of a neurotic woman trying to maintain balance in her life despite feeling choked by the industrial landscape that dominates her surroundings. This was Antonioni's first color film and it highlights (to an even greater degree than his black and white films) his dedication to the aesthetic qualities and purposes of his work. *Blow-Up,* a meditation on creating and interpreting images, was Antonioni's first film in English, and was set in the swinging London of the 1960s. The film achieved immense popularity, even outside the art filmhouses to which Antonioni's works were usually restricted. His popularity declined considerably with the critical failure of *Zabriskie Point* (1969), a Hollywood film addressing the emptiness of American culture, and the pain many Americans experienced during the era of the Vietnam War. *Professione: Reporter* (*The Passenger,* 1975), a melodrama of third world violence as seen by an Englishman who has subverted his own identity, was the last of Antonioni's films to be given commercial theatrical distribution.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

When it was premiered at Cannes in May 1960, *L'avventura* was booed. Penelope Gilliat, a film critic for the London *Observer,* wrote that she slept through the film. Two years later *L'avventura* had achieved considerable notoriety and was widely considered a classic by fans and critics alike. Antonioni's next three films, *La notte, L'eclisse,* and *Il deserto rosso,* were fashionable successes in the art-theatres catering to the new European intellectual film buffs. After the success of *Blow-Up,* Antonioni decided to direct a film in Hollywood, but *Zabriskie Point* was riddled with difficulties during production. The American crew on the film disliked the way Antonioni worked and regarded the film as "anti-American." The feature was a critical failure, neither appealing to the popular nor to the art-house audience. Reaction to Antonioni's films has always been divided, but it has never been indifferent. To some viewers, the films are excruciatingly boring and pretentiously empty, lacking in plot or coherence, and luxuriating in neurotic anxiety and amateur profundity. However, others see Antonioni's work as profoundly beautiful and serious, exploring essential questions of identity, morality, and ethics.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Gente del Po [*People of the Po Valley*] (documentary short) 1947
Nettezza urbana [*N. U.; Sanitation Department*] (documentary short) 1948
L'amorosa menzogna [*Lies of Love*] (fictional short) 1949
Cronaca di un amore [*Story of a Love Affair*] (film) 1950
La signora senza camelie [*The Lady without Camelias*] (film) 1953
Le amiche [*The Girlfriends*] (film) 1955
Il grido [*The Cry*] (film) 1957
L'avventura [*The Adventure,* 1960] (film) 1960
La notte [*The Night*] (film) 1961
L'eclisse [*The Eclipse*] (film) 1962
Il deserto rosso [*Red Desert*] (film) 1964
Blow-Up (film) 1966
Zabriskie Point (film) 1969
Chung Kuo (documentary) 1972
Professione: Reporter [*The Passenger*] (film) 1974
Il mistero di Oberwald [*The Mystery of Oberwald*] (television feature) 1979
Identificazione di una donna [*Identification of a Woman*] (film) 1982
Quel bowling sul Tevere [*That Bowling Alley on the Tiber: Tales of a Director*] (short stories) 1982
Al di là delle nuvole [*Beyond the Clouds*] (film) 1996
Destinazione Verna (film) 1999
Just to Be Together (film) 1999

CRITICISM

William Kelly (essay date Spring 1984)

SOURCE: "Identification of a Woman," in *Film Quarterly,* Vol. 37, No. 3, Spring, 1984, pp. 37–43.

[*In the following essay, Kelly analyzes the moral decadence of Antonioni's characters in* Identification of a Woman.]

Speaking of ***Red Desert,*** Antonioni once said that it was not a result but research, an apt description which could apply just as accurately to all his subsequent narrative films, until now. In ***Identification of a Woman,*** his first Italian film in nearly two decades,[1] Antonioni consolidates and refines the formal and thematic explorations made earlier, blending effortlessly the abstractions of the English-language films with the more intimate milieu and deeper mode of characterization of the Italian films. In addition to drawing from his prior experiments with color, movement, sound, and montage, Antonioni relaxes his strictures on the use of otherwise conventional formal devices by deploying numerous flashbacks and subjective inserts, an abundance of extra-diegetic ("New Wave") music, a freer use of the zoom, and, most surprisingly, dissolves. The result is Antonioni's most lucid work, which brilliantly highlights his most pressing concerns, while helping to illuminate further his previous efforts, especially the much maligned English-language films.

The film revolves around the middle-aged, middle-class Niccolo (Thomas Milian), a film director, and his relationship with Mavi (Daniela Silverio), a young, upper class

woman. Niccolo receives anonymous threats to cease their relationship, but ignores them, with the result that his sister, Carla (Veronica Lazar), loses her position as chief gynecologist of a hospital. After two months, Mavi "disappears" by moving from her apartment without any word to Niccolo. He begins a relationship with Ida (Christine Boisson), a young avant-garde stage actress. After a few weeks, Ida's discovery that she is pregnant by another man ends the relationship. Niccolo, who all along had been seeking a serious subject for a new film, decides to make a science fiction film.

As always with Antonioni, plot summary yields scant indication of substance. It is in the wealth of plastic details and in their correspondences, rather, that his intentions are revealed. Set predominantly in Rome, ***Identification*** depicts a world beset by fear, some symptoms of which include a private alarm system, a gun-toting (and apologetic) neighbor, helplessly benumbed seminarians witnessing a street altercation, a harrowing panicked nocturnal drive at breakneck speed through dense fog, as well as more insidious effects on the character of individuals.

The surfeit of fear, so pervasive throughout the film, arises from what Antonioni sees as the fundamental problem of our age: the contemporary individual, bereft of any viable set of values, unable to maintain faith in any ideal, is becoming less and less prepared to adapt to the many unprecedented conditions of our rapidly changing world. This has been Antonioni's most persistent concern. In his Cannes statement of 1960 he wrote of the "unsuited and inadequate" old morality "sustained out of cowardice or sheer laziness."[2] Since then, we have jettisoned much of the old morality, the sexual revolution being just one outcome, but the ethical void has yet to be filled. Thus without any set of values, and with the limitations of relying on the self-propulsion of egoism becoming ever more apparent, the "fears and terrors and stammerings that are associated with a period of gestation."[3] are that much more evident. Accordingly, in ***Identification,*** Antonioni presents the individual as living in a constant state of exigency, tending to rely not on a balanced use of reason and instinct, but on instinct, which is woefully regressive since adaptation "occurs not by instinct, but in spite of it."[4]

Backed into the corner of his/her own psychic chaos, the modern individual has been reduced to a primitive level at which the sole criterion for action is the instinct for self-survival, the consequence of which finds the individual at odds with the good of the larger community, unravelling the social fabric to the point where we, as technologically sophisticated barbarians, annihilate each other. A frightening vision, no doubt, but not despairing, for Antonioni still sees the possibility of finding new values appropriate to our age.

In doors, the dominant visual motif of ***Identification,*** Antonioni has found the ideal object with which to suggest the moral condition of each character: when, how, or if a character passes through a doorway accentuated the ethical nature of his or her actions. This is a formal strategy Antonioni wastes no time in implementing. The first image of the film appears simply to be a floor-level shot of a wall imprinted with a subdued geometrical design. The longer this image is held, however, its perspective begins to seem out of joint, as the surety of the initial impression gradually gives way to uncertainty, to which the film's intermittently obstructing titles only add. Then, what at first seems to be a piece of the floor rises at an acute angle from the base of the image, but reveals itself to be something quite different: an opening door, seen from above. This spatial dislocation, from an assumed viewpoint grounded securely on the floor to one situated precariously off the side of a wall above the door, is disorientating to say the least. And into this disorientating image walks Niccolo, the most ethically disoriented of the film's major characters. Antonioni quickly augments the door/ethics correlation, as Niccolo, after climbing the stairs to his own apartment's door and realizing he's lost his keys, mumbles four times the word "karma."

A closer look at Niccolo and the film's two other major characters will help in getting a better idea of just how Antonioni conveys his concerns.

Niccolo differs from Antonioni's previous male protagonists in that he is surprisingly affable and a much more credible object of women's affections. The difference stops there, however; as with the others, his bad habits—selfishness, egoism, irresponsibility—overcome him. In his relationship with Mavi, in their numerous torrid love scenes, or when, for example, he places a blanket on the sleeping Mavi and watches over her, Niccolo appears to be attentive, generous and caring, but as Mavi tells him later, he cares for her physical, not her emotional health. And even this is cast in doubt when Mavi tells him (to the accompaniment of an off-screen siren), that the doctor ordered abstention from sexual activity, and he responds "one time can't hurt." Needless to say, the one time turns to many times.

Niccolo's love relationships are strikingly impersonal; it doesn't seem to matter whom he's involved with. To Niccolo, a woman is more a habit than an individual. Although Niccolo professes to search for "the ideal woman" as inspiration for his next film, he views the real women in his life as objects, or interchangeable parts. When Niccolo discusses his chimerical search with a male friend, the latter asks about Mavi, whom Niccolo contemptuously dismisses from having anything to do with it. This dichotomous view of women is hinted at early in the film during this first conversation with Mavi.[5] While waiting to see his sister in her office, Niccolo answers the phone and receives Mavi's call to make an appointment. Niccolo likes the sound of her voice and arranges a date with her. In the course of their short conversation, while he tells her "I'm uneasy when I can't visualize the person I'm talking to," he looks at an x-ray of another woman. His talking to one woman while looking at or thinking of another is

perfectly in keeping with his habitually divided attention. This is even more apparent in a later scene, when, after his unsuccessful initial search for Mavi, Niccolo is on a date with another woman (possibly his ex-wife) whom he quickly discards when he sees Ida for the first time.

The habitual nature of Niccolo's behavior is given salient expression in the scene where he does succeed in tracing Mavi to her new home. While Niccolo hides on the landing above her apartment, Mavi returns from the outside, but must wait to enter the apartment until her roommate unjams the door lock. In the meantime, Mavi searches for matches to light a cigarette. Niccolo, who has been secretly watching, begins to move forward, his arm outstretched with lighter in hand. Suddenly, as if realizing the absurdity of his unthinking actions, he stops, and abandons his attempts to talk to Mavi.

On the very next day, when Niccolo and Ida take a trip to Venice, the tenuousness of his affections becomes glaringly evident. As they are out in a small boat on the lagoon, he suggests to Ida that marriage would be a "solution" to their problem. (This must surely be the most unromantic marriage proposal ever portrayed in a film.) The proposed solution, similar in spirit to what Antonioni termed the "mutual pity" informing the end of ***L'avventura,*** is, however, short lived. Upon returning to their hotel, Ida receives a phone call and learns of the positive results of her pregnancy test. Niccolo is cold at best when he thinks the child is his, and then downright callous when Ida realizes she already had been pregnant when she and Niccolo first met. Ida-as-mother no longer fits Niccolo's solution scheme. Proposing only moments ago, Niccolo now seems a stranger, and long before the scene's conclusion, his final response is intimated by the hundreds of pigeons seen through the glass doors of the hotel. When Niccolo walks up to those doors we already know that he will take flight from Ida.

Niccolo is not the only male in the film to exhibit less than admirable behavior. The scene in which Niccolo waits in the hospital to see his sister begins with a shot of a pregnant woman moving out of the frame. When Carla comes into the waiting room and Niccolo approaches her, a man suddenly runs up to them shouting "I was first." Naturally this man is not waiting to see the gynecologist; his wife, presumably that pregnant woman, is. The man's use of the first person singular to the exclusion of his wife is true to a type of male self-centeredness. In this same sequence, Carla tells Niccolo she has lost her position at the hospital. Even though it was Niccolo who had received the threats about continuing his relationship with Mavi, it is Carla who is victimized: another female casualty in the petty battle of male egos, in this case between Niccolo and, as it turns out, Mavi's well-connected father. Taken together, Niccolo's behavior and the seemingly incidental acts of the film's other men form a rather unflattering portrait of the modern male, one which might best be titled, "Objectification of Women." The film's actual title is somewhat ironic as it suggests that which Niccolo is incapable of accomplishing, much less conceiving; for how could someone who views all women as essentially the same think of identifying *a* woman?

A recapitulation of this failing of Niccolo's occurs near the end in one brief shot of him returning to his apartment building after the trip to Venice. From a medium close-up of a statue of a woman, the camera tilts down to reveal Niccolo turning away from the statue. The statue, like the ever-growing collage of photographs of women that Niccolo amasses in his apartment, defines the extent of his relationship with women: remote objects to be contemplated, completely void of any genuine emotional association. The tilt itself, by barring Niccolo from sharing the frame with the statue, expresses the separation between Niccolo and his chosen object(s) of contemplation.

Conversely, through his empathic portrayal of his female characters, Antonioni not only comes closer to the promise of the film's title, but goes beyond it to approximate something of an identification *with* these women. Mavi is the most ambivalent character in the film. She is also the most self-destructive. Her sensitive and essentially honest nature conflicts with her own wealth and upbringing. Assimilated into the bohemian fringe, she eschews outward display of wealth by no longer spending time with her "old crowd," and by living in modest apartments located in run-down neighborhoods complete with Socialist Party posters and Communist graffiti. But the only activities we see her involved in—making love, attending parties, and shopping—belie that image, and affirm that hers is actually a life of purposeless leisure, supported by enormous wealth. These consciousness-obliterating activities offer her immediate relief at the cost of long-term stability, and constitute a prevalent form of myopic behavior. This is true especially of her sexual activity; despite the doctor's orders, she risks her health for its swift narcotic effect. That Mavi admits to having "problems" in sexual matters is significant too, as it intimates a possible awareness of, and inner dissatisfaction with, the inordinate disparity of importance between her sexual activity and everything else in her life. Further indications that something is amiss with Mavi's sexual life are her unwillingness to undress fully, and her intensely narcissistic gaze at her own face in a mirror during her one on-screen orgasm.

Mavi's addiction to sexually induced oblivion (her sexual appetite is reflected in her last name: Lupus) is so strong that it overpowers her intense anger at Niccolo and her awareness of the necessity to end their relationship. A simple pan and dissolve beautifully conveys this when they are in a country house following their harrowing drive through the fog. As they cease their discussion, which leaves no doubt as to the terminal nature of their relationship, Mavi suddenly runs to Niccolo, and they embrace. The camera pans left away from them, revealing a burning fireplace at the side of the frame and a closed door in the background. The image dissolves to the same set-up with the door—the bedroom door—open, thus effectively suggesting that the heat of her passion literally

dissolves her conscious resentment of, and resistance to, this man she knows she should no longer be with.

But all is not hopeless with Mavi. She does leave Niccolo, albeit in a cowardly fashion, and she survives a difficult test of her resolve in the scene where Niccolo tracks her to her new apartment. Here, Antonioni employs the apartment building interior as a concise metaphor for the labyrinth of Mavi's emotional state. Barred from entering her new home and from being with her new (female) lover, Mavi waits impatiently for the door to open. She asks her friend why she has locked the door in the first place, and when told that Niccolo earlier had been looking for her, she runs downstairs and slams closed the front door to the apartment building, thus placing herself in a state of limbo between these two doors and two relationships. As yet unable to truly enter the door to a new life, she desperately attempts to keep out her previous life—even though, in the form of Niccolo who is on the next landing) it is still an active element in her emotions. Once inside, however, Mavi closes the door behind her, and secures passage to a new phase in her life. In one of Antonioni's most emotionally moving scenes (oozing with romantic piano music of a sort not heard since ***Il grido***), Mavi moves to a window overlooking the street in which Niccolo now stands looking up. Hiding at first, Mavi moves directly before the window, at last confronting Niccolo and her own cowardice, and issues a wordless "addio." "Will you leave me too?" asks Mavi's new lover. Turning momentarily from the window, Mavi says no. When she turns back to the window, Niccolo is no longer there. The outcome of Mavi's new relationship admittedly remains ambiguous (she had female lovers before Niccolo), but this last scene of hers does intimate a positive change in her life.

Ida is different. Down to earth and honest, she is the strongest character in the film. From a poor background, she has worked from an early age. In contrast to Mavi's fruitless activities, Ida works most of the time as an actress. In her spare time we see her writing and horseback riding. She works in the city and lives in the country, demonstrating her ability to easily bridge urban and rural existences, while underscoring her life's fundamental balance, something the other characters sorely lack. Although she exudes a strong sense of sexuality, we do not see her in any explicit love scene with Niccolo as we do with him and Mavi, for sex is not an all-encompassing impulse for Ida. Nor does Ida possess any hang-ups about being nude; she performs her stage work in the nude, and the one time she actually appears undressed in the film occurs as she is on the toilet in her bathroom—which has no door, indicating that body functions are shamelessly integrated elements in her balanced existence.

Ida's ingenuousness infuses a transparency into her relationship with Niccolo, which is in marked contrast to the relationship of Mavi and Niccolo, so shrouded in a miasma of subtle deceptions, evasions and rampant anxieties. Indicative of the converse nature of these two relationships are the two extended exterior sequences in the film: the fog sequence, with its heavily laden atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and confusion, perfectly illustrating the equivocal nature of Mavi and Niccolo's relationship, and the lagoon sequence, with its clear perspective leading all the way to the horizon, characterizing the genuineness of Ida and Niccolo's relationship. This is not to say the latter scene is winsome; indeed, it is quite the contrary. Its image of two people alone on an otherwise empty and vast body of water hauntingly conveys what Jung termed the "unenviable loneliness" of modern existence. Furthermore, the scene exudes not a cryptic loneliness, offering the possibility for evasion, but a loneliness so conspicuous that in the dead of silence it cries out for recognition and examination. As demonstrated in her conversation with Niccolo, these are demands Ida candidly complies with.

Ida's is an authentic existence. Like anyone else she is prey to the modern world's attendant anxieties, but rather than evade or repress awareness of them, she confronts them, attempting to alleviate a problem, or learning to adapt to its existence. A good example of this can be seen in her response to Niccolo's continuing obsession with finding Mavi. Rather than ignoring the situation in the hope it might disappear on its own, and despite the risk to her newly flourishing relationship with Niccolo, of her own accord Ida searches for and discovers information which leads him to Mavi's whereabouts.

Ida's authenticity manifests itself most outstandingly when, after just having agreed to Niccolo's marriage proposal, she is placed in a quandary from which some kind of hedging might sympathetically be expected. Ida greets the news of her pregnancy with unalloyed joy, and when Niccolo asks if the news is good or bad, she doesn't hesitate to reply affirmatively. But when she begins to ponder the possible effects on her relationship with Niccolo, she changes her answer to "I don't know." Niccolo's blunt reaction to the news of her pregnancy forces Ida to summon up the courage to weigh the two new developments in her life, marriage and pregnancy, which are suddenly at odds with each other. With an inspiring honesty and courage Ida does something no other character in the film does: she sacrifices immediate self-satisfaction for something and someone else, the future and the child. Coming as it does toward the end of a film with numerous evocations of weakness and sterility, Ida's decision is a singularly striking affirmation of human responsibility and hope.

The prominence given to Ida's forthcoming child and Niccolo's nephew in ***Identification*** brings to the foreground a significant element in most of Antonioni's work: the figure of the child. While children have been more noticeable in certain films (e.g., ***Il grido, Red Desert***), their appearances in the others, no matter how brief, have been of equal importance in conveying Antonioni's cautionary implications for the future. In ***Blow-Up*** and ***Zabriskie Point,*** children watch very intently the actions of their erring elders, waiting for their first chance at emulation.

Children appear throughout ***The Passenger,*** some acting as a stimulus for the old Spaniard's fatalistic discourse: "Other people look at them and they imagine a new world. But me, when I watch them, I see the same old tragedy begin all over again." These sentiments are then visually articulated in that film's penultimate shot: a child, who had been throwing rocks at another old man, runs off screen at the same time and frame location as Locke's killers drive on screen, amounting to a temporal compression of mankind's tragically perpetual passage from the child's misguided "play'" of rock throwing to the adult's murderous intent of bullet shooting.

The difference in the way children are perceived in ***Identification*** consists of an emphasis on the uncertainty of their continued existence. One of the key images of the film is an empty birds nest, seen from the balcony of Niccolo's apartment. The image is presented twice, but it is not until the second time, when his nephew questions Niccolo about it, that its significance becomes clear. To the child's question of where the birds are when the nest is empty, Niccolo responds that they are flying around, thereby linking the notion of sterility with flight.

Although flight from the responsibility for one's own existence long has been an enduring major theme of Antonioni, the flight imagery in ***Identification*** is more subtle than in ***La notte,*** for example, with its lengthy rockets sequence and its revealing reference to Hermann Broch's extraordinary novel *The Sleepwalkers,* a book with numerous digressions on the nature of flight, or ***Zabriskie Point,*** with its elaborate stolen airplane sequence. Nonetheless, the characters, save for Ida, are engaged in the same kind and, at the very least, the same degree of flight of their counterparts in the earlier films. Moreover, Antonioni has widened his field of scrutiny beyond the individual's flight to include the larger ramifications of widespread flight.

As in the previous films, men are the preponderant perpetrators of flight, the worst consequences of which are left for mothers and children to face. This is clearly the case with Niccolo's sister, and, of course, Ida. To highlight this male complicity, throughout the film Antonioni juxtaposes the male in flight with the woman's role of mother: Niccolo passes a door through which emanates a pop song, "Mamacita"; he looks at a magazine photo of a woman giving birth; he shares the waiting room with a pregnant woman; and we see him with Carla, a single mother, and Ida, an expectant one.

But even more severely affected than women are children, depicted here as victims of neglect. Not only do we see and hear of Niccolo's inattentive relationship with his fatherless nephew, but Mavi herself is shown to have borne needless suffering from the abnegation of paternal responsibility, made only more painful when her mother's current lover, a man Mavi has always despised, suddenly discloses to her, undoubtedly out of his own selfish need to assuage guilt, that he is her father.

With this ongoing mass male migration from paternal responsibility, women understandably are becoming less willing to bear children, and many, like Mavi and her friends, have taken to what hitherto has been for the most part in Antonioni's work a predominantly male activity: sexual flight. With procreation as the end of sexual union becoming anathema in our time, ***Identification*** looks beyond the breakup of the nuclear family, prefiguring the dissolution of all families. The empty birds nest, then, is a telling symbolic portent of what might become of the human future.

Another theme running parallel to that of threatened procreation is the sterility, or failure, of imagination, wherein our endeavors in the arts and sciences likewise have fallen prey to myopia and flight. The conspicuous consumption of facts and information, like the attainment of sexual gratification, has become an end in itself, with the desire for knowledge having replaced the quest for wisdom. Again, this is not new in Antonioni: Thomas in ***Blow-Up,*** despite his learning the process of observation (sorting out facts from a vast accumulation of visual information) remains ethically vacuous and is thus paralyzed at the end; in ***Zabriskie Point,*** the apparently inexorable tragedy of the self-destruction of a technological miracle crystallizes in the image of books—the recorded accumulation of knowledge—exploding to the accompaniment of an agonized scream; and in the final shot of ***The Passenger,*** a driver education car, in which a student is learning how to drive, but not knowing where to go, at last moves haphazardly to the left—which, in the film's network of directional connotation, leads to destruction. In essence, all are brilliant illustrations of the aspect of the modern dilemma which John Herman Randall, Jr. concisely summarized: "The modern physicist tries to give man God's knowledge of how to do it, but he has overlooked the knowledge of what is best to do."[6]

Identification gives this theme added emphasis and urgency. Upon his return home from the trip to Venice, Niccolo takes yet another flight, this time in his work, by surrendering to the new mysticism, namely, science fiction.[7] Accompanying an image of an asteroid travelling through space is Niccolo's voice-over synopsis of what he images to be his new film: scientists have converted this asteroid into a spaceship so as to be able to fly close to the sun. Niccolo's nephew is heard questioning the credibility of a ship flying so close to the sun, to which Niccolo cynically responds, "The laws of science fiction leave many doors open." His nephew then asks why they should be flying to the sun, with Niccolo responding, "So we'll get to know how the universe was made, and to know the cause of things." Finally, with uncharacteristically verbal directness, Antonioni compellingly conveys the problem of the contemporary mind-set of attending to process without consideration of purpose, as he leaves it to the child to beg the question of our age: "And then?"

In each of Antonioni's films, especially those in color, there exists a proportionate relationship between the sheer beauty of the images and the terrible reality contained in them. ***Identification*** contains at one and the same time

Antonioni's most beautiful images and the most terrifying truths, and might be said to be the latest of a series of metaphysical horror films. But these films are much more than exquisite images of desolation—nothing could be further from a passive acceptance of the world's ills. "Profoundly political in its objective,"[8] Antonioni's work seeks to expose the inherent contradictions of our age, and offers the prerequisite for effecting positive change, understanding. In this context, ***Identification of a Woman*** is the most severe of Antonioni's films, and, as he has described it, his "most sincere."[9]

Notes

1. In 1979, Antonioni made *Il misterio di Oberwald* for Italian television. Based on one of Cocteau's lesser plays, "The Eagle Has Two Heads," it was shot and edited in video and later transferred to film. Hardly an "Antonioni film," its only real interest lies in the director's use of electronic color modification within scenes. In addition, his extensive use of the video technique of keying in may have caused Antonioni to reassess the value of dissolves in film.

2. *Film Makers On Film Making,* ed. Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 208.

3. Antonioni, *Ibid.*, p. 209.

4. Eugene Marais, *The Soul of the Ape,* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 174. A study of the origins of primate consciousness, this is the book that book Locke and Robertson coincidentally were reading in *The Passenger.* Besides being a naturalist, Marais was many things, including journalist and gun-runner.

5. Although this is their initial conversation, it is the second time we see him talk to Mavi. Using a strategy he deployed in *Zabriskie Point* (the flashback of Daria's first scene), Antonioni structures a large portion of *Identification,* from Niccolo's wait in Carla's office to Mavi's late arrival at Niccolo's apartment, as a flashback which isn't immediately apparent as such.

6. *The Making of the Modern Mind,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 100. One further indication of the persistence of this theme in Antonioni's work is the title of his aborted Amazon project, *Technically Sweet,* which he took from a comment by Robert Oppenheimer: "If one has a glimpse of something that seems technically sweet, one attacks this thing and achieves it." (Quoted in R.T. Witcombe, *The New Italian Cinema,* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1982], p. 8.)

7. This is not to say that science fiction is intrinsically so, but, unfortunately, it is a rare film of the genre that escapes this description. Antonioni himself is not opposed to science fiction per se, as indicated in his own thwarted plans to make a science fiction film in the Soviet Union (see "La Méthode de Michelangelo Antonioni," *Cahiers du Cinéma,* No. 342, December 1982, p. 64). Also, while Niccolo's intention to make *any* film could be seen as some kind of victory, the context of *Identification* renders it a shallow one at best.

8. Witcombe, p. 3.

9. Antonioni, before the screening of the film at the 1982 New York Film Festival.

Seymour Chatman (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: "The Great Tetralogy: Plots and Themes," in *Antonioni, or, The Surface of the World,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 51–83.

[*In the following essay, Chatman analyzes how Antonioni explores "the modern condition" in* L'avventura, La notte, L'eclisse, *and* Il deserto rosso, *using plots "liberated" from conventional narrative techniques.*]

If the films of Antonioni's apprenticeship show diverse and sometimes wayward strands of originality, the four mature films—***L'avventura, La notte, L'eclisse,*** and ***Il deserto rosso***—constitute a solid core of achievement. Even early on, critics felt that the first three films formed a trilogy. I would extend the group to include ***Il deserto rosso,*** which differs from the earlier films only in its use of color but not significantly in theme, plot structure, or character type. About the plight of still another middle-class Italian woman, in another difficult relationship, again at odds with her environment, it looks backward rather than forward to the quite different thematic concerns of the later films. I do not claim that Antonioni intended a cycle of four films, only that the themes, style, and worldview are best understood if the films are looked at as a loose unity.

In the tetralogy, the "Antonionian film," as the world understands that expression, was born. The surface of the world was finally captured and then polished with consummate skill. Plots and themes (this chapter), characters (Chapter 4), and settings (Chapter 5) were integrated in a new and brilliant synthesis in a style (Chapter 6) that would be increasingly admired and copied by other filmmakers.

With ***L'avventura*** (***The Adventure,*** 1959), Antonioni established himself as one of international cinema's great artists. The story, which occurred to him on a cruise among the Aeolian Islands off Sicily, concerns the unexplained disappearance of a young woman, Anna (Lea Massari), from the uninhabited island Lisca Bianca ("White Fishbone"), to which she had sailed on a luxury yacht, and the impact of her disappearance on her lover Sandro (Gabriele Ferzetti) and her friend Claudia (Monica Vitti). Anna's feeling for Sandro is highly ambivalent—she both wants him and rejects him. Claudia seems to be the only one who is genuinely upset by Anna's disappearance. With