

# Introduction

What is impressive about Antonioni's films is not only that they are good but that they have been made at all. Films depend directly on mass public support in the form of ticket purchases. Antonioni's films do not appeal to large audiences, and like many another artist he has had to be tenacious, tough-minded, and resilient to pursue his exacting goals through many difficult years. In a 1980 television interview on RAI with Lino Micciché he said: "I always had to fight like crazy to make cinema, because my films . . . have always been tremendous commercial failures. . . . The producers consider me a cold director, a sophistic director, an intellectual director."<sup>1</sup>

Why do average moviegoers find Antonioni difficult? Perhaps because his subtleties of form make the content seem more abstruse than it really is. The slow editing pace, the careful, subtle, measured camera movements, and the long holds on faces and details of location violate their expectations and elicit the question that producers most dread—What's this movie about anyway? Yet the preoccupations of the films do not differ markedly from those of network television's daily fare—the difficulty of sustaining a love relationship, of finding work that is meaningful, of weathering the stormy conflict between our own drive and others' expectations of us. It is not the first time that the form of a work has obscured its meaning—though economic exigencies make that phenomenon rarer in film than it is in the other arts. Of course, it may attest to a film's power that some viewers walk out. As Roland Barthes put it in a tribute to Antonioni:

The activity of the artist is suspect because it disturbs the comfort, the security of the established senses, because it is at once expensive and free, and because the new society which seeks to find itself through diverse regimens has not yet decided what to think.<sup>2</sup>

The discomfort felt by average moviegoers was felt even more acutely by nervous producers. For years Antonioni has been *regista maledetto*, doomed to be unpopular because he was too private. Antonioni recalls one of the blunter of these rejections, made in the fifties by a producer named Amato: "You, Antonioni, are a great director, but we've got to kill you . . . because you're dangerous to cinema, because it's such a pain to see your films."<sup>3</sup> The producers who have risked their

energy and capital on Antonioni's projects will be remembered with gratitude for their vision and contribution to the art of cinema.

Antonioni has to some extent been vindicated by time. Hooted and derided by audiences at the Cannes film festival in 1959, *L'avventura* was a few years later judged to be one of the ten best films of all time. Far from being dated, it is more accessible than ever; what was opaque twenty years ago seems translucent today. (The same fate befell other great filmmakers, the Fellini of *8½* and the Bergman of *Persona*.) Antonioni's films have even anticipated issues of widespread public concern. *La notte*, *L'eclisse*, and *Il deserto rosso*, for instance, touched on the unnerving collapse of normal assumptions about the safety and stability of the environment at a time when few people thought about such matters. It is not hard to see in them implications for the lives of residents of Three Mile Island or Love Canal. Although environmental anxieties have come to be exploited by pop films and television programs (microwave bombardments by the Russians, all manner of UFOs, shootouts in space), Antonioni's art has disdained such popularizations precisely because they remove us, through comforting fictions, from our real plight. Here his superior vision and control show their power. For all their hysteria and manipulateness, commercial films cannot evoke the chilly truths of the final sequence of *L'eclisse*. Of course, artists are not spokespersons, and still less opinion managers. They are concerned not to exploit a public predicament but to show us its implications in an honest and beautiful way. With an artist's prescience, Antonioni perceived signs years before most of us had ever heard the word *ecology*, but his exacting and original vision was not easy to read. The films provided few clues, and practically none of the clues were verbal.

The central and distinguishing characteristic of Antonioni's mature films (so goes the argument of this book) is narration by a kind of visual minimalism, by an intense concentration on the sheer appearance of things—the surface of the world as he sees it—and a minimization of explanatory dialogue. The rendered surface is eloquent once one has learned to read it, and, even more, to accept its esthetic and narrative self-sufficiency. To the viewer familiar with minimalism in the other arts, especially in literature (as in the work of Hemingway and Robbe-Grillet), the demand is not outlandish. But to traditional audiences, for whom story is paramount, the films have seemed troublingly opaque.

To say that Antonioni is obsessed with the surface of the world is not to say that his films are unconcerned with the depths of personality—motives, perceptions, the vicissitudes of the emotional life. On the contrary, he emphasizes these precisely by leaving to the viewer the task of inferring them from (often enigmatic) signs. The very effort demanded of the audience ensures a heavy psychological accent. As in the modern novel, the omission of explicit text paradoxically adds implicit meanings. We fill in what is missing, to the limits of our imagination and experience. The demand placed on viewers is even more challenging than that placed on readers of a novel precisely because of the constraints of the medium. Films do not allow us to stop and reflect on what we have read: the projector, not our eyes, controls the pace. So reflection is deferred, and visual attention and memory are exercised by the deferral.

Antonioni took a long time to learn how to render the effect of surface—fifteen or more years and no fewer than five feature films. Though his early work showed promise, his later artistry is very clearly the result of effort and experimentation. He is a made, not a born, artist. He had to free himself of conventional cinematic means of rendering narrative, especially in respect to dialogue, conventional sound effects, and commentative music. We can see this development beginning in the first films (Chapter 1). Flawed as they are, they show an acute sensibility struggling to master the medium. The first unqualified success is *Il grido* (Chapter 2), which serves as a bridge to the great films of the late 1950s and the 1960s—*L'avventura*, *La notte*, *L'eclisse*, and *Il deserto rosso* (Chapters 3–6). With *Blow-Up* (Chapter 7) Antonioni enters a new, international phase. His style secure, he takes up new themes—the problem of the visual perception of reality, especially as it touches the artist (*Blow-Up*), political revolution (*Zabriskie Point*, Chapter 8), and personal identity and death (*The Passenger*, Chapter 9). His last two films (*Il mistero di Oberwald*, Chapter 9, and *Identificazione di una donna*, Chapter 10) also show movement into new realms, both thematic and technical.

In describing this development, my focus is primarily on the films. I introduce few biographical details—only those that directly pertain to Antonioni's evolving art.<sup>4</sup> But I do quote extensively from Antonioni's highly articulate writings and interviews, since they provide an excellent and revealing commentary on his intentions and method—one that the English-speaking reader may not know.

The amount of space devoted to each film in the following account only partly reflects my feeling of its importance in cinema history. I have discussed at length several lesser films that cannot readily be seen by American filmgoers—the “Prefazione” to *I tre volti* entitled “Il provino,” *Il mistero di Oberwald*, and *Identificazione di una donna*. The discussion is proportionately shorter concerning films like *Blow-Up* that have been widely seen and discussed in America.



# Early Films

## DOCUMENTARIES

Although he had written screenplays for feature films as early as 1939, Antonioni started his career with short documentaries. The experience was decisive: *L'avventura* is inconceivable without its shots of ordinary Sicilian life, as is *La notte* without those of the Milan suburbs or *L'eclisse* without those of the EUR section of Rome.

Antonioni's first documentary was *Gente del Po* (People of the Po), begun in 1943 at the time and near the place where Visconti was shooting *Ossessione*, a film that influenced at least two of Antonioni's own films. Only parts of the original footage escaped the war, and Antonioni was not able to finish the film until 1947. In 1948, he made another documentary, *N.U.* (short for *Nettezza urbana*), about the street cleaners of Rome. He made several more documentaries—*L'amorosa menzogna* (The Amorous Lie, 1948–1949), on the *fumetti*, the comic strip–like photoromances popular in Italy; *Superstizione* (Superstition, 1949), on superstitious practices in the Italian countryside; *Sette canne, un vestito* (Seven Reeds, One Suit, 1950), on the manufacture of rayon thread; *La villa dei mostri* (The Villa of the Monsters, 1950), on the statuary in the Villa Orsini in Bomarzo; and *La funivia del Faloria* (The Funicular of Mount Faloria, 1950), on the funicular railway near the town of Cortina d'Ampezzo.<sup>1</sup>

*Gente del Po* and *N.U.* provide dazzling early evidence of Antonioni's powers. Though they do not experiment with narrative structure, they evoke an unmistakably Antonionian mood. The explanatory voice-over is used with restraint; the images more or less speak for themselves. Each film beats to the rhythm of the life that it portrays. In *Gente del Po*, the camera follows the slow movement of the river down to its wide mouth at the Adriatic, and the very images are regulated by that irrepressible current. The river is broad, opaque with silt, “as flat as a span of asphalt.”<sup>2</sup> It dominates not only the vistas but also the quality of everyday life in “an impoverished country, where everything flows slowly like the seasons, like the river.” Antonioni's camera captures that movement with broad, slow sweeps



*Frame 1*

and countersweeps or holds on slowly drifting boats. Every image is referred back to the river's blank, noncommittal dominance—bargemen loading their boats, field hands threshing and reaping, couples courting, housewives washing, cooking, nursing, shopping, or just standing. The whole life of the river vibrates and pulsates in clear though flatly lit tones. Preferring the visual image to the soundtrack, *Gente del Po* shows the first evidence of Antonioni's lifelong effort to uncover the meanings of things beneath the mystery of their appearances.

*N.U.* also finds a rhythm in its subject—a day in the life of Rome's sanitation workers, who sweep away as the busy city whirls around them. The film emphasizes their "invisible" omnipresence. Antonioni asks us to take a slow, steady look at the world around us, to forget our ordinary preoccupations, and to contemplate that which lies slightly athwart them. Though the film begins at dawn and ends at dusk, its principle of arrangement is geographic as well as chronological. First we see a worker alone in the Piazza del Popolo, then one in the Piazza del Quirinale, then one against San Pietro, another against the bells of Trinità dei Monti, and so on. The film reverses ordinary travelogue interests: however variegated the brilliant Eternal City may be, the street cleaner is everywhere, invisible to the populace and indifferent to the landmarks yet ironically essential to them, to Rome's *nettezza*, its propriety. We see him, humble, modest, even docile, working alone or with a fellow worker, behind a broom, followed by a truck. We see him eating against a wall or taking a postprandial nap. We see his efficacy and modest technology. We see him feeding garbage to the pigs.

*Gente del Po* and *N.U.* already convey the tensions of Antonioni's later career. Only hasty readings of these films interpret them as criticisms of the social system. True, there are sad images: mothers and babies endure the elements; workers drink milk out of metal pails, fetch morsels from a garbage can, or eat their

*Frame 2*

lunches in the bleak street against a stone wall. We know that mothers and babies need better conditions and that workers deserve the sausages that hang temptingly in shop windows before their eyes. But that does not seem to be the message—nor does there seem to be any message at all. The films offer more than easy appeals to sympathy or social reform. We are shown the awesome Po with the humble architecture of its inhabitants and the light irony with which a sanitation worker sweeps up the scraps of a letter discarded in an argument between a middle-aged husband and wife, reminding us that the garbage man always has the last word. The camera eye refuses to simplify, to reduce the heterogeneous complexity of the world to a few motifs merely in order to validate some ideology. (Several early critics erred in stressing Antonioni's "Marxism.") In this earliest evidence, we see Antonioni's primary allegiance to a *vision* of the world in its plastic particularity. His vision of the street cleaners is cool: we are not asked in any direct way to sympathize with their lot. The wall and their placement against it form an interesting design, the kind of pattern that we would expect to find in art photographs. The carefully articulated scale and distribution of the figures, the textures and lighting, the very beauty of the imagery discourage easy social judgments. Antonioni's most valuable contribution to the cinema can already be seen—his unrelenting insistence on the value of the pure visual given. The theme of *N.U.* is "That is the way they look, the sanitation workers; that is the way our streets get cleaned; here is one part of the banal urban scene made visible; what do you make of it?" Few filmmakers had asked such a question before 1948, and it seemed a particularly odd question to ask in Rome three short years after German soldiers and partisan guerillas had fought in its streets. Even in the thick of war-oriented neorealism, Antonioni's viewfinder was beginning to track a kind of film that was different from any that cinema audiences had ever seen.

The look of these short films is not unfamiliar to the fan of Antonioni's later work. After the credits appear against a wall, the very first shot of *Gente del Po*, the first film of his career, is already moving: a pan to the left on peasants unloading sacks of flour from a truck. The word used by the screenplay to describe the shot is *scoprire*, which can mean "uncover" or "reveal" in a relatively conventional theatrical sense, as when we say, "The curtain rises, revealing the interior of a lavish Manhattan apartment." But it also means "discover." This movement of almost surprised discovery calls immediate attention to the existence of the camera, the medium of registration, and the eye behind it. Here begins Antonioni's lifelong attack on cinematic illusion, on the myth that the visual images should be somehow secondary, working only in the service of the story. With increasing subtlety, he would come to challenge the traditional dominance of story over imagery and over the activity of the camera that photographs it.

The words of *Gente del Po*'s title apply literally. These are real *gente*, people, and this is the real Po River, the flowing sheet of gray behind, in front of, and around them. We speak of the human images in a landscape painting as *figures*—meaning the main objects of our attention—and of landscapes, buildings, and so on as *ground*. Here we are prompted to ask, Is this film primarily about the people or about the Po? Which is the figure, and which is the ground? Has the river made the people what they are, or do the people live there because of the kind of people they are? At the very outset of his career, we see the birth of one of Antonioni's chief preoccupations, the tension between figure and ground. The buds in these short documentaries would ultimately bear elegant fruit in *L'eclisse*, which raises the ground of a banal streetcorner in the EUR section of Rome to blinding figure by literally erasing the characters in its last minutes.

The technique of *Gente del Po* is relatively conventional—mostly static setups punctuated by traditional pans and cutaways. The strategy is familiar: first the human situation is shown, then the same old river, which "just keeps rollin' along," or vice versa. The overwhelming monotone of the river—moving but always the same—is invoked by simply reverting to it. The river's indifference to human fate is signaled by its juxtaposition with human situations of different emotional charge: a woman feeding her man, a field worker looking wistfully at the passing boat, a *ragazzo* wooing a *ragazza*, a mother giving medicine to her sick child. The incessant reference back to the river is quite natural. Indeed, it is a little too easy, reflecting something of an apprentice stage of work.

*N.U.* is subtler. Consider one small but telling example. Whereas in *Gente* the camera movements or editing cuts always reinforce our sense of the Po's importance (regardless of the nature of that importance), *N.U.* offers a camera movement so strikingly arbitrary as to prefigure *Il deserto rosso* or *The Passenger*. The film is ostensibly about how we overlook workers and tasks in the urban scene in our everyday obsession with our own affairs. Usual textual logic would suggest a regular foregrounding of the street cleaner, precisely to make him visible. And indeed, foregrounding is Antonioni's *modus operandi* in the first, establishing part of the film: the patient and humble form of the street cleaner is placed against