ANTONIONI IN THE 1980s:
BETWEEN
ART HISTORICAL TRADITION
AND INNOVATION

By

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Eleonora Raspi, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____

Date: 17/09/2015

To Anita,

and all those precious women in my life

ABSTRACT

Key critical accounts on Michelangelo Antonioni's career continue to be carried out within various disciplines, spanning film studies, art history and cultural studies. While much critical recognition is directed towards his great 'moments' of the 1960s and 1970s, current literature shows limitations in thoroughly addressing his 1980s body of work. This dissertation aims at uncovering the significance of this underestimated period, and tracing new perspectives on it, re-orienting the gaze towards Antonioni's cross-disciplinary work and experimental approach.

The core of this study expands the director's undisputed image as auteur to acknowledge him as a multimedia artist, in light of his ways of appropriating multiple creative mediums and his longstanding painting practice. Collectively, Antonioni's multimedia output, from *Le montagne incantate* (1979-1983) to *Roma* (1990), plays on a repetition of previous themes and preoccupations, but does so across the heterogeneous cultural ecosystems of cinema, visual arts, music video and advertising. This study considers such body of work a turning point in the director's career, by recognising his interdisciplinary approach to the art practice, and a pioneering personality that guided his aesthetic journey towards an abstraction of colour and form.

This dissertation is structured into six chapters; after an initial examination of Antonioni's use of colour and space, each chapter focuses on a new professional step within the decade, as with *Le montagne incantate, Il mistero di Oberwald, Identificazione di una donna, Renault 9* and *Fotoromanza, Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* and *Roma.* The analysis of each case study is performed through three dialoguing perspectives, namely thematic, interdisciplinary and inter-textual. From such scrutiny, the works of the 1980s emerge as a truly exciting moment, a lively coexistence of multiple experimental experiences and directions that eventually led to Antonioni's final artistic exploration in the 1990s and 2000s.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

*Non intendo cadere nell'introspezione nostalgica, ma è un
fatto che possiamo parlare di Antonioni come uno dei pochi
sopravvissuti (insieme a Godard) di un'epoca in cui si poteva
intavolare un dialogo radicale con le forme estetiche […].*[1]

Domènec Font Blanch

In looking at the career of Michelangelo Antonioni, analysing his
personality may be a specious but inescapable part of the process. In March
2013, as I entered the director's apartment in Rome to conduct an interview
with his wife, Enrica Fico, I saw the director's clothes elegantly arranged on
the furniture: they were being sold for charity. 'Era un uomo sanguigno, ma
anche molto aristocratico, ferrarese, elegantissimo, quasi inglese', Fico
explained to me. 'Sarebbe stato felice del mio gesto, ma anche geloso del
suo completo Armani.'[2] We both smiled. As the conversation went further,
Fico discussed her husband's fierce and passionate personality, which
prevented him from making compromises in his work; the impossibility of
concealing the true sentiment; and, finally, his many connections to visual
arts and the act of painting.

Indeed, painting is pivotal in the way Antonioni uses his visual art
practice to investigate and reinterpret reality. The recent retrospective
exhibition, *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo. Antonioni e le Arti*, as well as the essays
included in the homonymous catalogue, drew particular attention to the
subject and reaffirmed Antonioni's profound immersion in the realm of
visual art.[3] Curator Dominique Païni presented a wide range of unpublished

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[1] Domènec Font Blanch, 'Macchie, corpi, fantasmi: il colore nel cinema di Antonioni', in *Le
sonorità del visibile*, ed. by Alberto Achilli and others, Atti del Convegno (Ravenna: Londo
Editore, 1999), pp. 77 81 (p. 77).
[2] Enrica Fico Antonioni, 'Congiunzione di sguardi': personal interview, Rome, 17 March
2014. See Appendix 1 for the whole interview. Wherever possible, all the quotes of this
dissertation will be provided in the original language.
[3] Curated by Dominique Païni at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy (10 March, 2013 -
9 June, 2013). Dominique Païni, ed., *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo. Antonioni e le arti* (exh. cat.
Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara), 10 March 30 June 2013 (Verona: EBS, 2013).

documents, journals, personal correspondences and art books from the Michelangelo Antonioni Museum in Ferrara, together with artworks by artists loved by the director, such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Mario Schifano, Giorgio Morandi, Giacomo Balla, Francesco Somaini, Renzo Vespignano and Alberto Burri.

This exhibition has been one of multiple events that were organised for the 2012 celebration of Antonioni's centennial. Among them, in Italy, the international symposium *Cronaca di un autore. Convegno su Michelangelo Antonioni nel centenario della nascita* at the Università di Ferrara portrayed Antonioni as one of the most pioneering filmmakers of the twentieth century.[4] With particular focus on Antonioni's eclecticism and significance, the three-day *Convegno* explored the links of his films with the contemporary national and international cinema, his narrative choices and spatial explorations, and his liaisons with the history of art and video art. The year before, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, held a retrospective of Antonioni's films, organised in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute. Additionally, a programme of events, titled *Homage to Michelangelo Antonioni (1912 – 2007),* was organised in New York City. The celebration also included the *International Conference: Antonioni 1912-2012,* hosted by Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimó at the New York University, and a series of screenings. On this occasion, many of the speakers focused on some of Antonioni's most appreciated films, such as *Il deserto rosso* (1964) and *Zabriskie Point* (1969). Among other topics, papers emphasised Antonioni's use of colour and the inclination towards geometrical abstraction (John David Rhodes), his appreciation for the world of fashion (Eugenia Paulicelli), and his strong interest in new technologies (Karen Pinkus).[5] Attention was also directed to late Antonioni, specifically to *Il mistero di Oberwald* (1980), *Identificazione di una donna* (1982), and the short-

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[4] *Cronaca di un autore. Convegno su Michelangelo Antonioni nel centenario della nascita*, Università di Ferrara, Ferrara, 11–13 December 2012.
[5] See the video recording of the whole conference: 'International Conference: ANTONIONI (1912-2007) — Part 2 of 2', *Vimeo* <http://vimeo.com/40172731> [accessed 3 January 2014]

format films *Roma* (1990) and *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* (2004). Besides being relevant and crucial in expanding Antonioni's legacy, these events also served as an opportunity for scholars to debate once again his cinema and radical dialogue with the visual arts.

Given these evaluations, the overall purpose of my dissertation is to broaden Antonioni's conventional image as cinema director and present him as interdisciplinary artist, wherein I will take into consideration all the works he produced in the 1980s in various artistic mediums with different qualitative outcomes. In particular my analysis will focus on the art series *Le montagne incantate* (1979–1983), the feature films *Il mistero di Oberwald* and *Identificazione di una donna*, short videos *Renault 9* (1983) and *Fotoromanza* (1984), and short films *Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* (1983) and *Roma. Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1989, together with *La Villa dei Mostri* (1950), *Vertigo. La Funivia del Faloria* (1950) and *Kumbha Mela* (1979): as these last three films were not conceived and shot in the 1980s, yet only edited, they will be not part of my main selection.

For the Italian director, the 1980s took shape as a period of re-evaluation of his own work, particularly with respect to experimentation in colour manipulation and approach to new formats, and ultimately paved the way towards new aesthetic approaches in his final years as a painter. For this reason, it is desirable to interpret such decade as a unified and linear journey, and to examine the dialogues within and between Antonioni's works, and with other aesthetic systems. Specifically, this study will address this decade by pursuing a critical analysis of secondary and primary works together, aiming at blurring the boundary between "high" and "low" level texts. Thus, I will particularly focus on those aspects that better identify Antonioni as an artist leaning towards the future, and a director perfectly nestled into his concurrent postmodern era. His optimism towards technological advancements, pluralism of mediums and aesthetical references, experimentalism and contamination of languages, all of this

distinguishes him as 'a director who captures the *air du temps*', as suggested by Italian scholar Francesco Casetti's definition.[6]

Because the subject of this dissertation is multidisciplinary, it may be argued that using a single research method does not suffice to properly render all of its nuances. First, like numerous publications, such as Angela Dalle Vacche's *Cinema and Painting* (1996), Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (2002) and Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes's *Antonioni: Centenary Essays* (2011), this thesis positions itself as a cross-disciplinary study, interweaving the fields of visual culture, gender studies, art history and cinema studies. To paraphrase Dalle Vacche's introduction to her study, cinema has the power to attract multiple elements of visual culture into its textual orbit, thanks to its borderless and comprehensive nature.[7] She argues that art history cannot ignore the development of cinema: such artistic production may establish a dialogue with broader cultural and social issues wherein, she argues, 'the film in all its aspects […] channels, contains and gives meaning to intertextual citations.'[8] With particular regard to Dalle Vacche's method of work, an important aspect of my methodology will consist in integrating art historical readings (referring to artists and themes spanning from the Renaissance period to Transavanguardia) within the context of media and cinema studies. Particularly evident in chapters 1, 3 and 6, yet present in all the chapters of the thesis, an art historical framework and terminology will be used to provide new perspectives and better clarify many aspects of Antonioni's cinematic works.

Second, my approach is also thematic, as the analysis of each work will be developed around key themes that recur in all the chapters at many levels. For instance, these include a renovated use of colour and space; use

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[6] Francesco Casetti, 'Ten Footnotes to a Mystery', in *Antonioni: Centenary Essays,* ed. by Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes (New York: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 206 216 (p. 209).
[7] Angela Dalle Vacche, 'Introduction: a thematic and intertextual approach', in *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film,* ed. by Angela Dalle Vacche (University of Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 1 12.
[8] Ibid., p. 4.

of abstract representation; feelings of lightness and emptiness, contrasted to the materiality of the image; and elements of fragmentation and contamination. Furthermore, I will dedicate ample space to intertextuality, as a way to place Antonioni's works in a dialogue among themselves. For instance, a comparative analysis between *Renault 9* and *Blow-Up* and *Fotoromanza* and *Il mistero di Oberwald* (both analysis in chapter 5) will offer new aesthetic insights on each individual text and draw new connections between them; discussing popular and commercial works within the same framework will prove effective to trace the progression of Antonioni's career and eclecticism.

Third, my method is interdisciplinary, as this study incorporates an analysis of paintings, videos, music clips, cultural and social reflections (female and gay issues), and references to pop culture. I will explore cross-pollinations between the visual arts (painting in particular) and his cinema, and shed light on his work with new technologies, colour and spatial experimentations. The question of Antonioni's multiple practical approaches to his work is key in the 1980s. Whilst being primarily a film director, his visual practice involves painting, collage, photography and video. When it involves films in particular, my study is guided by the theoretical and methodological study by Allen F. Repko, *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory* (2008), in which, drawing on a series of case studies, he argues that interdisciplinary research is better able than single-discipline research to produce a more comprehensive understanding of all the issues concerning one single case study. [9] Relying on Repko's proposed method of work, integrating insights from other disciplines will be useful in framing the complexity of Antonioni's cinema of the 1980s. For instance, both the readings of *Identificazione di una donna* and his commercial videos

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[9] Allen F. Repko et al., 'Preface', in *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory* [2008], ed. by Allen F. Repko, 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publication, 2012), pp. XV–XXIII. For this purpose, Repko's landmark book identifies as core features of research the ability to focus on complex issues and integrate multiple disciplines within the same subject of investigation, and it indicates a precise research model to be used (e.g. 'state the problem', 'identify relevant disciplines', 'integrate insights'), in Repko, p. 10.

(chapters 4 and 5) will take into account concurrent social and media issues, and it will present such works under the light of the director's critical reflection on a new society and a changing cultural environment.

As regard to this last methodological approach, contextualising Antonioni's works of the 1980s may in fact be useful for a discussion on key topics and issues emerging in the decade and echoing in some of his narrative and creative choices. To this purpose, the following section will provide an overview of the main theoretical framework encapsulating the postmodern era. Moreover, with the exception of considerations regarding music (specifically addressed in chapter 3), this second section below will tackle the issues that may have had an impact in late Antonioni. It will outline the growing importance of advertising and its increasing dialogue with film directors; the drastic changes in Italian television and their impact on national cinema and viewers' expectations; the overall aspects of Italian cinema of the decade; and the introduction of the medium of videotape in the practice of cinema.

Context

In 1979, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard published his *La Condition Postmoderne*, a revolutionary volume that symbolically marked the beginning of a new era — or, what comes *after modernity* — and outlined its key traits.[10] The publication aimed at responding to the urgency of defining a reality of growing uncertainty and social fragmentation, a by-product of unexpected economic events, including the oil crisis of the 1970s and the consequent breakdown of the industrial sector. According to Lyotard, the new period of postmodernity marks the end of big ideologies such as Illuminism, Romanticism and Futurism, and presents many internal contradictions at all levels of society, namely growing economic wealth;

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[10] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

crisis of identity; pluralism of languages; crossing borders and mixing genres; contradictory optimism and desire of experimentation.[11] Paradoxically, the cultural and social flattening that was supposed to cloak the 1980s was instead replaced by a disintegration of the centrality of what Lyotard defined as the 'grand narratives'.[12] Such disintegration triggered a process of proliferation and multiplicity of cultures, subcultures and voices from all over the world.

Almost contemporary to Lyotard's theorisation, philosopher Gianni Vattimo's work on the end of modernity contributed to the cause, and started to be particularly appreciated in the Italian context.[13] Scholar Alessia Ricciardi includes him in her recent publication *After La Dolce Vita,* investigating the decade 1975-1985 across the fields of film, literature, philosophy and art criticism.[14] Ricciardi regards the notions of 'sweetness', 'lightness', 'weakness' and 'softness' as key tropes of the Italian intellectual milieu of that time, and links each one of them to the work of four contemporary representatives of the national intelligentsia: filmmaker Federico Fellini, writer Italo Calvino, Vattimo and art critic Achille Bonito Oliva. According to this scholar, Vattimo's work is in line with Lyotard's thought and may be considered as the continuation of a trend initiated in the 1960s by philosopher/novelist Umberto Eco with studies such as *Opera Aperta* (1962) and *Apocalittici e Integrati* (1964).[15]

Parallel to Eco's writings that dismantled the hierarchical and

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[11] Lyotard and Marshall McLuhan (*The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 1962) are among the first intellectuals to address this issue and use the *post*-suffix to indicate an age that is placed after the modern period. Differently from the modern period, the period after is characterised by the spread of information technology that have changed the way we live the time and information, by speeding up communication, breaking down barriers of space and time.

[12] The term 'grand narratives' was used by Lyotard in *La Condition Postmoderne* to indicate the large-scale philosophies of the XX century, including the idea of linear progress of history, the absolute freedom, and the unconditioned belief in science and technology.

[13] Among his main books, see *Il Pensiero Debole* (Milan: Garzanti, 1983), *La Fine della Modernità* (Milan: Garzanti, 1985) and *La Società Trasparente* (Milan: Garzanti, 1989).

[14] Alessia Ricciardi, 'Introduction', in *After La Dolce Vita. A Prehistory of Berlusconi's Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 1-18.

[15] Ricciardi, p. 23

traditional way of considering culture, and presented a linguistic and aesthetic analysis of comics, pop music, television, *gialli* and science fiction literature, Vattimo celebrates the unlimited languages of postmodernism, as defined by a labyrinth of high and low culture.[16] Back in the 1960s, Eco's semiotics played a fundamental position in establishing and describing a new cultural climate in the country: specifically, he legitimised the role of the new instruments of mass communication (like television for instance) in transforming the core of the society. Like Eco's message, Vattimo's philosophical thoughts of the 1980s are extremely valuable for emphasising the relevance of the 'media' factor in the definition of the postmodern society.[17]

  According to Vattimo, modernity was characterised by a kind of "repeatability" in the history of events, an optimism in social progress, and a deep belief in the emancipation of humanity. When all of this ceased to be, and it was no longer possible to look at history as a continuous and singular line, the unitary concept of modernity itself became illusory and eventually disappeared.[18] Specifically, this ending was provoked by two interlocked (respectively external and internal) causes: first, there was the end of the traditional forms of colonialism, which led to both the discovery of other cultures and to a sense of inadequacy of the idea of European Humanism for all men. The second event was, in a way, the realisation of Eco's prediction: the overwhelming presence of mass media failed to offer an

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[16] The concept of "multiplicity" is explored also in the landmark publication *Il Pensiero Debole*, published in 1983 by philosopher Gianni Vattimo. In this landmark publication, Vattimo argues the rise of a "weak thought" in the postmodern society, as defined by the cognitive act of destroying the "strong thought" of unity of modern society. Stories are multiplied, and the multiplicity may be the category of a new thought, that is the weak thought of postmodernity.

[17] The popularity of Vattimo's philosophy in the discussion on postmodernism is extremely relevant particularly for the Italian context.The philosophical thoughts and figure of the author became so popular in Italy that they were ratified in a television comedy sketch of the night program 'Quelli della Notte', aired on Raidue in 1985. See Ricciardi, 'Weakness', p.135.

[18] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (1989), translated by David Webb (Baltimore: John Hospkins University Press, 1992), p.1. Indeed the term "History" encompasses also the histories of art, literature, science, etc., and not only refers to the story of the traditional powerful individuals of the society (i.e. kings, popes, etc.).

accurate vision of reality.[19] The great availability of communication tools should have implied freedom of information, dissolution of communication barriers, and creation of an "objective" world in which 'the norm is the exact reproduction of reality'.[20] Paradoxically, the increase of communication channels gave the world an altered version of reality and challenged people's perception of it. In other words, with the open, transparent, purpose to offer a *real* vision of reality, the media gave voice to the mass, to everyone, with the result of a global cultural chaos.

Both Lyotard and Vattimo's analyses may provide an introduction to the Italian landscape of the 1980s. Among the main features of postmodernism pinpointed, there are the inherent presence of: ideas of pluralism and experimentalism; will of mixing languages and genres; generalised feelings of the end of an era, together with a sense of fragility and crisis of identity; altered perception of reality; optimism towards the future; and finally, clear awareness of the key role of the masses in shaping the society. All of these elements see many practical outlets across many creative and cultural fields, such as cinema, television, video, visual art, advertising, and music. More specifically, the aforementioned social/philosophical discourse on the Italian cultural landscape below may be extremely useful in light of a contextualisation of Antonioni's career steps and work of the decade. Indeed, the close reading of these works in each chapter of the thesis is nestled into this context.

In the 1980s, Italians were experiencing a 'second economic miracle', as David Forgacs defines it, and an obsession with material, objects and consumption, new aesthetic values and a frantic-yet-glamorous search for physical perfection.[21] Despite the many tragic events affecting its political

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[19] Vattimo, 'The Postmodern: A Transparent Society?', in *The Transparent Society*, pp. 1-11.
[20] Vattimo, 'The Postmodern', p. 7.
[21] On this subject see David Forgacs, 'Cultural Consumption', in Forgacs and Lumley, *Italian Cultural Studies*, pp. 273–290; Andrea Branzi et al., *Profilo Italia: un certo stile made in Italy: design, arte, creatività Italiana in mostra a Torino* (Milan: Berenice Arts Books, 1990);

and everyday life, the country was experiencing a period of prosperity, cultural vitality and technological advancements.[22] The combined work of national television and advertising industry accelerated economy, fostered the birth of new countercultures and encouraged the viewers/consumers to buy. Advertisements contributed in creating new trends and led television to its transformation into a fashionable medium and an unquestionable source of economic profit. Indeed, adverts achieved higher social legitimacy; they became an essential factor in economic growth, and consequently a symbol of the new modernity of the media.[23] Thanks to its considerable financial resources, the industry had the possibility to fulfil its own needs and ambitions, and showed a rapidly-growing interest in re-inventing itself visually and investing in the development of new and seductive audio-visual languages. This marketing choice led to an expansion of the market, given

Enrico Morteo and Alessandra Maria Sette, eds., *Unicità d'Italia: Made in Italy ed identità nazionale, 1961 – 2011* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011).

[22] During these years, the Italian Government saw a period of apparent stability, with the rise of Socialist Bettino Craxi as head of the Socialist Party (1976 – 1993), and Prime Minister in 1982 until 1987. However, both the 1970s and 1980s were marked by a concatenation of tragic events that affected the daily life of the Italian peninsula: terrorism, mafia and corruption. First, after the dramatic 'Anni di Piombo' culminating with the murder of Aldo Moro (President of the Democrats Catholic Party and former Prime Minister) in 1978, the conflict among extremist movements within and against the State did not conclude, but implemented; in this sense, the massacre of the train station of Bologna in 1980 is tragic symbolic and landmark event of the period. Second, the Sicilian Mafia was experiencing a period of transition in terms of structure and internal values, with the rise to power of the Corleonesi family until the early 1990s. The violent conflicts inside the criminal organisation and against the Italian State originated an extended atmosphere of terror within the population; additionally, this led to the death of a great number of common people, militaries, and public figures, culminating with the public outcry which followed the assassination of two anti-Mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992. Third, corruption among all the political parties and the most notable figures of that time became more and more extensive, and this was eventually exposed to the public by a large legal investigation (nicknamed 'Mani Pulite') in 1992 – 1992. The political paralysis and uncertainty that this trial was able to produce opened the door to the rise of new political figures, such as the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, who served as Prime Minister between 1994-1995, 2001-2006 and 2008-2011. For further analysis on the post-war Italian culture and economy see: Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943 - 1980* (London: Penguin, 1990); Zygmunt G. Baranski and Robert Lumley (eds.), *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy* (London: The McMillan Press, 1990; David Lumley and Robert Forgacs (eds.), *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

[23] Armand Mattelart, 'The New conquest of Space', in *Advertising International: The Privatisation of Public Space*, trans. by Michael Chanan, 3rd edn, in *Taylor & Francis eLibrary* < http://www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk/> [accessed 3 September 2014].

the great impact that advertising had not only on the production and distribution of secondary goods, but also on pop culture.[24]

New relationships between creative and commercial fields also paved the way for a new range of opportunities for the moving image. On the one hand, advertising became an important hub for filmmakers, directors of films and TV series, in which they had the chance to experiment and express their own creativity, although in accordance to the client's taste. On the other hand, advertising firms and related companies increased their own reputation by hiring prestigious directors for commercial projects.[25] In France, Roman Polanski filmed adverts for Kronenbourg beer and the fashion magazine *Marie Clare*. In Italy Fellini filmed both Barilla and Campari advertisements in 1985, while Antonioni, Sergio Leone and the Taviani brothers produced adverts for Renault 9 and 18. Among the most successful examples is Ridley Scott's television advert that introduced the Apple Macintosh for the first time, worldwide, in 1984.[26]

Following the pressure of local private networks, and political and economic interests, the Italian audio-visual landscape saw a profound transformation, leading towards the end of the broadcasting monopoly of RAI in 1985.[27] In just one decade, the traditional image and role of the public broadcasting service radically changed, and so did the Italians'

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[24] Levi's jeans, Marlboro cigarettes and Martini drinks are a few among many of the results of this marketing strategy; thanks to the captivating power of the adverts made for these brads, these objects infiltrated into the society as status symbol. For a further study on this subject, see Alberto Abruzzese, *Metafore della pubblicità* (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1988).

[25] Mattelart, 'Confusion of Genres', unnumbered.

[26] This commercial was daytime televised broadcasted only on 22 January 1984 during the third quarter of the main yearly sport event in the US television, which is the Super Bowl (edition XVIII). See Antonio Castolfi, 'I video e le formi brevi del digitale nel processo di rilocazione dei media', in *Media Mutations. Convegno Internazionale di Studi sull'Audiovisivo. Bologna 24-25 May 2010,* ed. by Guglielmo Pescatore (Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, 2010).

[27] Several Italian and foreign publications explain in detail the events that led to this regulation. Particularly see Claudio Ferretti, Umberto Broccoli, Barbara Scaramucci (eds.), 'Dal Monopolio al Satellite (1974 - 1997)', in *Mamma RAI. Storia e storie del servizio pubblico televisivo* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997); Italo Moscati, 'Pareti di vetro, test di legno', in *L'Occhio Androgino* (Milano: Bulzoni Editore, 1982); Elena Dagrada, 'The Breakup of Monopoly: from 1975 to the early 1980s', in David Lumley and Robert Forgacs (eds.), *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 240   248.

domestic viewing experience. In April 1975, the Italian Government enacted Law 103. Within the scope to privilege pluralism and limit the influence of only one political Party over RAI, the control of the national network was transferred from the Government (executive power) to the Parliament (legislative power), where the parties change on the basis of their electoral power. As a result of this process of *"lottizzazione"* of the state-owned company, RAI 1 came under the direct control of the Christian Democrats; RAI 2 came under the control of the Socialists; and RAI 3 came under the control of the Communist Party.[28] RAI thus became a real ministerial agency, a national instrument, and confirmed its involvement in the political life of the country. As Elena Dagrada argues, 'the *lottizzazione* was an effect of the continued organisation of television in a centralised and hierarchical manner', with the result that RAI become more difficult to manage, less independent and slower in its journey towards modernity.[29]

At the same time, although Law 103 confirmed the national monopoly of RAI, in absence of a clear framework for local audio-visual media, the private sector developed nevertheless. This status of "deregulation" opened the way to a period of 'televisione selavaggia', as critic Marga Cottino-Jones puts it, encouraging a break of national moral-social taboos, an invasion of American/foreign television formats, and an increasing request for cinema products.[30] Despite having illegally broadcasted locally since 1974, many local private television stations (i.e. Berlusconi's *Telemilano* and *Telemontecarlo,* founded in 1974) were soon liberalised with the new Ruling 202 of July 1976.[31] The Ruling filled the gap in the law, and inaugurated a period of proliferation of small networks; eventually, with a few exceptions, the private service gradually came under the control of Berlusconi's media

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[28] Moscati.
[29] Dagrada, p. 241
[30] Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones, 'The 1980s', in *A New guide to Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2007), pp. 113   125.
[31] Forgacs and Lumley.

empire Mediaset (part of Berlusconi's holding company Fininvest Group).[32] In a couple of years, by transmitting the same TV programme simultaneously on all his stations across the state, Mediaset appeared as if it was broadcasting nationally and quickly became the main competitor for RAI.[33] In order to legitimise an anarchic and illegal status quo, Prime Minister Craxi enacted the Decreto Berlusconi (1984), which became law in 1985 and legally allowed Mediaset to transmit nationally. Through this act, Italian television entered a phase that has been defined as "duopoly" or "mixed system" (RAI on one side, Mediaset on the other side), later ratified by the Mammì law in 1990.[34]

Eco frames this crucial change as the passage from 'paleo-television' to 'neo-télévision'.[35] By using these terms, the critic aims at explaining the transition from a constitutional public service, based on a moralistic and paternalistic approach, and rigidly structured formats and broadcasting hours, to a new medium with different appeal and styles, outside the territories of any educational purpose. By innovating the many ways it addressed viewers, 'neo-television' promoted new cultural values and challenged the traditional triangular structure of Italian society (Party Family   Church). In this end, it started to present itself, especially to the eyes of a younger generation, as an occasion to evade from daily life, political engagement and social issues. According to Eco, the re-fashioned medium had an inescapable influence on people, because it was able to channel some of the aspects of everyday life while keeping a complicit approach to the viewers; also, it offered more broadcasting hours and an

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[32] The magnate launched *Canale 5* in 1980, and bought *Italia Uno* (founded by Rusconi Publishing in 1982) and *Rete Quattro* (founded by Mondadori Publishing in 1982).

[33] Dagrada.

[34] Ibid. The Mammì Law gained also the nickname of 'photography law', as it was made with the only scope to legitimize an anomaly, that it was Mediaset monopoly in the private audiovisual sector. The text of the law is available at http://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1990;223.

[35] Eco, 'A Guide to Neo-Television of the 1980s', in Baranski and Lumley, *Culture and Conflicts*, pp. 245   255. On 'neo-television' see also Casetti and Roger Odin, 'De la paléo- à la néo-télévision: approach sémio-pragmatique', in *Communications,* no 51 (1990), pp. 9   26.

extended space to showcase its content.[36] With an openly negative opinion, critics Claudio Fava and Aldo Viganò saw this period as the beginning of a trash culture and the change 'from a stern monopoly to a brazen liberty, without apparent rules [but with] an overdose of the small screen that has no equal in Europe or perhaps the world'.[37]

Because of the increasing demand for new films to broadcast, both public and private television networks started to include an exponential number of films into their programming, by having a major impact on cinema in terms of financial resources, visibility of new filmmakers and viewing habits.[38] With a pluralism of offers, audiences became more demanding, more educated, curious and inclined to different experiences of domestic vision.[39] Moreover, after the request of support and more substantial guarantees from ANICA (the Italian National Association of Authors of Cinema), television studios started to invest more and more in cinematic production, and RAI produced more than 120 films between 1975 and 1984, giving particular support to directors such as Ermanno Olmi, Federico Fellini, Antonioni, and Gabriele Salvatores.[40] In this period, two of the most important achievements came with Vittorio and Paolo Taviani's *Padre Padrone* winning various international prizes in 1977 (Berlinale Film Festival, Festival de Cannes, David di Donatello Awards) and with Olmi's *L'albero degli zoccoli* being awarded the Palme d'Or Unanimité at the Festival of Cannes in 1978.

Collectively, Italian cinema of the 1980s was characterised by an apocalyptic atmosphere and struggled to find a clear direction until the end

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[36] Eco, 'A Guide'.

[37] Claudio Fava and Aldo Viganò, as quoted in Millicent Marcus, 'Introduction', *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age* (Pittsburgh: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 4 (3 12).

[38] Luisa Cicognetti and Pierre Sorlin, 'Italy: Cinema and Television: Collaborators and Threat', in *European Cinemas in the Television Age,* ed. by Dorota Ostrowoska and Graham Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 41 70.

[39] Gian Piero Brunetta, 'Cinema in televisione', in Brunetta, *Storia del Cinema,* pp. 504-517.

[40] Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 1992); mentioned also in Mary P. Wood, 'The impact of commercial television', in *Italian Cinema* (London. Bloomsbury Academy, 2005), pp. 21 23.

of the decade, epitomised by a profusion of filmmakers, languages and genres; a generational change in terms of both directors and critics; and a widening distance between auteur films and the general public.[41] Critic Gian Piero Brunetta defines it as a 'cinema in metamorfosi', because of its ability to communicate with the spaces of fashion, video art and advertising.[42] According to him, directors appeared more insecure in their artistic paths, and auteur films often resulted in being elitist and inaccessible to the general public.[43] With this respect, American scholar Millicent Marcus argues that the 1970s marked the beginning of a period of disappearance of an entire generation of Italian directors, including Pasolini and Elio Petri, and the rise of a new generation of auteurs, such as Bernardo Bertolucci, Marco Bellocchio and Nanni Moretti.[44] In the second half of the 1980s, Italian cinema re-affirmed itself internationally thanks to the success of films such as Giuseppe Tornatore's *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (1988) and Gabriele Salvatores' *Mediterraneo* (1991).

In light of a further analysis of Antonioni's only long feature of the decade *Identificazione di una donna* (chapter 4), it may be useful to underline two recurrent aspects distinguishing many films of this time: first, a growing interest in the representation of a new femininity and erotic allusions, and second, a tendency towards an inward-looking cinema.[45] With regard to the first case, Cottino-Jones points out the presence of several films by both male and female directors who tackle, more directly than in previous years, concerns about women's emancipation. Her analysis of films such as Federico Fellini's *La città delle donne* (1980), Liliana Cavani's *Interno berlinese*

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[41] Gian Piero Brunetta, 'La generazione degli anni Ottanta: i sommersi, gli emergenti, gli emersi', in *Storia del cinema Italiano. Dal miracolo economico agli anni Novanta 1960–1993*, 4 vols (Milan: Editori Riuniti, 1993), pp. 518–538. Other publications that tackle such issue are: Carlo Celli and Cottino-Jones, 'The 1980s', in *A New Guide to Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 113–125; William Hope, *Italian Cinema: New Directions* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005).
[42] Brunetta, p. 506.
[43] Brunetta.
[44] Marcus, 'Introduction', *After Fellini*, pp. 3–12.
[45] Cottino-Jones, 'Decentring the Masculinity'; Tiziana Ferrero-Regis, 'Intimacy, otherness and spaces', in *Recent Italian Cinema* (Leicester: Troubadour Publishing, 2009), pp. 175–200.

(1985) aims at showing a decentred masculinity compared to a stronger female counterpart. [46] In Fellini's film, for instance, together with arguing about the presence of a feminist discourse, Cottino-Jones points out the director's goal of displaying a weak, and in many ways ridiculous, male figure, who is unable to orient himself within a strictly female social environment.[47] Together with films such as Bertolucci's *Ultimo Tango a Parigi* (1972) and Pasolini's *Salò* (1975), *La città delle donne* may be read as the result of a process started in the mid-1960s, with the inclusion of elements of over-eroticism across cinematic genres, thanks to the progressive breaking of sexual taboos in society.[48]

Finally, with regard to the second case, a highly introspective, personal search for intimacy is among the peculiarities distinguishing the Italian cinema of the period, alongside small budget productions, low-key aesthetics, simple narratives, and a detachment from political intervention.[49] Marcus notices a minimalistic approach pursued by filmmakers, as a critical response of Italian cinema to the usurpation of its cultural prestige, perpetrated by television.[50] In Ferrero-Regis's argument, this phenomenon is connected to its marketability in television, because most of these films were low budget and offered an on-screen visualisation of everyday life.[51] As a matter of fact, micro stories were more suitable for television broadcasting times, and were often produced with lower budgets than science fiction, historical-epic and adventure productions.[52]

A stronger participation of television in the landscape of Italian cinema indeed implied its consequent opening towards new genres, new viewers and new techniques, such as television cameras and magnetic tape. Above all, beyond the cinema vs. television clash for communicational supremacy,

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[46] Cottino-Jones, 'Decentring the Masculinity'.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ferrero-Regis, 'Intimacy, otherness'.
[50] Marcus, p. 5.
[51] Ferrero-Regis, 'Intimacy, otherness'.
[52] Ibid.

one of the hottest issues concerned electronic innovations in video, which coincided with the entrance of cinema into new territories, as shown by features such as *Parade* (Jacques Tati, 1974), *Numéro Deux* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1975) and *Blow Out* (Brian di Palma, 1981).[53] Overall in Europe, the appropriation of videotape by film directors started controversies in terms of cultural and aesthetic values, sometimes even within the same creative team. For instance, with regard to the experience of *Numéro Deux,* while Godard enthusiastically looked at video as a linguistic extension of the trajectory of cinema, and consequently argued the possibility to shoot on video at high-end standards, his cinematographer at the time, William Lubtchansky, defended the opposite opinion. Sharing the same ideas of other cinema authorities like Fellini and Ingrid Bergman, Lubtchansky argued that cinema and video needed to be separated. Godard and Lubtchansky's dispute is symptomatic of how the two different perceptions coexisted in the same period. On the one hand, directors such as Godard regarded video as the opportunity to open the door to a range of possibilities, including the immediacy of the recording, the possibilities for the manipulation of the image, and a greater room for imagination, especially in post-production. On the other hand, in the eyes of other professionals, such as Lubtchansky, video represented a restriction, and was most certainly not 'worthy' of the Seventh Art.[54]

Historically linked to both visual art and experimental cinema environments, videotape is nonetheless the undisputed protagonist of performance and video artists during the 1960s and 1970s (i.e. Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Sandro Chia). During those years, it presented itself as an aesthetic tool and an interpreter of a counterculture in contrast

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- [53] Rosanna Maule, 'Film authorship and the crisis of European cinema', in *Beyond Auteurism: New Directions in Authorial Film Practices in France, Italy and Spain since the 1980s* (Intellect, 2008), pp. 38-53.

[54] Godard, 'Verso la luce' and William Lubtchansky, 'Cinema è cinema', in *Il cinema elettronico,* ed. by Toni Verità (Firenze: Liberoscambio Editrice, 1982), pp. 67–62 and pp. 73–75.

to the mass media culture, as proved by the works by Nam Jun Paik and Doug Hall.[55] Alongside international affirmation and development of video art, with the end of the 1960s, this medium started to be primarily defined by its communication and media dimensions.[56] It became quite popular among feminist, gay/lesbian and political movements, thanks to its technical specifications that facilitate communal participation in the process.[57] A further example lies in the critical work of cinema journal *Cinema Nuovo* edited by Guido Aristarco, which published a critical section dedicated to videos and videotape in 1975, including opinions from important Italian editors, directors and producers about the subject.[58]

In Italy, the issue was, as usual, multifaceted. On one hand, many filmmakers began exploring and experimenting with more advanced technologies: for instance, Giuliano Montaldo and Vittorio Storaro's *Arlecchino* (1981), Enzo Tarquini's *Oniricon* (1985) and Peter Del Monte's *Giulia and Giulia* (1987) were among the first pioneering steps in electronic cinema (with high definition image) produced by RAI. On the other hand, technologies available to filmmakers at that time in Italy were as advanced as those in USA and Japan, but much less used. About this matter, in 1983, \

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[55] On the history and evolution of video art see: Michael Rush, *New Media in Late 20th Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999); Cosetta G. Saba, 'Introduzione. La memoria delle immagini: art/tapes/22. Restauri e "riattualizzazione"', in *Arte in Videotape,* ed. by Cosetta G.Saba (Milan: Silvana Editore, 2007), pp. 22 73.

[56] Valentina Valentini, 'Il Video: un non-luogo', in *Arte in Videotape,* pp. 88 107.

[57] Ibid., p. 97.

[58] Festivals, exhibitions, publications and programmes on the subject abounded. Venice Art Biennial 1985, in accordance with the theme *Art and Science,* dedicated a significant section to video and computer art. RAI promoted a series of programmes dedicated to research and experimentation on new electronic technologies, including Gianni Toti's *Videopoesie e Videopoemetti,* followed by *Trilogia Majakovskiana* (1982-1983). In 1982 Paolo Rosa (cinema and visual arts), Fabio Cirifino (photography) and Leonardo Sangiorgi (graphics) founded the multimedia association *Studio Azzurro* in Milan. Finally, public universities (including Turin, Porretta, Bologna, Camerino and Pisa) organised conferences about video and the 'future' electronic cinema. For more information see Valentino Catricalà and Laura Leuzzi, 'Cronologia della videoarte italiana: 1952-1992', in *Kinema. Il cinema sulle tracce del cinema,* ed. by Marco Maria Gazzano (Rome: Exorma, 2012), pp. 527-555. With the development of digital technologies from the mid-1980s, and the emerging generation of filmmakers during the 1990s, videotape started to be abandoned and to be exclusively identifiable with the aesthetics of a past era.

Aristarco commented that 'noi in Italia siamo sempre su posizioni falsamente umanistiche, per cui abbiamo sempre sospetto verso la tecnica.'[59] As Roberto Faenza bitterly states in his essay on electronic cinema in 1985, the only possible advancement in Italy would have been a mere 'swap' in terms of medium: substituting film with magnetic tape.[60] In other words, electronic effects such as those visible in *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, USA, 1982) would have been impossible.[61] Antonioni's work on *Il mistero di Oberwald* may help clarify this point (chapter 3). While *Tron* was the result of computer designing, *Il mistero di Oberwald* was a way to make electronic cinema closer to that of traditional cinema.[62] The story, the setting and the characters are grounded in reality, on which Antonioni superimposed colour electronic effects.[63]

In conclusion, the multiplicity of interconnected cultural factors that have been presented above, together with a generalised consideration of the decade as a controversial and disruptive moment for Italian cinema, might have influenced both critics and general public's attitude towards Antonioni's work of the 1980s. Indeed, his late works are less appreciated and discussed than those of earlier decades, perhaps because they are still perceived as inconsistent with his past work. While much appreciation is directed towards the great period of Antonioni's work in the 1960s and

[59] Guido Aristarco, qtd. in Giuliano Montaldo, 'Un Arlecchino ad alta definizione', in *Il nuovo mondo dell'immagine elettronica,* ed. by Guido and Teresa Aristarco (Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1985, p. 167.

[60] Roberto Faenza, 'Differenze incostanti', in *Il nuovo mondo*, pp. 173–201.

[61] Produced by Walt Disney Productions and directed by Steven Lisberger in 1982, *Tron* is considered a cult film in the history of electronic and science-fiction cinema. It tells the story of a computer programmer who is transported into the software world of his computer machine, where he discovers the structure of this parallel universe. Beyond the story, *Tron* shows unique and revolutionary visual effects for the time of its production, as it is one of the first films to make extensive use of any form of computer animation and graphics.

[62] 'Una differenza totale nel modo di usare lo strumento elettronico: l'uno, *Tron,* è frutto del disegno fatto attraverso il computer, è insomma un cinema computerizzato, fatto a tavolino, che produce immagini piatte, con profondità solo pittorica, laddove l'altro, il mio *Mistero di Oberwald,* è un cinema, che pur servendosi dell'elettronica, è molto più vicino alla pellicola, in quanto si è trattato di mettere la macchina da presa sempre di fronte alla realtà con i suoi precisi e reali volumi'. Antonioni, qtd. in Mori, 'Il regista e l'elettronica', p. 313.

[63] Ibid.

1970s, the literature is still divided about his body of work of the 1980s, which is read as irregular and mannerist. The third section below will then offer an overview of these mentioned works and a comprehensive view of the literature, by pointing out some of the main authoritative critical voices. The overall dissertation, as it will be reiterated later, will fill the critical gap and shed light on this too often forgotten yet difficult period, which I argue marks an aesthetically tumultuous turning point in the director's career.

Critical voices on late Antonioni

Among Antonioni's documentary works, commercial videos, writings and paintings that will be discussed, particular attention will be paid to the reception of the two feature films *Il mistero di Oberwald* (henceforth *Il mistero*) and *Identificazione di una donna* (henceforth *Identificazione*). Peter Brunette does not include the body of works from the 1980s in his landmark publication *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, besides a brief mention of the three main features of this period in the Introduction.[64] As Brunette states, the main purpose of the volume is to investigate what *he* considers to be Antonioni's central and the most qualitative works, which are those made in the 1960s.[65] Seymour Chatman includes *Il mistero* and *Identificazione* in his significant study on the director's visual approach to cinema, *Antonioni, or the Surface of the World.*[66] Albeit acknowledging new thematic and technical realms in both films, he still reads the tetralogy (*L'avventura*, 1960; *La notte*, 1961; *L'eclisse*, 1962; *Il deserto rosso*) as the peak of Antonioni's career. These choices, made by two of the most influential scholars of Antonioni, seem indicative of American scholars' general approach towards the more recent films. Indeed, as pointed out by Jim Welsh, after their

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[64] Peter Brunette, 'Introduction', in *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1 27.
[65] Ibid., p.1.
[66] Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni, or the surface of the world* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

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premiere in New York, neither *Il mistero* nor *Identificazione* had a place in the home entertainment market in the United States, with negative consequences for Antonioni's international reputation.[67]

The late Sam Rohdie distances himself from Brunette's and Chatman's interpretation of these films. In his publication for the British Film Institute, *Antonioni,* Rohdie looks at the 1980s films with a neutral gaze and suggests a potential explanation for the general dislike towards them.[68] In his view, Antonioni's flamboyant experimentations (*Il mistero*) as well as his symbolism and pathos (*Identificazione*; *Al di là delle nuvole,* 1995, henceforth *Al di là*) that differentiates this late phase, is problematic for the traditional viewer. The camera is no longer tied to the character or the story, but gains a greater freedom to discover new autonomous realms and ways of filming. As the critic argues, 'the camera cannot provide any anchor, a certainty to grasp; it begins to move, to slide away at the precise moment that you think you have it.'[69] The resulting uncertainty is, in Rohdie's view, at the core of this issue.

In contrast, several Italian and European scholars have demonstrated appreciation of these late works. For instance, at the time of their release, *Il mistero* was described as 'un'eccelsa operazione pioneristica'.[70] Cultural contributor to *Il Giornale,* Alfio Cantelli, commented on *Il mistero*: 'la vera novità sperimentale della Mostra'.[71] Italian screenwriter and critic Tullio Kezich commented on *Al di là delle nuvole*: 'inchiniamoci all' incomparabile lezione artistica e umana che ci dà Michelangelo Antonioni (83 anni il 29 prossimo), colpito da grave malattia ma non domo, fedele a se stesso e

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[67] Jim Welsh, 'Remember Antonioni?', *Literature/Film Quarterly,* 13.4 (1 Oct. 1985), 233. The films became available in the US market only in the late 1990s.

[68] Sam Rohdie, *Michelangelo Antonioni* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

[69] Ibid., p.139.

[70] Claudio Camerini, 'Il mistero di Oberwald', *La rivista del cinematografo,* XLIV.II (November 1981), 598 599.

[71] Alfio Cantelli, qtd. in Aldo Tassone, *I film di Michelangelo Antonioni: un poeta della visione* (Rome: Gremese, 1990), p. 42.

giovane come quando qui al Lido esordì nel '5o'.[72] Ivo Franchi drew attention to the thematic and stylistic continuity of Antonioni's work throughout the years.[73]

Another recent publication, *Michelangelo, Red, Antonioni, Blue* by Canadian scholar Murray Pomerance, is worth mentioning, as it distances itself from the existing literature on the director, first and foremost due to its structure.[74] Contrary to almost all the academic volumes dedicated to Antonioni's films, Pomerance's study does not follow a chronological order, but instead starts from the most recent colour features and concludes its critical arc with *Blow-Up.*[75] Pomerance comes at his analysis from a different angle than other critics (cf. Chatman, for instance) by not arguing for the tetralogy as the central phase in the director's career. Critics Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe positively review *Identificazione* and *Al di là* and underline Antonioni's operation of critically reflecting on his filmmaking practice. In other words, they suggest that the director's purpose of finding a meaningful way of communicating to the viewer both general content and key passages of the film questions 'the viability of narrative filmmaking'.[76] Above all, their article investigates the reasons why this late production did not meet the standards of contemporary tastes, and why it received such a cold reception. The following sections aim at answering their key question: 'What criteria are being used to judge these works?'[77]

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[72] Tullio Kezich, 'Venezia s'inchina a Michelangelo: bentornato!', *Corriere della Sera*, 4 September 1995 <http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/1995/settembre/04/Venezia_incantata_inchina_Michelangelo_bentornato_co_o_9509046016.shtml> [accessed 7 June 2013].

[73] Ivo Franchi, 'Identificazione di una donna', *Cinema Nuovo*, 286 (1982), 43–44.

[74] Murray Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue. Eight Reflections on Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[75] Non-academic volumes and exhibition catalogues, such as Païni, *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* and Vittorio Giacci, ed., *Lo sguardo estatico* (Roma: Marchesi Grafiche Editoriali, 2008), articulate the structure of the chapters around main themes (e.g. fog, reality, out there, etc., in the case of Païni's catalogue).

[76] Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe, 'Michelangelo Antonioni: The Late Years', *Cineaction*, 42 (1997), 70–73.

[77] Ibid., p. 70.

Il mistero di Oberwald

After a five-year period of absence, Antonioni surprised his audience with the melodrama *Il mistero,* an adaptation of Jean Cocteau's play *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (*The Eagle with Two Heads*, 1947). With the collaboration of scriptwriter Tonino Guerra, Antonioni confronted both Cocteau's subject and structure with a respectful distance, and this allowed him to exclusively experiment with chromatic possibilities (electronic of colour, shimmering effects, fade-ins and outs), new technology (videotape) and an innovative use of illusory elements and melodrama nuances. *Il mistero* was produced by the national television network RAI and, a year later, it premiered at the Venice International Film Festival and New York Film Festival, where the Italian national press acclaimed it as one of the main technological achievements of the year, praising Antonioni's proverbially innovative cinematic approach.[78]

Because of the unusual subject and style, the film has raised debate about its experimental nature and narrative and visual components. For instance, more than one scholar identifies and appreciates the intrusion of violent and artificial colours, as well as Antonioni's elegant compositional framing.[79] Among them, Pomerance offers a well-articulated close reading of the film. He notes Antonioni's openness towards the visual and historical stimuli emerging from the 1980s (e.g. fluorescent colours and the use of television cameras) and in his words: 'while the surface structure of the film, as Antonioni admitted, was melodrama, the film itself is considerably more'.[80] This 'more' refers to Antonioni's work on colour modulation, the portrait of a vast range of human feelings, and a fascination with the idea of communication between life and death.

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[78] Cf. newspapers articles collected in Rome, Biblioteca Luigi Chiarini, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Fondo Luigi Freddi Antonioni.

[79] See Vittorio Giacci, 'Il mistero di Oberwald', in *Michelangelo Antonioni: lo sguardo estatico* (Centro Sperimentale di Fotografia and Associazione B.A. Factory, 2008), pp. 83 84; Camerini, 'Il mistero di Oberwald'; Nicola Ranieri, *Amor Vacui* (Chieti: Métis, 1990).

[80] Pomerance, p. 151.

Giorgio Tinazzi argues that *Il mistero* is 'the terminal point of a preceding tension [...in the] search for technical novelties'; in this sense, the film is seen as an investigation of the potential of new technologies, and a reflection on the direction that cinema was taking at the time.[81] Bert Cardullo points out the 'several firsts' that the film offers. It is the first of Antonioni's films since *Il deserto rosso* to cast Monica Vitti as lead actress, the first film Antonioni adapted from a play, and the first project he shot for television and with television cameras.[82] With regard to this last point, Rohdie acknowledges: 'one of the principal interests of *Oberwald* depends on the quality of the tape', not on Antonioni's 'desire to express [himself]'.[83] In his view, the film shows a rigorous objectivity, as well as a detachment from the director's more intimate films, for which he was better known.

Vittorio Giacci agrees with Rohdie by interpreting the film as an experimental study, but he argues a clear distinction between Antonioni's operation and the one of filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola in *Apocalypse now* (1979) and Robert Wise in *Star Trek* (1979).[84] Contrary to them, Antonioni's use of the electronic effects is not related to his attempt to solve some of the technical issues of filming with celluloid stock. Rather, electronics is seen by the director as another and new instrument to 'paint' in his cinema, and to interpret human emotions. His purpose is to explore whether the use of new technologies equates to a revised view of emotional connection with media and to develop new visual languages according to the changing world he was living in. Thus, it may be argued that *Il mistero* operates on two levels, as it encompasses the director's reflection on both

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[81] Giorgio Tinazzi, 'The gaze and the story', in Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision. Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, ed. by Carlo Di Carlo and Giorgio Tinazzi, American Edition by Marga Cottino Jones (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), pp. XIV XXVII (p. XX).
[82] Bert Cardullo, ed., *Michelangelo Antonioni: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi Press, 2008), p.93.
[83] Rohdie, p.172.
[84] Giacci, 'Il mistero'.

video and film tools, as well as on their role in the composition of the final work.[85]

Other scholars concentrate on different aspects. Aldo Tassone regards the work as beneath Antonioni's poetic achievements, accusing him of making the same mistake of adaption that Luchino Visconti made with Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942).[86] Specifically, he considers the film to be a cold and artificial electronic operation, marred by use of overly basic symbolism, mannerist effects and poor performances. Additionally, he derides the unusual   and pathos-inducing   use of Strauss's and Schoenberg's music for emphasising the characters' emotions far too much. Similarly, Chatman dislikes the film as a whole (with the exception of the compositional elegance of the frame), because it is too marked by 'theatrical grandeur', while lacking realistic detail.[87] He criticises the use of colour in the film, particularly the violet/pink Antonioni has chosen for the evil character, Count Foeh: 'the result [his lavender face] is the last thing one would expect to see in an Antonioni film   a cartoon'.[88]American journalist Vincent Canby indicts the film as well. In his *The New York Times* review, he says that the colours of *Il mistero* are not comparable to those of *Il deserto rosso,* and the whole operation is 'no more interesting than a child's playing with the color-tone knobs on a television set.'[89] Furthermore, already at the time of the film's Venice premiere in 1981, Italian critics Guglielmo Biraghi and Alberto Farassino wrote of their dislike for the uneven technical results, metallic look, bad colour and naive colour/figure transfigurations. Biraghi defined *Il mistero* as a 'fumettone d'autore', and Farassino considered the attempt to make a correlation between colours and human feelings a

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Tassone, *I film di Michelangelo*, p.169.

[87] Chatman, 1985, p.209.

[88] Chatman and Paul Duncan, *Michelangelo Antonioni. The Complete Films* (London: Taschen, 2008), p. 77.

[89] Vincent Canby, 'The Mystery of Oberwald', *The New York Times*, 30 September 1981 < http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/30/movies/antonioni-s-mystery-of-oberwald.html> [accessed 7 June 2014].

complete failure. He argued about this matter: 'certi effetti appaiono ancora ingenui, dando l'impressione di ignorare vent'anni di video arte'.[90]

In conclusion, in spite of the positive or negative reviews on *Il mistero*, television cameras usher Antonioni into a new phase of colour and technical experimentations. As Pomerance notes, these are not the same hyper-realistic colours Antonioni was using during the 1960s; rather they are de-saturated, altered and often distorted.

Identificazione di una donna

Identificazione, shot on 35mm film, was also produced by RAI. Adapted from Antonioni's homonymous novel, it was produced by Antonio Macrí and Giorgio Nocella (ITER Films Rome, and Gaumont Paris), and won the 35th Anniversary Prize at the Festival de Cannes in 1982. There, it was greatly appreciated, particularly by French critics, such as Emmanuel Carrère. In his review in *Positif,* he discusses Antonioni's fascination with the feminine world and the elegant composition of the image. Mainly, he praises as the great outcome of the film the feeling of 'opacity' that returns to fill the surface, the mise en scène, the characters' psychology and relationships.[91]

Critical writing about *Identificazione* relates in large part to its relationship with Antonioni's earlier films, the concurrent social Italian context, the subject, the soundtrack, and the characters. In his article 'Identification of a Medium: *Identificazione di una donna* and the Rise of Commercial Television in Italy', Michael Loren Siegel examines the words 'investigation' and 'identification' within the landscape of *Identificazione* and the later short-format film *Roma*.[92] By questioning the objects of this 'investigation' in both films the absent woman and the Italian capital city,

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[90] Guglielmo Biraghi and Alberto Farassino, as quoted in Tassone, *I film di Michelangelo,* p. 59.

[91] Emmanuel Carrère, 'De retour en Italie. *Identification d'une femme*', *Positif,* 263 (1983), 36 43.

[92] Michael Loren Siegel, 'Identification of a Medium*: Identificazione di una donna* and the Rise of Commercial Television in Italy', in *Antonioni: Centenary*, pp. 216 229.

respectively Siegel underlines the presence of Antonioni's formal and balanced style, as well as some of the director's hallmarks, such as the use of extreme close-ups and detail shots.[93] Giacci looks at *Identificazione* as the outcome of the investigation initiated with *Cronaca di un amore,* and describes the film as a 'giallo alla rovescia', since the protagonist's quest does not reach any conclusive point.[94] The French scholar Vincent Amiel is of a similar opinion, but he considers the structure of this investigation redundant.[95]

In Chatman's words, '*Identificazione* marks a return to the preoccupations of the films of the tetralogy', including the deterioration of the concurrent quality of Italian life.[96] Together with the idea of the investigative story, critic William Kelly appraises the consolidation of formal and thematic preoccupations of early Antonioni.[97] Kelly also refers to the artist's quest and his inevitable impossibility to reach a conclusion and makes note of the way Antonioni implies a fragmentation of reality, the primacy of photography, the dominant role of the female body and mind, and the compulsive, uncontrolled presence of objects and popular culture. About this last subject, it has been argued that both the physical and conceptual presence of the object world is more explored in *Identificazione* than in other films, such as *Il deserto rosso* or *Blow-Up* (1966). In Chatman's words, '[e]ven the clothes are or seem to be made of plastic',[98] and, according to Gideon Bachmann, 'there isn't a single object that isn't authentic'.[99]

Identificazione was set in Rome, the capital, the symbol of cinema, and the city Antonioni lived in. Chatman argues that the film succeeds in giving

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[93] Siegel, Identification of a medium'.
[94] Giacci.
[95] Vincent Amiel, 'Identification d'une femme: Quête sans objet', in *Positif,* 262 (1982), 56 57.
[96] Chatman, 'Identificazione', p. 216.
[97] William Kelly, 'Identification Of A Woman Michelangelo Antonioni', *Film Quarterly*, 37 (1984), 37 43 (p.37) <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3697198>.
[98] Chatman, 2008, p.19.
[99] Gideon Bachmann and Antonioni, 'A Love Of Today: An Interview With Michelangelo Antonioni', *Film Quarterly*, 36 (1983), 1 8 (p.2) <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3697089>.

an authentic portrait of the issues of the Italian aristocratic class of the period, particularly the emptiness that distinguishes it.[100] Siegel and Frank P. Tomasulo agree with Chatman's opinion and put the emphasis on the relationship of the film with the historical context of that time.[101] Moreover, Chatman argues that, if for Antonioni 'the quest has been   as it always has   to use cinema to articulate a changing object world', *Identificazione* accomplishes this goal, in the sense that it investigates and identifies a new medium (the television) and its mechanism, as well as the new imagery that this medium introduces in everyday life.[102] This last point recognises the validity of the film in its response to the Italian historical and social context of the 1980s, characterised by an explosion of the mass media culture and by a saturation of vulgar images. In agreement with Chatman, Kelly also notices a 'critical inclusion' of the historical context within the film, arguing that while Antonioni's early films reveal a sort of elitism   linked to the accusation of being distant from the general public   *Identificazione* directly tackles popular culture.[103]

With regard to content and language, Chatman raises several questions and doubts about the general meaning of the film, as well as the excessive use of flashbacks. Compared to those used in *Professione: reporter,* for instance, the too many flashbacks seem unnecessary and without a proper goal, in his opinion. In agreement with Tassone, Chatman dismisses the dialogue as too verbose, unnatural, and irritating, and almost showing a moral emptiness. [104] Additionally, he discusses the dryness of the story, the construction of superficial characters and the use of an excessively banal language.[105] With the accusation of banality, other critics join Chatman in arguing that the film is superficial, repetitive and empty. For instance,

[100] Chatman, 2008.
[101] Siegel, 'Identification of a medium'; Frank P. Tomasulo, 'Identification of a woman', *Cineaste* (2012), 56 58.
[102] Ibid., p. 228.
[103] Kelly, 'Identification of a Woman by Michelangelo Antonioni'.
[104] Tassone, 'Identificazione di una donna', in *I film di Michelangelo*, pp. 172 178.
[105] Chatman, Identificazione di una donna', in *Antonioni, or the surface,* p. 231.

Canby writes that '*Identification of a Woman* is an excruciatingly empty work. It is also beautiful and sad   virtually a parody of the director's great *L'avventura* and some of his other earlier films'.[106] Tassone, not keen on the film either, argues that, except for the elegant composition of a few shots, it is a failure. In his opinion, the film is permeated by a certain 'gravità emozionale', while offering many moments overly steeped in pathos.[107]

In terms of the film's soundscape, it is well known that Antonioni uses his soundtracks in a way that is opposed to that of traditional cinema; ambience, silences, bird sounds, wind, rain and footsteps are traditionally his preferred 'score'.[108] In *Identificazione,* instead, the music is loud, extreme and disorienting. In Chatman's view, the director does not seem to show any consistency with his choices, and the selection of contemporary pop-rock music, including Italian singer Gianna Nannini and the band U2, results in a sound that is 'very "punk"   electronic, unsmoothing, a constant source of nervous stimulation'.[109] Music scholar Roberto Calabretto leads the analysis in a broader direction and inserts *Identificazione* in the 'fourth phase' of Antonioni's cinema, which is characterised by the use of contemporary music, as well as by a multitude of diegetic sources such as radio, live concerts and instruments.[110]

With respect to the characters in the film, it has been noted that the filmmaker Niccolò, the aristocrat Mavi, and the actress Ida manifest some similarities with previous Antonioni figures because of their artistic affiliations and interests, emotional inconsistency, personal crises and attempts to find a more fulfilled existence. For instance, Tomasulo observes a resemblance between the love relationship of Niccolò and Ida with that of

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[106] Canby, 'Antonioni's Identification Of A Woman', *The New York Times*, 1982 <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9407EEDB143BF933A0575AC0A964948260& partner=Rotten%20Tomatoes> [accessed 7 June 2014].
[107] Tassone, p.168.
[108] See the volume on Antonioni and music, Roberto Calabretto, *Antonioni e la musica* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2012).
[109] Chatman p. 219.
[110] Roberto Calabretto, 'Da ragazzo suonavo il violino ma non amo la musica nel film', in *Antonioni e la musica*, pp. 11 51.

Sandro and Claudia in *L'avventura,* with particular reference to the final feeling of acceptance developed between the couples.[111] Pomerance notes some resemblances between Niccolò and the filmmaker Guido Anselmi in Federico Fellini's *8 ½* (1963), particularly in relation to the shared profession, the similar creative crisis, and the importance of the presence of women in both their lives.[112] However, in Chatman's view, 'unlike *8½* the film does not tell us much about how the director's creative mind actually works.'[113]

Overall, the actors' performances have been judged to be poor, 'lackluster',[114] naïve and, as Canby straightly asserts, just 'not super'.[115] Tassone regards it as all ineffective, with the exception of Daniela Silverio's voracious and complete abandonment during the sensual/sexual scenes.[116] The characters' tension, though, is more emotionally shallow than that between characters in previous films. Bachmann suggests that not giving them 'a definite ideological position' is part of Antonioni's conscious direction.[117] Lorenzo Cucco reaffirms that the frenetic editing technique reflects both story and characters, resulting in a lack of the depth that once constituted Antonioni's *modus operandi*.[118] Chatman also suggests a sense of 'machismo' in the lead character's personality, something that none of Antonioni's previous characters has ever showed before. For instance, in the critic's view, Niccolò is unable to express and live his feelings outside of sexual relations; he seems to be intrigued by Mavi, rather than being sincerely in love with her, and 'losing her seems to be as much as blow to

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[111] Tomasulo, p. 57.
[112] Pomerance, 'Identification of a woman', pp. 35 69.
[113] Chatman, *Michelangelo Antonioni*, p. 81.
[114] Edward Guthmann, '14 Year Wait, No Reward 'Identification' for die-hard Antonioni fans only', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 November 1996 <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/FILM-REVIEW-14-Year-Wait-No-Reward-2959066.php> [accessed 7 June 2013].
[115] Canby, 1982.
[116] Tassone, p.168.
[117] Bachmann, p.3.
[118] Lorenzo Cucco, *Antonioni. Il discorso dello sguardo* (Pisa: ETS Edizioni, 1990), pp. 98 101.

his vanity as it is anything else'.[119] Similarly, Italian critic Franchi looks at Niccolò as a 'non-hero of vision', because of his inability to see and find his own artistic path.[120]

Le montagne incantate, writings, videos and documentaries

The series of *Le montagne* is still not enough known to the general public and the academic literature on it shows some limitations, although many artworks of the series have been presented in Ferrara at *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo. Antonioni e le arti* exhibition. The series includes two types of artwork: postcard-sized watercolours and collages, sometimes 'no bigger than a matchbox', and their related photographic enlargements.[121] Among the critics who tackle this subject, Vito Apuleio pays attention to the use of the photographic medium, and outlines many thematic and stylistic connections with Antonioni's earlier films, such as *L'avventura* and *Blow-Up*.[122] According to Apuleio, in the *Le montagne* series Antonioni starts from watercolour to end with photography; this puts emphasis on the *non finito* status of the collages, compared with the *finito* status of the photographic enlargements.

The homonymous exhibition, *Antonioni. Le montagne Incantate*, was presented for the first time in 1983 at the Correr Museum in Venice, on the prestigious occasion of the Venice Biennale of Art.[123] The exhibition was

[119] Chatman, 1985, p.224.
[120] Franchi, 'Identificazione di una donna'.
[121] William Arrowsmith, 'Letter from Rome', *Arion*, 2.2/3 (Spring 1992 – Fall 1993), 300–303 (301). In this letter, there are Arrowsmith's comments on Antonioni's collages after his last visit to his studio in Rome: 'A very odd sort of artwork, for which there's no name - perhaps "fotometapainting" or something of the sort. He does tiny watercolors, some no bigger than a matchbox, some in tempera, some in collage, and then blows them up to roughly ten or twenty or even thirty times their original size.'
[122] Vito Apuleio, 'Attraverso l'emozione', *Il Messaggero*, 21 October 1983.
[123] The Venice solo show, *Antonioni. Le montagne incantate*, was curated by Art Biennale (directed by Maurizio Calvesi) in collaboration with Cinema Biennale – Venice Film Festival (directed by Gian Luigi Rondi), which concurrently was going to award Antonioni the Golden Lion. The exhibition toured both across the nation and internationally during the

well received by the critics and by the general public, and it was covered by the national press, including articles from *La Stampa, Il Messaggero* and *Il Corriere della Sera*.[124] Among them, the journalist Gianni Rondolino defined Antonioni as 'esploratore di spazi indefiniti ed indagatore di momenti di sospensione'; he described the show as a journey across hundreds of pictures of mountains, hills and rocks. He wrote: '[...] sono come delle "visioni ritmiche" che vanno viste l'una con l'altra'.[125] Franco Miracco suggested that sublime and melancholic feelings are emerging from the images, evoking a parallel with the works of Caspar David Friedrich.[126] Journalists Chris Darke and Chris Wagstaff, writing in *Sight and Sound*, look at *Le montagne* as part of the creative process of Antonioni's late period, arguing that the images show some aspects of his personality that had been hidden until that time.[127] In discussing the colours used to shape the mountains, Kezich underlines their evocative power and the symbolic connections with the Occidental view of the Oriental tradition, which evoke feelings of mystery, abstraction and transcendence.[128]

Around the same period of *Le montagne,* Antonioni worked on several screenplays and ideas for new films, which were never fully realized, for various reasons. For instance, in 1982 in collaboration with Tonino Guerra, Antonioni wrote *L'aquilone,* which he later intended to produce as a film directed by his wife, Enrica Fico, in 2007;[129] because of the severe stroke

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following years. It was presented at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, on the occasion of Antonioni's retrospective in January 1988 in New York City; at the opening of the Michelangelo Antonioni Museum in Ferrara in 1995; and at the National Museum of Abruzzo in L'Aquila, on the occasion of a large retrospective of the director's corpus of work in 2007, curated by the Superintendent of the Cultural Office Anna Imponente.

[124] Press review of the Venice exhibition (mainly referring to the years 2006-2007) is currently preserved in Fondo Luigi Freddi-Antonioni.

[125] Gianni Rondolini, 'Antonioni pittore di Montagne Incantate', *La Stampa,* 14 September 1983.

[126] Franco Miracco, 'Michelangelo in mostra a Venezia', *Il Manifesto,* 3 September 2009.

[127] Chris Darke and Chris Wagstaff, 'Beyond words/Beyond the clouds/Par-delà les nuages/Al di là delle nuvole/Jenseits der Wolken', *Sight and Sound*, (1996), 12 16.

[128] Kezich, 'Sur le tableaux de Antonioni', *Positif,* 273 (1983), 53 55 (p. 53).

[129] The script was published in 1982 by a small publishing house in Rimini, Maggioli Editore, and the edition was illustrated by eight colour plates by Nicolai Ignatov.

Antonioni suffered in December 1985 the project was interrupted.[130] The forthcoming volume *Quel bowling sul Tevere* assembled a variety of short stories and novel sketches, and was translated in English by William Arrowsmith in 1986.[131] Scholars have often referred to these screenplays in their critical essays, but have rarely analysed them in depth, with the exception of some specific publications and articles, such as the edited volume by Di Carlo and Tinazzi's *Unfinished Business: Screenplays, Scenarios and Ideas,* in 1998.[132]

Above all, at the beginning of the 1980s, conscious of having closed an important phase of his life, Antonioni was eager to move his career along a different path. To Bachmann's provocative insinuation about his inclination to work around the same themes again and again, Antonioni answered:

> Actually, I am quite tired of it. […] In fact, my next film will be a very different venture. It will take place mostly at sea, it will be made in America again, and there will be sudden disappearances […] but it will not deal with a man-woman relationship. There will be interactions between men, but not on a sexual level.[133]

On this occasion, he was referring to *La ciurma*, a new project mentioned in an interview with Lietta Tornabuoni from the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*.[134] Here, he reconfirmed his willingness to challenge himself as a film director with a new kind of work that might potentially speak more

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[130] The precise time of the stroke is unclear. However, according to the national newspaper *La Stampa,* Antonioni suffered from a cerebral stroke on the 20th of December 1985 in Rome; he was moved to the hospital Sant'Anna in Ferrara in January 1986. See 'Migliora Antonioni dopo l'ictus celebrale', *La Stampa,* 5 Febbraio 1986 <http://www.archiviolastampa.it/component/option,com_lastampa/task,search/mod,libera/action,viewer/Itemid,3/page,21/articleid,0988_01_1986_0030_0021_13512390/> [accessed 3 June 2013].

[131] Antonioni, *That Bowling Alley On The Tiber,* trans. by William Arrowsmith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[132] For instance, see, Antonioni, *Unfinished Business: Screenplays, Scenarios and Ideas,* ed. by Di Carlo and Tinazzi (Rome: Marsilio, 1998).

[133] Bachmann, p.4.

[134] Lietta Tornabuoni, 'Antonioni sul mare del futuro', *La Stampa*, 1982, p.3.

openly to the contemporary public.[135] Also this project was eventually abandoned.

His interest in video, new technology and commercial visual language led him to direct a commercial advert for *Renault 9* in 1981 and the music video *Fotoromanza* in 1984, from Gianna Nannini's breakthrough album *Puzzle*. The critical accounts of these little-known commercial works are limited, but there are a couple of mentions. Tassone is one of the few scholars who includes and describes them in his volume dedicated to Antonioni's cinema.[136] On the occasion of the release of *Fotoromanza*, journalist Maurizio Bizzicari published an article in *L'Europeo* with the title 'Michelangelo Rock', and reviewed this work as the first 'auteur music video ever made'.[137] Around the same period, Antonioni also directed *Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* (henceforth *Ritorno*) for the unaired RAI 3 television program *Falsi ritorni: per un'archeologia del set*. The film premiered at the Festival de Cannes in 1989, the year which marked Antonioni's return to cinema and comeback to Cannes after his stroke. Di Carlo comments about this matter and the years post-1985: 'Per Antonioni comincia un period molto duro, per uscire da una condizione difficile di vita e di forzata inattività'.[138] However, in spite of the tangible difficulties, he did not stop making cinema.

The following film was *Roma*, part of the project on Italian cities, *12 registi per 12 città*, produced by Recta Film for Istituto Luce and Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo on the occasion of the 1990 FIFA World

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[135] *La ciurma* was supposed to be shot along the coast of Florida and to mark Antonioni's return to working in the United States. The director aimed at focusing on the concepts of violence and envy as the predominant feelings of contemporary society. The characters' behavior should have followed a logic of violence, which was seen by Antonioni as the only possible answer to contemporary life, as well as an individual's reaction to the mechanisms of the system. See Antonioni, 'The history of cinema is made on film', in *The Architecture*, pp. 193 216 (p. 205).

[136] Tassone, pp. 44 45.

[137] The article/interview was published in the now-closed national newspaper *L'Europeo* in April 1984. See Maurizio Bizzicari, qtd. in Domenico Liggeri, 'Michelangelo Antonioni: il grande sdoganamento', in *Musica per i nostri occhi. Storia e segreti del videoclip* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007), p. 459.

[138] Di Carlo, 'Il lungo viaggio con Antonioni', in *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo,* pp. 201 207 (p. 206).

Cup hosted in Italy. Two years later, Antonioni went on to make the ten-minute video *Noto, mandorli, Vulcano, Stromboli, carnevale* (1992). This compilation of unstructured footage, shot in some areas of the Sicilian region, was made for the Enel Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Seville, and focused on the grandiosity of the land itself, its traditions and nature. These four short films were also presented at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in December of the same year of the large retrospective on the director's work.

The existing literature on Antonioni's documentary roots (via Brunette, Chatman, Noa Steimatsky, Rohdie, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith) has emphasised and supported the director's way of challenging the traditional objective mode of realistic representation. Although early issues concerning visibility are still present in the aforementioned short films of the 1980s and 1990s, there are very limited critical accounts of them, with the exception of reviews in newspaper and journals. For instance, Brunette does not include these works in his analysis of Antonioni's films, and he mentions them neither in the introduction nor in the filmography section.[139] Chatman does not refer to *Ritorno* and *Roma* in his monograph published in 1985.[140] Tassone inserts only *Ritorno* in the brief section dedicated to Antonioni's documentaries, but he does not include it in the filmography along with *Roma* and *Noto, mandorli, Vulcano, Stromboli, carnevale*.[141] Finally, Chatman and Paul Duncan's volume *Michelangelo Antonioni: The Complete Films* makes a brief reference to all these short films and includes them in the final filmography.[142]

Instead, this dissertation specifically addresses all the works of the 1980s as a unified body; it discusses their core features and provides critical readings of each piece. It also directs attention to the forthcoming works of the 1990s and considers them in order to trace parallelisms and

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[139] Brunette, 1998.
[140] Chatman, 1985.
[141] Tassone, p.61.
[142] Chatman and Duncan, *Michelangelo Antonioni*, pp. 92–95.

developments in terms of style and themes. The structure of this dissertation is divided into six interconnected chapters and will follow a chronological order. Together, they will offer new, fresh insights into the whole trajectory of Antonioni's late career, which has for too long been considered problematic to approach because of its eclecticism and experimentalism.

Outline of the thesis

The opening chapter will map out the question regarding the issues of colour and space in Antonioni's cinema preceding the 1980s (from *Gente del Po*, 1942 1947, to *Zabriskie Point*).[143] It will offer an overview of several references to visual arts that have been addressed in his cinema, with particular attention to Alberto Lattuada, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Schifano, Henri Matisse and Rothko. The second part of the chapter will outline Antonioni's concerns about spatial issues and will investigate the core elements that populate his cinematic space, intended as abstract and fragmented, interior and exterior space, and natural and urban landscape.

Chapters 2 and 3 will begin the study of Antonioni's work of the 1980s with the graphic series *Le montagne* and the film *Il mistero*. The proximity of these two chapters aims at stressing the sense of unity in Antonioni's visual and thematic journey of the period. The core features of the series, and specifically the theme of the mountain, will be examined and put in parallel

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[143] *Professione: reporter,* released in 1975, is the last feature of the decade. The choice of not including the film in this analysis is based on the perception of a different kind of relationship between the character and the landscape. In *Professione: reporter,* Antonioni follows the journey of David Locke, a young reporter who exchanges his identity with a dead person, in order to escape his reality. As in the case of *Identificazione,* the camera stays closer to the male character and follows him in every step. This is a work about a man in the act of both discovering and escaping new environments, instead of letting them surmount him. In terms of treatment of space, this may suggest that *Professione: reporter* begins a process of spatial investigation continued in *Identificazione.* In this sense, the 1975 film is the ideal junction point between *Zabriskie Point* and *Identificazione,* as here Antonioni deepens the spatial nature of the character, and describes him as a universe, to discover his borders and territories.

with the work of Piet Mondrian, some of the shots in *Professione: reporter*, *Il mistero* and *Stromboli*.

In chapter 3, *Il mistero* will be analysed through three interwoven perspectives. The first short section will be dedicated to the reasons behind the making of the film, as it stands as an unusual choice for Antonioni in terms of subject, and a completely new adventure in terms of medium (videotape). The second section will shed light on the relationship between *Il mistero* and the original Jean Cocteau play *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (henceforth *L'Aigle*), and particularly on authorial interventions, mise-en-scène, colour choices and characters. The third and longer section will articulate a parallel between *Il mistero* and the artists of the Italian art group of Transavanguardia. Here, particular attention will be given to the ideas of lightness and surprise, to the significance of the chosen medium of work (videotape for Antonioni and painting for the artists), and, finally, to colour experimentations, illusory elements and melodramatic nuances, interconnected with common themes and symbolic elements.

Chapter 4 is divided into three sections, and includes a broad analysis of *Identificazione*, as it is the only feature-length film of the 1980s, and the last of Antonioni's films engaging with 'Antoniennui' themes before his 1985 stroke.[144] The first section will focus on 'The Gaze' of *Identificazione di una donna*, which corresponds to the lead character Niccolò. The second section will investigate 'The Object' of the film, as defined by the multitude of women, female images and erotic allusions. Specifically, a broad space will be dedicated to the analysis of the characters Maria Vittoria Luppi (Mavi) and Ida, and the feelings that these female figures convey. Finally, the last section, 'The Filter', will tackle mainly the use of the soundtrack in the film, and will point out evolutions and changes in *Identificazione*,

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[144] As quoted by Rascaroli and Rhodes in the 'Introduction' of their BFI volume, the term 'Antoniennui' was coined by Andrew Sarris in the article 'No Antoniennui', published in The Village Voice on 29 December 1966, on the occasion of the London release of *Blow-Up*. The neologism is particularly useful because it includes all the semantic/discursive fields discussed in Antonioni's cinema, such as alienation, solitude, emptiness, fragmentation, and uncertainty.

compared with earlier films. Overall, the analysis will underline the way the film partially distances itself from Antonioni's traditional cinema, and ushers in a new phase of his career, as suggested by the late features *Al di là* and *Il filo pericoloso delle cose* (2004, henceforth *Il filo*).

Chapter 5 will address Antonioni's further engagement with video and will focus on his commercial works, which are the advert for the Renault 9 model TSE and the music video *Fotoromanza*. It will outline the main technical advancements and the popularity of the medium of video, drawing on the research conducted by Italian scholars Guido Aristarco, Cosetta Saba and Roberto Faenza. The first part of the chapter will provide a concise introduction to the history and language of the advertising industry during the 1980s, and will set the tone for a close reading of Antonioni's advert. It will go on to focus on the direct analysis of *Renault 9*, underlining the main peculiarities in terms of technical specifications, themes and visual elements. The second part will give a brief overview of the growing role of music videos in the pop scene of the 1980s, and will point out some of the most successful international examples. Along with placing emphasis on Antonioni's colour experiments with the magnetic tape, a parallel between *Fotoromanza* and David Bowie's iconic video *Ashes to Ashes* will establish a dialogue with the contemporary pop and cultural visual experiences.

Chapter 6 will consider the short films *Ritorno* and *Roma* using the theoretical framework of portraiture from art history. The analysis will approach these two works as 'portrait films' of a landscape, rather than documentaries, taking as its subjects Nature in *Ritorno* and Art in *Roma*. The first section will take into account the idea of a return journey to the locations of *L'avventura* in *Ritorno*, the representation and treatment of space, the dialogue with landscape portraiture, and the director's personal engagement within the overall project. The second section will underline the role of a classical and sentimental soundtrack in describing some of the most recognisable and spectacular Baroque architecture of Rome and the iconic inner space of the Vatican. A close reading of this film will revolve

around the physical presence of people on camera and the non-presence of human emotions, as well as around the use of architectural and pictorial space.

In the conclusion, I will review the research contributions of this dissertation, as well as discuss directions for further study on Antonioni's cinema. Such conclusion will be followed by two appendices. The first text is the transcription of the unpublished interview with Fico, *Congiunzione di sguardi,* which I personally conducted at her house in Rome in March 2013. The interview, developed from the desire of discovering more aspects of Antonioni's works of the 1980s from Fico's personal and professional gaze, focuses on the director's acquaintance with the visual arts and his films of the period. The second text will address Antonioni's final works in detail, including *Al di là, Il filo, Lo sguardo* and later abstract paintings, and will give an overview of the main literature about them.

CHAPTER 1
MANIPULATING COLOUR AND SPACE

1.1 Walking in the landscape of Antonioni's visual references

Colour and space are the two core topoi of Antonioni's cinema, aesthetics and universe. Since the very first critical articles about the director's work, scholars and journalists have been pointing out the crucial role of these two elements, as well as their relevance in the visual composition of the image, framing, and symbolic landscape of Antonioni's films and/or art pieces. Putting an emphasis on their development in the director's works before the 1980s may provide a necessary background for understanding and tracing their treatment in the following body of works, which are the main subject of this dissertation. As this study will rely on interdisciplinary approach, and so it will incorporate art-historical analysis, there will be many direct references to art genres, painters and spatial thinkers. Indeed this introductory chapter on colour and space will provide a solid base for further speculations on these matters, and will be key in identifying those elements of innovation introduced by Antonioni in the 1980s.

In regard to the first topos, Antonioni's cinema is saturated with visual arts references, as he was himself passionate about art and an insatiable collector. To take one instance, his film *La signora senza camelie* (1953) features Paolo Uccello's *La Battaglia di San Romano* and other reproductions, Vincent Van Gogh's *Tournesols dans un vase* and various Amadeo Modigliani's portraits. In a recent essay, curator Barbara Guidi acknowledges Antonioni's regular visits to art exhibits and correspondence with artists such as Giorgio Morandi, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Emilio Vedova and Rothko. She also gives insights into

the director's personal collection, which includes artworks by Roy Lichtenstein, Francis Bacon, Alberto Burri and Giacomo Balla;[1] curator of Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara Maria Luisa Pacelli adds to this list a substantial body of 27,000 photography prints and film stills collected by Antonioni (many of them by photographers Giovanni Battista Poletto and Bruce Davidson), screen tests, actor portraits and pictures of possible film locations.[2] She argues that this collection metaphorically stands for a visual journey leading the viewer towards Antonioni's process of thinking and creation. Additionally, there are many artists the director does not acknowledge directly but likely to have had an impact on his vision; Benci mentions Claes Oldenburg (with whom he briefly collaborated, after having seen his work at the Venice Biennale in 1964), Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris and Alberto Giacometti.[3]

In true, Antonioni gave precise indications about his interest in painting and visual arts in 1985, in an interview with Sophie Lannes and Philippe Meyer:

> Other painters? [...] I would say Paolo Uccello, [Paul] Kandinsky, [Jackson] Pollock, [Kazimir] Malevich, [Giorgio] Morandi. And, of course, [Pablo] Picasso. I am quoting names at random. For example, I have a deep admiration for [Diego] Velazquez, who in my opinion is underrated. Another great painter from the past who is too little known is Cosmé Tura, the most original of the Ferrarese School. And among the lesser figures is Benozzo Gozzoli: I always take great pleasure in is work, he uses such unusual colouring pinks, turquoises especially and then, I also like his compositional skills. Among the contemporary Italian painters, I would say [Mario] Schifano.[4]

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[1] Barbara Guidi, 'Sono un amante della pittura', in *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*, pp. 258 263.
[2] Maria Luisa Pacelli, 'L'archivio personale di Antonioni', in *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*, pp. 173 177.
[3] Benci, '"All that is behind colour": Antonioni and painting (three case studies)', *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, 1.1, (2015), 65 89 (p. 86).
[4] Antonioni, 'Identification of a Woman', interviewed by Sophie Lannes and Philippe Meyer, in *The Architecture*, pp. 245 256 (p. 248).

The artists mentioned span a vast historical period between the early fifteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century. In the realm of both academic and non-academic literature regarding Antonioni, critics specifically refer to the influence of historical avant-garde movements, Italian Metafisica and Arte Povera, British and American abstract art, and painters and photographers of every kind on his work. Païni underlines the relevance of Piero della Francesca and Rothko above all, and also of Lucio Fontana, Jean Dubuffet, Burri and Piero Manzoni. In particular, he recalls Antonioni's well-known admiration for Della Francesca, and suggests an analogy between the aesthetics of the two artists based on a 'strategy of the enigma'.[5] In his hypothesis, the egg manipulated by Monica Vitti in *Il deserto rosso* – a direct reference to the symbolic egg in Della Francesca's *Vergine con il bambino* (1472) – conveys the whole enigmatic and symbolic world of Antonioni's cinema.

Antonioni's early black and white documentaries are grounded in the intellectual milieu of the pre- and post-war periods, and it may be argued that they share a similar visual sense of urgency with the work of photographers like Giuseppe Cavalli, co-founder of the group of *La Bussola* (1947), which included Mario Finazzi, Francesco Ferruccio Leiss, Federico Vender and Luigi Veronesi. This group, followers of Benedetto Croce's aesthetic principles arguing a work of art as a form of knowledge, expression and intuition, promoted the autonomy of the photographic medium and aspired to formal purity in their work. In particular, analogies between Antonioni and Cavalli may be found in the technical and experimental approach to the camera, in the use of the close-up and extreme close-up, and in the manipulation of reality. Other points of contact may be established with filmmakers like Alberto Lattuada, exponents of Neorealism, and designers such as Giò Ponti, who were promoting new theoretical discussions on spatial issues at the beginning of the

[5] Païni, 'Ritratto di un cineasta in veste di pittore', in *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*, pp. 24-41.

1940s.[6] At that time, Antonioni was developing his engagement with space, architecture and setting, thanks to his studies in architecture and professional encounters at both the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia and the editorial office of the journal *Cinema* in Rome between 1940-1942.[7] Grounding on this artistic exchange during this period, Leonardo Quaresima discusses the connection between Antonioni's work and Lattuada's landscape photographs of the poorest areas of Milan, published in the volume *L'occhio quadrato* by the periodical *Corrente* in 1941.[8] Lattuada's photographs are particularly crucial in the context of this chapter, as the series opens up the discussion of the subject of space.

Having studied architecture, Lattuada captures in his photographs architectural elements, objects and details of urban and rural landscapes, with particular interest in spatial volume, lines and surfaces (Fig. 1). Whilst encompasing a documentary sensibility, most of his images reveal a commitment to abstract form and show a geometric layout where human presence is either absent or depicted at the margins. Similarly, *Gente del Po* depicts the daily life of the people living and working on the river Po, at the

[6] Antonioni contributed to the monographic issue 'Stile Italiano nel cinema' of the Milanese magazine *Aria d'Italia* in 1941. It was shut down during the same year, at the time the magazine was following an innovative, interdisciplinary editorial direction and was generally regarded as the link between two of the most influential publications among Giò Ponti's magazines, *Domus* and *Style*. Amongst the contributors to this particular issue were Francesco Pasinetti, Giuseppe De Santis, Luchino Visconti and Ponti himself, whose essay called for architecture to play a more active role in cinema, rather than functioning only as background. Antonioni's most legendary scenes evoke Ponti's words: 'Architecture is in itself a character'; 'Imagine a film that starts with an "empty scene" dominated by architecture', an 'empty stage, where the architecture still lives'. All the quotes are from Benci, 'Identification of a city: Antonioni and Rome 1940-1962', in *Antonioni: Centenary*, pp. 21 63 (p. 29); original article by Giò Ponti, 'Architettura nel cinema Idee', *Aria d'Italia*, 2.7 (1941), 23 26.

[7] According to Benci's article, Antonioni joined the army in summer 1941, but he did not leave the city and kept relationships with the cultural scene of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (he married one of his colleagues, Letizia Balboni, in 1942, and the couple shared an apartment with their teacher Francesco Pasinetti and his wife, Letizia's sister, until 1945). See Benci, 'Identification of a city'.

[8] Piero Berengo Gardin, ed., *Alberto Lattuada fotografo: dieci anni di occhio quadrato 1938-1948* (Firenze: Alinari, 1982); Leonardo Quaresima, 'Making Love on the Shores of the River Po: Antonioni's Documentaries', in *Antonioni: Centenary*, pp.115 133.

border of modern society. It shows the landscape as subject and main character, and also underlines the significance of the presence and absence of human beings and their relationship with the environment.

Fig. 1: Alberto Lattuada, *L'occhio quadrato,* 1941, two gelatin-silver prints, 20 x 30 cm. Fondazione 3M, Milan © Alberto Lattuada and heirs.[9]

Its originality, along with its value as a precursor to Neorealist film, lies in the choice of the location and the way it is presented.[10] A few years earlier, in 1939, Antonioni wrote an article in *Cinema* titled 'Per un film sul fiume Po', in which he claimed that 'gli abitanti del Po *sentono* il fiume. [italics added]'[11] In putting the emphasis on the verb 'to feel', Antonioni marks the concept of, in Noa Steimatsky's words, the *'genius loci* a spirit of place that would figure, by

means of the river, the "destiny" of the region as a whole'.[12] According to Steimatsky, the foundation of the film is in the way it raises questions about the nature of the documentary approach itself. Indeed, looking at this work as simply reportage about fishermen and humble country people would be reductive. Instead, the film functions as a harmonious network of visuals made by zoom shots of boats, waves and architectural elements and wide shots of land, river and villages where people frenetically move; *Gente del Po*, in addition to conveying a message or information, is aesthetically appealing. Antonioni focuses on the beauty of his film more than on historical facts, and highlights the formal qualities of the image in order to reimagine the political function of the image itself, removing it from direct activism.

Gente del Po marks the beginning of Antonioni's career and clearly establishes his visual approach to space and characters, filtered through the subject of the film: the Po Valley residents' ancestral relation with the river Po.[13] In the same year and place, Luchino Visconti was filming *Ossessione* and, as Benci recalled, it was the close contact with this director that led Antonioni to discover and appreciate the work of engraver and illustrator Renzo Vespignani, whose work entered the overall imaginary of his subsequent films. Visconti collected the work of this artist, who was also exhibited at Galleria La Margherita (1945) and Galleria L'Obelisco (1946, 1947 and 1949), both in Rome.[14] As noted by Francesco Maselli, Antonioni was fascinated by the artists of the School of Portonaccio and, particularly, by Vespignani's urban studies, to the extent that many shots of his second short film, *N.U./Sanitation Department*

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[12] Noa Steimatsky, 'Aerial: Antonioni's Modernism', in *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 1 40.

[13] 'Po di Volano belongs to the landscape of my early childhood. To the Po of my youth. The men who would pass on the levees, dragging along the barges with a rope at a slow, rhythmic pace; and later the same barges dragged along in a convoy by a tugboat, with the women intent on cooking, the men at the helm, the hens, the clothes hanging out-true wandering houses, touching. They were images of a world of which, little by little, I was becoming conscious.' In Antonioni, 'Preface to Six Films, in *The Architecture*, pp. 57 70 (p. 65).

[14] Benci, '"All that is behind colour".

(1948), have been argued to bear striking resemblance to the illustrator's drawings and engravings.[15] Antonioni's appreciation is further proven by the fact that the director commissioned Vespignani to make some drawings based on shots of his first full-length film, *Cronaca di un amore*, in 1950.[16]

In regard to the representation of urban landscape, Ian Wiblin suggests a relation with Bernd and Hilla Becher's modernist vision of space.[17] According to the critic, their works imbue the landscape with the overwhelming presence of buildings, which imply the tensions, aspirations and limitations of humanity, and consequently underscore the fundamental absence of human beings in these spaces.[18] The Bechers started to explore European and North American industrial postwar landscapes at the end of the 1950s, around the same period in which Antonioni was developing his own critical view on modernist architecture, showing the peripheral areas of the modern European city. *Il grido* (1957), for instance, may be read as an example of the director's deep interest in a new urban, liminal and almost metaphysical space, and confirms his participation in a broader discussion about the dialogue between visual art and architecture. In the film, the camera follows the desperate journey of the middle-aged worker Aldo across the flat region of Po Valley in search of a safe place and an identity.

The film has a circular and traumatic structure. Aldo does not find what he is looking for; he is not able to adjust himself to any of the new physical and social situations he encounters and eventually comes back to the original point of departure. Visually, the film starts and ends with the same image: the water tower in Aldo's worksite (Fig. 2, right). Fig. 2 shows, side-by-side, details from the Bechers' *Water Towers* and Antonioni's *Il grido*, both featuring a water

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[15] Ibid., p. 67.
[16] Ibid., p. 72.
[17] Ian Wiblin, 'The Space Between', in *Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, ed. by François Penz and Maureen Thomas (London: British Film Institute, 1997), pp. 104–112.
[18] Ibid., p. 111.

tower structure. Both the Bechers and Antonioni consider the strong, frontal, vertical aspect of the water tower.

Fig. 2: Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers,* 1980, nine gelatine silver prints, 155.6 x 125.1 cm, detail. S. Guggenheim Collection, New York © 1980 Bernd and Hilla Becher (left).[19] Screen grab from *Il grido.* Detail of the water tower in the final scene (right).

Together with silos, oil refineries and furnaces, waters towers are regarded by the Bechers as symbols and documents of a past era. Of different times and forms, these structures are part of the industrial architecture obsessively recorded by the two photographers, and then organised in series by typology and arranged in rows and grids. As the left frame in Fig. 2 shows, the two photographers frame each structure in almost the same way, evoking a unique style and methodical approach. The camera angle is frontal and the tower occupies almost the entire composition, in order to enhance both the visual

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[19] Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers,* 1980 <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/500> [accessed 13 September 2015].

and conceptual relevance of the object.[20] In *Il grido,* the architecture of the water tower has a similar visual and narrative role, and the low angle of the camera emphasises, at the ending of the story, Aldo's suffering and abjectness. During the film, the character's narrative journey allows Antonioni's camera to wander through different environments and capture vehicles, street signs, borders, confines, and liminal locations such as train and car stations, empty houses, factories and hotels.[21] Among them, the water tower represents the changing industrial landscape of Italy, and it mirrors the lead character's feelings.

In Antonioni's cinema, there is a silent, solitary and deserted feel to nature, evoking the dreamlike atmosphere of the Surrealistic tradition, and the emotional, profound skies of Giorgio De Chirico (cf. *L'Autunno* [1935] and *Bagni Misteriosi* [1966]). A further parallel can be found in the natural landscapes of the Italian photographer Mimmo Jodice. For instance, in his black and white photographs *Pozzuoli* (1985) and *Stromboli* (1999), nature is represented at the peak of its primordial grandiosity, similar — despite the temporal distance between the works — to some shots in *L'avventura*. The natural light is charged with both spiritual and violent qualities, and the heightened contrast between shadows and highlights renders the perception of these landscapes even more dramatic.[22] Although Jodice and Antonioni's works enter the space of abstraction, in both cases they are far from being indefinite or utopic; rather,

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[20] Andrea Karnes, 'Bernd and Hilla Becher', in *Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth 110*, ed. by Michael Auping (London: Third Millenium Publ., 2002), pp. 213–214.

[21] Other examples of the theme of journey in Antonioni's cinema are the inconclusive search for Anna in the Sicilian land of *L'avventura*; Antonioni's personal documentary work in China; the aerial flight of the male lead character of *Zabriskie Point* in the vast American landscape; and the long journey in *Professione: reporter* from Algeria to London, Munich and Spain. *Professione: reporter,* released in 1975, is the last feature of the decade. The choice of not including the film in this analysis is based on the perception of a different kind of relationship between the character and the landscape. In *Professione: reporter,* Antonioni follows the journey of David Locke, a young reporter who exchanges his identity with a dead person, in order to escape his reality.

[22] For more information on the photographer, see Mimmo Jodice, *Perdersi a guardare*, ed. by Alessandra Mauro and Roberto Koch (Milan: Fotolito Colore Due, 2007).

their images are both tangible and material.

On the pictorial sources for *Il deserto rosso,* Robert Benayoun and Roger Tailleur discuss a connection with Tachisme,[23] and with works by Jean Dubuffet, Nicolas de Staël and Jean Fautrier.[24] Dalle Vacche also identifies many resemblances between the pulsing landscape in this film and the paintings by De Chirico, Piero Manzoni, Mario Sironi, Alberto Burri and Mimmo Rotella.[25] In her view, Antonioni merges a figurative representation, defined by the natural and industrial landscape of the film, and an abstract approach to the image, exemplified by vanishing contours, fog and an oscillation between reality and dreams.[26] Additionally, many critics and curators, recently including Jeffrey Weiss, Guidi, Païni and Benci, have discussed Rothko's influence on Antonioni's visual choices in the film.[27] As will be discussed in the next sections, Antonioni shares affinities with Rothko in terms of aesthetic sensibility, use of colour and space.

For *Blow-Up,* Antonioni's second film in colour, the director took inspiration from the figure of the London abstract artist Ian Stephenson in the construction of the character of Bill; his artworks feature prominently as mise-en-scène elements, together with works by Peter Sedgley, who has been celebrated for his vibrant paintings, tempera and kinetic installations since the mid-1960s. In the film, photography is an important source of inspiration in

[23] A French movement of informal art in the 1940s and 1950s, sometimes considered to be the European equivalent to abstract expressionism.
[24] Robert Benayoun, 'Un cri dans le désert', *Positif,* 66.43 (1965), 59; Roger Tailleur, 'Le desert jusqu'a plus soif', *Positif,* 67 68 (1965), 81 92.
[25] Dalle Vacche, 'Michelangelo Antonioni's Red Desert: Painting as Ventriloquism and Color as Movement', in *Cinema and Painting*, pp. 43 80.
[26] Ibid.
[27] On the parallels between Rothko/Antonioni, see the studies by Richard Gilman and Matthew Gandy; Lee Seldes, *The Legacy of Mark Rothko* (Capo Press, 1996); Chatman, *Antonioni, or the Surface,* p. 54; Steven Jacobs, 'Between E.U.R. and LA: Townscapes in the Work of Michelangelo Antonioni', in *The Urban Condition: Space, Community, and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis,* ed. by GUNST (Ghent: 010 Publishers, 1999), pp. 324 342 (pp. 330 334). Jeffrey Weiss, 'Temps Mort: Rothko and Antonioni', in *Rothko,* ed. by Oliver Wick (Milan: Skira, 2007), pp. 45 56; Barbara Guidi, 'Sono un amante della pittura'; Païni, 'Ritratto di un cineasta in veste di pittore'; Benci, '"All that is behind colour"'.

multiple ways. For instance, in editing the scene with supermodel Veruschka, Antonioni uses the jump-cut technique, synchronising the cuts to the repeated shutter clicks of the photographer. By using this editing technique, the filmmaker transforms the original temporality of the footage and makes its main meaning evident: the click of the camera. The result is an overlapping of space/time, which reveals Antonioni's presence as mastermind behind the scene and sketches out a photographic allegory.[28] A further allusion to photography is inherent in the character of Thomas, whose personality recalls the London fashion photography celebrities of the 1960s, including David Bailey (b. 1938), Terence Donovan (1936-1996), Brian Duffy (1933-2010) and Tony Armstrong-Jones (b. 1930). It is worth noting that, thanks to Donovan's mediation, Antonioni eventually found the perfect location for Thomas' private and professional space, 39 Prince Place in the Notting Hill area, which at that time was artist John Cowan's studio.[29]

Among other great masters who have interested Antonioni, art historian Flavio Caroli cites Jackson Pollock and Mario Schifano as particularly influential, because of their significance in the visual composition of Antonioni's films of the 1970s, specifically *Zabriskie Point* and *Professione: reporter*.[30] As the main focus of this dissertation is on Antonioni's body of works of the 1980s, it is relevant to conclude this section with visual artists who held weight in the director's career leading up to that period, looking at influences from the beginning of the 1950s to these last two feature films of the 1970s. Alongside compositional and visual references to Pollock in *Zabriskie Point,* the dialogue between the painter and Antonioni comes in the

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[28] This editing technique consists of the removal of some frames of the original footage, while keeping the camera perspective fixed. In this case, the succession of the shots creates an effect of artificial time, and appears as a sequence of photographic stills one after another.

[29] Philippe Garner, 'Fleeting images: photographers, models and the media - London, 1966', in *Antonioni's Blow-Up* (London: Steidl, 2010), pp. 106-123 (p. 115).

[30] Païni, 2012; Flavio Caroli, 'I sentimenti degli uomini sono in grado di cambiare il paesaggio', *Che Tempo Che Fa,* RAI 3, 14 April 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSMq8YNqVus> [accessed 3 June 2014].

deconstruction of reality. In both cases, form is disorganised and deconstructed, and colours are vibrant and dynamic.

In regard to a parallel with Schifano, Caroli has drawn attention to some of the shots in *Zabriskie Point* and *Professione: reporter*. Considered one of the most important Italian postmodernist artists, in 1962 Schifano visited the United States, where he established contacts with members of the American Pop Art movement, and particularly admired the work of Jim Dine and Franz Kline.[31] Attracted by the stream of images that the new mass media offered, including corporate logos and signs, Schifano started to produce several series of paintings and collages inspired by international brands such as Esso and Coca-Cola, and began his monochrome period.[32] The large canvas *Coca Cola* is one such work from the early 1970s, and marks the development of the artist's style by obsessively repeating and manipulating corporate logos (Fig. 3).[33]

Here, Schifano pays particular attention towards the material aspect of the painting, indicated by the impetus of the line and the imperfection of the lettering. It is almost as if the artist wanted to play with his viewers; he opts to show fragments of the lettering *c, o, l, a* and not the complete name of the brand. As noted by Caroli, the same vibrant and powerful red, interrupted by a sequence of bold white stripes and fragmented letters, can also be found on the walls of the car rental agency in Spain in *Professione: reporter* (Fig. 3).[34]

[31] Schifano landed several times in jail for drug issues. As an autodidact, in his art he includes experiments with cinema, video, television, photography and painting. He began working with his father in the National Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia in Rome in his early twenties; he dedicated himself exclusively to painting around 1957. Stemming from an interest in informal art, with Franco Angeli and Tano Festa he founded the Roman Scuola di Piazza del Popolo and began exhibiting with them around the same period. In 1962 he took part in the landmark exhibition *The New Realists* at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York with fellow Italian artists Tano Festa and Mimmo Rotella, along with Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Dine and George Segal. See Marco Meneguzzo, *Schifano* (Ravenna: Essegi Editrice, 1982).
[32] *Mario Schifano. Big Paintings*, exhib. cat., Istituto di Cultura Italiano, London, 7th July – 9th September 2005 (London: Istituto di Cultura Italiano, 2005).
[33] Meneguzzo.
[34] Caroli.

Fig. 3: Mario Schifano, *Coca Cola,* 1972, mixed media on canvas, 200 cm x 205 cm, detail. Museo Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Rovereto (left).[35] Screen grab from *Professione: reporter*. Detail on the wall of Avis car rental location (right).

In 1970, Schifano painted *Tutti Morti,* which marked the beginning of a new phase in the painter's career (Fig. 4). Showing human figures in an expansive natural scene, the painting is a visual expression of intimate despair and of human degeneration. In spite of the evidently absurdist atmosphere of the scene, the colour is applied with detail and rigour: the ground is yellow, the grass green, the sky blue. In Antonioni's orgy scene in *Zabriskie Point*, characters are alive and making love, but at the same time they are completely covered in dust and immersed in the ground of the desert. Similar to Schifano's painting, the landscape does not work as the background for the characters' narrative action, rather it plays an active role. Human beings appear even smaller than before: space works to deconstruct reality and then rebuild it.

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[35]Mario Schifano, *Coca Cola,* 1972
<http://www.mart.tn.it/collections.jsp?ID_LINK=688&area=137&id_context=3369> [accessed 13 September 2015].

Fig. 4: Mario Schifano, *Tutti morti,* 1970, mixed media on canvas, 195 cm x 220 cm, detail. Private collection © SIAE 2013.[36]

Through a long sequence of close-ups, details and different camera angles, Antonioni captures aspects of hippie culture and the wildness of nature, seemingly exploring the infinite possibilities of perspective and the multiplication and reflection of objects. Contrary to *Tutti morti,* this scene is blurry and fulfilled with a dense dust: colours tend towards browns, with some spots of light blue and grey in the landscape, far from the brightness and artificiality of the colours used in *Blow-Up.* In *Zabriskie Point* the message has changed and colours need to follow it: the characters' naked bodies are absorbed by the desert, in light of a utopic reconciliation between nature and culture.

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[36] Mario Schifano, *Tutti morti,* 1970 < http://www.daringtodo.com/lang/it/2013/03/08/mostre-imperdibili-michelangelo-antonioni-uno-sguardo-sulla-vita-e-sullarte/0a08m/> [accessed 13 September 2015].

1.2 Colour follows emotion

> Anche i colori durano poco, signor Goldwyn. Per uno stesso soggetto, non esistono colori fissi. Un papavero può esser grigio, una foglia nera. E i verdi non sono sempre erba, i blu non sono sempre cielo (Matisse). Chi le dice, poi, che il vermiglione chiaro corrisponda al colore della carnagione e che in un panno bianco le ombre siano grige? Provi a mettere accanto ad un panno bianco un cavolo oppure un cespo di rose e mi dica se è ancora convinto che le ombre del panno siano grigie (Gauguin). […] Insomma, signor Goldwyn, orizzonti molto vasti si aprono ad un regista che abbia inteso questo semplice fatto: che la legge del bello non è nella verità della natura. Io sono tra questi, ho le idee chiare, sono in altre parole un regista colorista. Mi fa dirigere un film? [37]

Colour means emotion, a subject of study and a vehicle of representation. Antonioni's inquiry into colour has deep roots, and there are numerous newspaper articles and interviews with the director on this topic dating back to the 1940s. Antonioni's 'Il colore non viene dall'America' (extract above), published three years after his encounter with Henri Matisse in Paris (1944) and less than twenty years before the one with Rothko in New York (1962), is one of his first texts tackling the subject of colour.[38] Written in the first person, the article is an open letter to the American film producer Samuel Goldwyn during a period when Hollywood was largely filming in Technicolor.[39] Making use of sarcasm and irony, the director openly provokes his ideal reader and criticises the then-current way of colouring in Hollywood films. He demands a freedom

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[37] Antonioni, 'Il colore non viene dall'America', in Antonioni, *Sul cinema*, ed. by di Carlo and Tinazzi (Venice: Marsilio, 2004), pp. 193 195 (p. 193).

[38] Antonioni, *Incontro con Matisse*, in Antonioni, *Sul cinema*, pp. 209 211. Antonioni met Rothko in his studio in Bowery Street in New York in 1962, thanks to the intermediary of writer and journalist Furio Colombo; about this matter see Benci, '"All that is behind colour"'.

[39] 'Technicolor' is the name of a technical process, which allowed filmmakers to produce the first colour motion pictures; invented at the beginning of the twentieth century, the process was commonly and largely used in Hollywood until the middle of the 1950s. For more information, see Richard W. Haines, *Technicolor Movies. The History of Dye Transfer Printing* (London: McFairland, 1993).

in the choice of colours, which sees its roots in the European tradition of painting. The article may be read as a statement of intent of Antonioni's use of colour and of the significance that colour would hold in his work, even during this early period of his career, when he was shooting black and white film.

His words reveal knowledge of the history of art and a preference for post-Impressionist painters, such as Paul Gauguin and Matisse. In the same way Matisse denies the representation of the sky as only blue and grass as only green, Antonioni suggests that a director should have the intellectual independence to follow his own vision, and to sacrifice the chromatic realism of an object, if that vision requires it. Antonioni seems to refer to the nature of Art itself, as a product made by the artist and for its own sake far from any realistic and true representation. Indeed, in his cinema the colours of reality are altered: streets become greyer, parks greener, the sky becomes violet and red. Studying Matisse leads Antonioni to a new way of using colour, departing from the complements dictated by the colour wheel and instead exploring bold and unusual relationships between colours. In his essay *Notes of a Painter* (1908), Matisse writes:

> The chief function of color should be to serve expression as well as possible. [...] My choice of colors does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences. [...] In studying the paintings of artists whose knowledge of colors depends upon instinct and feeling, and on a constant analogy with their sensations, one could define certain laws of color and so broaden the limits of color theory as it is now defined.[40]

In what is now seen as an innovative shift in the history of Western painting, in Matisse's view colours could be used to convey emotion and create relationships between elements, rather than to describe nature. His blocks of

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[40] Henri Matisse, 'Notes of a Painter' [1908], in *Matisse on Art*, ed. by Jack Flam (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 30–43 (p.41).

wild and bright colours break any fixed rules in terms of light and perspective, and follow both the form of the object and the artist's subjective vision.[41] Colours do not add touches and nuances to form; rather they play an active role in creating form and expressing the emotion undergirding the subject.

This free use of colour may be found, for example, in *Le Bonheur de vivre* (1905-1906; Fig. 5).
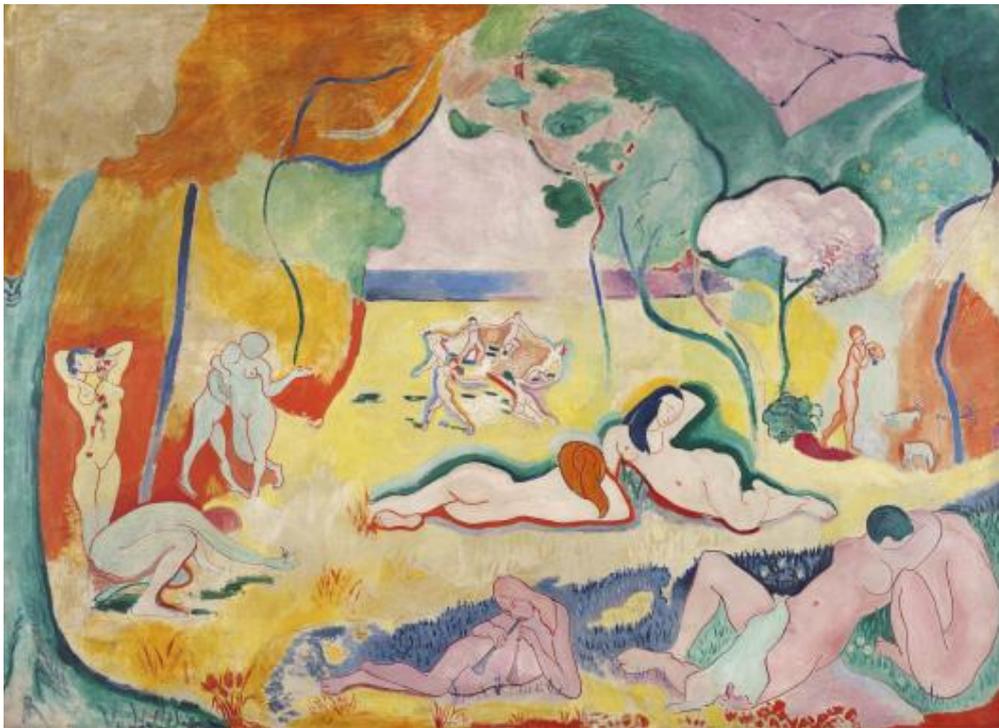
Fig. 5: Henri Matisse, *Le Bonheur de vivre*, 1905-1906, oil on canvas, 174 cm x 238 cm. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA © 2015 The Barnes Foundation.[42]

Made at the beginning of the twentieth century, this painting represents a significant departure in Matisse's subject and style. Evoking Gauguin's pictorial scenes, in this canvas Matisse represents a heavenly atmosphere and paints

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[41] Roger Benjamin, *Matisse's "Notes of a Painter": Criticism, Theory and Context 1891-1908* (Ann Arnor MI: Umi Research Press, 1987).
[42]Henri Matisse, *Le Bonheur de vivre*, 1905-1906 <http://www.barnesfoundation.org/collections/art-collection/object/7199/le-bonheur-de-vivre-also-called-the-joy-of-life> [accessed 13 September 2015].

grass in yellow, orange and blue, and the sky mostly in pink. Being painted from imagination, instead of real life, this painting is an explosion of colour and joy. The main compositional elements are trees and shrubberies of pink, green and red, as well as joyful circles of nudes, which will become distinctive of Matisse's future works. Perspective begins to be omitted, shadows and natural light abolished, while figures are drawn and shaped with bare and sheer colours. Similar to Matisse, Antonioni chromatically transforms objects and space depending on the emotions of the characters, and spoke extensively about the psychological and emotional functions of his colours.[43]

The first example of this shift in his work is, of course, in his first colour film *Il deserto rosso.* Representing a turning point in the director's career, it coincides with Antonioni's visit to Rothko's studio. In this film, the characters' emotions change the colour of the landscape and transfigure the perception of reality, rather than offering a real representation of the space.[44] In this sense, the colours of nature also become the colours of the soul. Among the many examples of this process, two film stills may be considered (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7): the first still corresponds to the beginning of the relationship between Giuliana and Ruggero, a businessman from Milan, and the second still is set in Ugo's factory.

After Giuliana and Ruggero's first conversation in the woman's recently acquired shop, she gets distracted by the presence of a trolley in the street and decides to sit on an empty chair next to it.

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[43] Antonioni, 'The night, the eclipse, the down: Godard interviews Antonioni', interviewed by Jean-Luc Godard, in *The Architecture*, pp. 288 297.

[44] See, for instance, one of Antonioni's statements from his interview with Godard. 'You know that there is such a thing as a psychophysiology of colour [...]. The inside of the factory in the film was painted in red; in the space of two weeks, the workers on the set had come to blows. The experiment was repeated, painting everything pale green and calm was restored. The workers' eye need to be soothed [*sic*]'. Antonioni, 'The night, the eclipse', p. 294.

Fig. 6: Screen grab from *Il deserto rosso*. Giuliana seats next to a fruit trolley, outside her shop in Ravenna.

Being characterised as a neurotic figure in the story, Giuliana acts in complete silence, making no attempt to explain her behaviour. Fig. 6 is a frontal wide shot of Giuliana, whose movements, lasting only a few seconds, encompass the depth of her sickness and lack of aptitude in life. She occupies the right third of the frame, counterbalanced by the cart itself (which fills the remaining two thirds) and by the old man sitting on the left edge. Any diagonal movement within the frame is denied, in order to give the impression of a flat and bi-dimensional image. The exterior space is styled in a grey colour scheme that returns in many scenes of the film, and which so closely hints at De Chirico's urban compositions. Besides the small bit of Giuliana's purple dress that is visible at her knees, everything appears to be grey: her coat, the trolley, the fruit, the old man, the background surfaces and the pavement itself. According Caroli, who was present during the shooting of this scene in autumn 1963, Antonioni considered the image perfect only after everything was awash in grey, including the old man on the left.[45] The director's point of investigation

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[45] Caroli.

was not the representation of realistic colour, but the colour of the scene's emotional state.

Apart from grey, other colours also encompass emotion. As Giuliana enters Ugo's factory, dressed in a green coat, the camera follows her walking around machinery, pipes and metal stairs. Inside, the space is depicted as a complex grid, with an unbalanced intersection of geometries, of which the dominant colours are overly saturated browns, greens, greys and whites (Fig. 7).
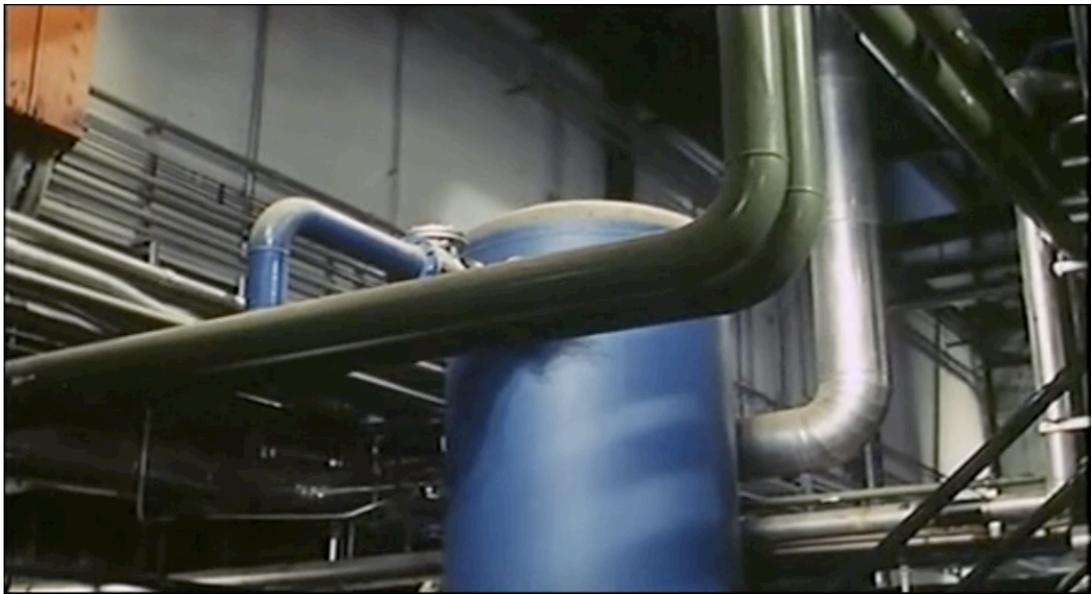
Fig. 7: screen grab from *Il deserto rosso*. Details of the interior space of Ugo's factory in Ravenna.

The green of Giuliana's coat starts to create harmonies and contrasts with spots of pure colour, painted by Antonioni inside the factory, including green pipes, a yellow wall and a blue tank. These colours mark the whole film, including the details of Giuliana's home and shop, the industrial landscape of Ravenna and the hut on the river. By using blue, red and green for some isolated elements in the factory, Antonioni does not give a realistic representation of this place of work; rather, he aims at showing his (as well as Giuliana's) inner vision of that space. He creates an emotional *hic et nunc*, a chromatic and inner interpretation

of the journey of the main character.

Along similar lines, the anguished, deserted and oppressive landscapes of the film may be interpreted as a projection of Giuliana's neuroses. Asked by Jean-Luc Godard about the use of colour in the film, Antonioni mentions the pivotal scene at the river hut as an example of his approach to colour.

> I couldn't *not* use red. In black and white it would never have worked. The red puts the viewer into a state of mind that allows him to accept such dialogues. It is the right color for the characters who, in turn are justified by the color and also for the viewer.[46]

In this passage, Antonioni both emphasises the emotional role of colour in developing his characters and adds another layer of perception: the viewer's. This element, beyond the making of large fields of colours and approach to space and void, puts him in direct dialogue with Rothko's art theories.

Rothko is regarded as one of the most influential figures among the Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1950s and 1960s, who were initially known as the New York School (including Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell and Frank Kline).[47] He dedicated his whole career to the research of chromatic harmonies and pure painting; he developed a deep knowledge of colour theory and constructed a complex system of colour perception. This system focuses on the relational triangle Feeling-Colour-Perception, as he regarded colours as emotional tools capable of appealing to the 'psyche of the sensitive viewer' standing in front of his paintings.[48] As pointed out by Christopher Rothko in his analysis of his father's essay, 'The Artist's Reality', in Rothko's view, painting is a sensual, emotional and intellectual experience,

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[46] Antonioni, 'The night, the eclipse', p. 295.
[47] Jacob Baal-Teshuva, ed., *Mark Rothko: Pictures as Drama* (Bonn: Tashen, 2003), p. 7.
[48] Mark Rothko, as quoted in *Mark Rothko: Pictures*, p. 50.

and finds its foundation in the work of Giotto and Renaissance painters.[49]

Rothko's act of painting fascinated Antonioni. In his letter to the artist, Antonioni lists his favourite paintings of him, and confesses to perceive an intimate connection with his sense of visual landscape, specifically with the sense of 'nothingness' that his works transmit to him.

> I find something new in these paintings, that appear to be made of nothing, or rather only of colour, discovering everything that is behind the colour, that gives it meaning, drama, in other words, poetry. I have already told you   presumptuously   that I feel your painting has so much in common with my work, at least as an imaginative experience.[50]

Inside this 'imaginative experience', the director admires the large dimensions of Rothko's canvases, as well as his vigorous gestures onto untreated canvas and the layering of pigments that generate a dense mix of shapes. By embracing an abstract sensibility, the two artists aim at encompassing an idea of pureness in colour, free from any figurative form. Both of them are beyond the concept of colour as light, and challenge the idea of colours as reflection and absorption of light on and by an object. They regard it primarily as pigments to be applied on the blank canvas with large brush strokes, as exemplified by Giuliana's work in her shop and Rothko's large canvases.

As suggested by the side-by-side images in Fig. 8 above, *Il deserto rosso* may be read as a great homage to Rothko's large surfaces and colour fields. The screen grab on the left shows a portion of roof and wall coloured by Giuliana in her shop. In order to find the right tonality for her shop, she tests several nuanced hues on the white surface and creates geometric colour fields, similar to those painted on canvas by Rothko.

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[49] Christopher Rothko, '*The Artist's Reality* di Mark Rothko: filosofie attraverso un'ottica italiana', in *Rothko*, pp. 27 32.

[50] Antonioni, 'Letter to Rothko' [27 April 1962], in Weiss, 'Temps Mort', p. 55. The letter was published for the first time in this 2007 catalogue.
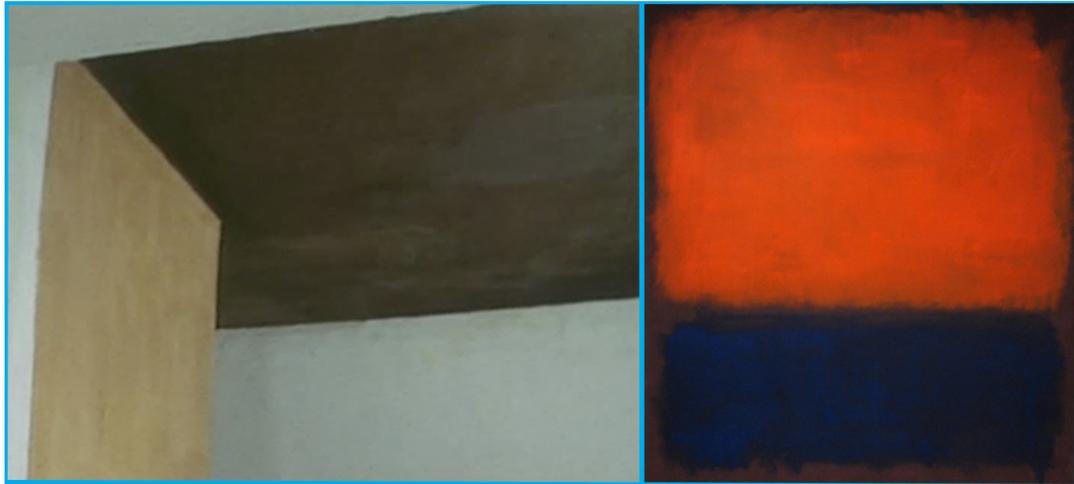
Fig. 8: screen grab from *Il deserto rosso*. A portion of the walls in Giuliana's shop (left). Rothko, *No. 14,* 1960, oil on canvas, 290.8 cm x 268.3 cm. SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, detail (right).[51]

Another common ground between the two artists may be found in the interpretation of space. Both artists create geometric spaces within the space of their canvas, and position the character/viewer between and against imaginary and real windows, doors and walls. Rothko refers to space as one of the central elements in his painting aesthetics; in 'The Artist's Reality', he writes that space is 'the most comprehensive statement of the artist's attitude toward reality'.[52] In his view, space is the visual and material manifestation of the artist's vision of reality, which encompasses the study of perspective and chiaroscuro, the employment of painting, the composition of forms and the relations between such forms and the viewer. Similarly, Antonioni creates physical and symbolic spaces using windows, doors and geometric elements, which draw further shapes inside the camera frame.[53] Given the extreme

[51] Rothko, *No. 14,* 1960 <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/22031> [accessed 13 September 2015].

[52] Rothko, *The artist's reality: philosophies of Art,* ed. by Christopher Rothko (London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 59.

[53] 'I feel the need to express reality in terms that are not completely realistic. The white abstract line that breaks into the shot of the little grey road interests me more than a car that is coming towards us'. Godard and Antonioni, 'The night, the eclipse', p. 293.

relevance of this subject, and the necessity of further development, the following three sections are specifically dedicated to the role of space in Antonioni's view and discuss its main forms as (1) fragmented space, (2) a strict geometrical framing and (3) dreamlike and illusory realities.

1.3   Space: empty and fragmented

> So whenever I am ready to start shooting a scene, I arrive on location in a fixed state of "virginity". I do this because I believe the best results are obtained by the "collision" that takes place between the environment in which the scene is to be shot and my own particular state of mind at that specific moment. [...] And, when I arrive, I like to be completely alone, by myself, so that I can get to feel the environment without having anybody around me.[54]

Locations, surroundings and places are, above all, Antonioni's first building block. Although both writing and the visual arts affect his method, the director starts building his films from the setting and from the feelings that a specific locale suggests to him. From the statement above, it is clear that the scene is not deeply planned *a priori*, but it is the outcome of a process of selection of the space for shooting.[55] Once there, the director follows a precise path of action. He arrives on location in a state of 'virginity', ready to listen to the stimuli that the landscape can offer his creativity; then, the 'collision' occurs, suggesting a possibly traumatic encounter with the surroundings, bringing to the surface both expected and unexpected feelings, which become the foundation of the shooting of the film. Whether indoors or outdoors, short scene or long scene, the most important part of his method lies in his pre-production process of feeling the environment; only after this does he include

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[54] Antonioni, 'A talk with Michelangelo Antonioni', in *The Architecture*, pp. 21 48 (p. 36).
[55] Ibid. From the same quote: 'it is dangerous to fall in love with formulated images [...].'

actors and narratives. For instance, the idea of *L'eclisse* came from the view of a solar eclipse in Florence in 1962.[56] As Antonioni claims in the 'Preface' to *Sei Film*, both in documentary and narrative films, he does not report on what is happening in the surroundings; rather, he uses the events in the service of his cinema.[57]

Antonioni's framing transcends tradition, and looks at abstraction: the landscape is fragmented, geometric, dissolved. The final sequence of *L'eclisse* highlights Antonioni's use of emptiness and its correlated fragmentation of space. As discussed by Michele Mancini and Giuseppe Perella, the epilogue of the film implies something or someone missing from the cinematic space.[58] With the purpose of retracing a time that does not exist anymore, here Antonioni re-introduces the places that were inhabited by the main characters during the film, but are now deprived of their presence. Architecture and urban and natural spaces are the only subjects of investigation. In Mancini and Perella's view, the act of waiting is more dominant than the act of seeing. While making use of temps mort and breaking the continuity of narrative action, Antonioni puts the viewer in a condition of waiting for the plot to evolve, for an epiphany of the character, which never occurs.[59] Mancini and Perella here define their concept of 'inhabited décor', arising from the idea that the characters have abandoned their own habitat, which was the space where their love story was born, developed and finally ended.

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[56] See, for instance, Antonioni, 'The history of cinema is made by cinema' [1979] and Antonioni, 'Red Desert' [1964], pp. 283 286, both in *The Architecture*.

[57] Antonioni, *Sei film. Le amiche, Il grido, L'avventura, L'eclisse, La notte, Il deserto rosso* (Turin: Enaudi, 1964).

[58] This sequence has been profusely discussed by Antonioni's critics, who regarded it as one of the highest moments of his cinema. See, for instance: Pio Baldelli, *Cinema dell'ambiguità. Bergman and Antonioni* (Rome: Samonà e Savelli, 1969); Chatman, 'The New Montage and Temps Mort', in *Antonioni, or, the Surface*, pp. 125 131; Tassone, 'Figure in un paesaggio' in *I film di Michelangelo Antonioni*, pp. 186 189; Giuliana Bruno, 'An Architecture of Film Nomadism', in *Atlas of Emotions* (London: Verso Books, 2002), pp. 95 103; Rascaroli and Rhodes, 'Dead', in *Antonioni: Centenary*, pp. 9 12.

[59] Norman N. Holland, 'Not Having Antonioni', *The Hudson Review*, 16.1 (Spring 1963), 94 95.

Fig. 9: screen grabs from *L'eclisse.* Fours stills from the film finale.

Moments before this epilogue, Antonioni edits together a sequence of shots framing Vittoria's head from behind (Fig. 9). Set up in one of the streets of the EUR, a residential and business district of Rome, the shot positions the trees as the target of the camera and Vittoria's gaze. The camera frames a portion of these trees from behind a gate, and subsequently offers an obstructed view with a jump-cut; it then pans slowly to the right until it reveals Vittoria, and frames her in an over-the-shoulder close-up. Finally, it holds steady as the woman exits the frame. Countering the viewer's expectations, Antonioni stays on the trees, rather than following Vittoria, and keeps filming the 'empty' frame in order to affirm, in Chatman's words, the 'aesthetic and thematic autonomy' of the background.[60] According to Chatman, the sequence is an example of the director's technique of employing abstraction in the treatment of space, in which the practice of temps mort is one of his most distinctive stylistic tools.[61]

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[60] Chatman, 'The new Montage', p. 126.
[61] Ibid. The definition and quality of *temps mort* has been recently discussed again by Rascaroli and Rhodes in the introductory section 'Dead', in their 2011 publication for Antonioni's centenary. There, the term is seen according to both cinema terminology, literally *dead time*,

With the progression of the images in the finale, even passersby are regarded as spatial elements in the overall setting: children playing on the street, women with shopping bags, people boarding and waiting for buses, etc. They are fully immersed in the environment as urban elements, and their visual function corresponds to the overall idea of the film, which is the emotional emptiness and incommunicability of modern times. Moreover, the choice of re-showing the same locations of the beginning of the film heightens a sense of waiting and tension for the viewer, as well as the expectation to see Piero and Vittoria at any moment. The whole mise-en-scène encloses a mixture of temporal sensations and visual metaphors: the past, expressed by the elements repeated from earlier in the film; the present, indicated, for instance, by a woman walking with a stroller and the setting sun; and the future, hinted by the urban development of construction sites and the overall destabilising setting.

These temporal levels are all present at the same time, offering an abstract view of reality that is contingent upon the landscape acting as more than a background. It may be suggested that the final sequence of *L'eclisse* echoes images coming from the experimental cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, when big cities such as Paris and Berlin were used as an ideal setting by early filmmakers.[62] According to critics Francois Penz and Andong Lu, by capturing the noises, local streets, buildings and historical landmarks of these cities, the films awakened memories of Surrealistic images, only these were pictorial, imaginary and chemical. In these early films and in *L'eclisse,* the filmic cityscape seems to be losing its materiality in order to embrace its status as a powerful mental image of everyday human life and society.

and art history terminology, *le nature morte* (still life). By making this link, the two critics relate Antonioni's cinematic work to his painterly approach to filmmaking and to his deep knowledge of the art history.

[62] François Penz and Andong Lu, *Urban Cinematics: Understanding Urban Phenomena through the Moving Image* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2011).

Moreover, the concept of abstract fragmentation of the space is pushed to the limits in the following image (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: screen grab from *L'eclisse*. Details of the metal edges of scaffolding in the EUR.

The edges of the scaffolding become an abstract, geometrical composition, recalling Piet Mondrian's black and white pictorial simplifications as well as Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism movement. As in their artworks, Antonioni creates a version of reality based on dichotomies of forces, such as vertical versus horizontal, black versus white, dynamic versus static. Fig. 10 shows Antonioni's implicit references to abstract painting. Training the camera on random structures and objects, with disorienting framing, the director gives the viewer the impression of being on a different planet, where there is no space left for human feelings, but only machines and the inert objects of a still life.[63]

The landscape is explored from many angles, and the camera moves sometimes not at all, or sometimes alternating from slowly to faster, suggesting it is searching for someone or something else; it stops, it gets distracted, it waits. The oscillations of the images, the unexpected changes, and the multiple

[63] Baldelli, 'Mezzi espressivi'.

perspectives and points of view captivate the viewer. Following a somewhat repetitive pattern, the camera selects an element to look at, lingers on it for a few seconds, almost giving the impression of a photographic still, and then suddenly moves to follow an off-screen sound. For instance in the very last sequence, the viewer hears the flow of water and rustling leaves and the camera cuts to the origin of these sounds: a suspended bucket half-filled with water. As scholar Sandro Bernardi suggests, the camera is searching in vain for elements to reconstruct; when the camera lingers on an old man, it selects frames the figure from afar, approaches him, cuts to his face and then leaves.[64] Antonioni shoots the man the same way he shot a building a few moments earlier, treating him as another random spatial element of the landscape.[65] This way of using close-ups, detail shots, and extreme close-ups, all edited together, unites elements of geometrical composition, portraiture and still lifes. Through this approach, Antonioni deconstructs reality, in order then to reconstruct it according to his abstract terms.

1.4 Geometrical framing

The second point to consider in discussing Antonioni's play with abstraction is his way of framing objects, people and urban and natural elements. Expressing reality in abstract terms can also mean altering reality itself through a multiplication of perspectives: this happens with a close-up of an object, an

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[64] Sandro Bernardi, 'La parodia del paesaggio, *L'eclisse'*, in *Il paesaggio nel cinema italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 2002), pp. 177 180.

[65] In a revealing statement, Antonioni explains the reason for his reluctance in consulting with actors about their roles: 'Otherwise, by revealing to them what is after all my own personal plan of action, they automatically become a kind of Trojan horse in what is supposed to be my citadel, which is mine by virtue of the fact that I am the one who knows what I want from them and I am the one who knows whether their response to what I ask for is good or bad. Inasmuch as I consider an actor as being only one element in a given scene, I regard him as I regard a tree, a wall, or a cloud, that is, as just one element in the overall scene'. Antonioni, 'A talk', p. 36.

insert shot of a detail and of an object on the foreground. As suggested earlier, a major influence on Antonioni's vision is undoubtedly Rothko's work. Rothko paid particular attention to the lighting and installation of his artworks so that the viewer could experience them exactly in the way he intended. He wrote detailed instructions to galleries and museums on how to install his large paintings, requesting a viewing distance of 18 inches, in order to put the edges of the painting beyond one's peripheral vision.[66]

Standing close to the canvases increases the perception of light value and luminosity of the works, as well as immersing the viewer in conceptual colour spaces without definitive edges.[67] Fig. 11 is an installation view of Rothko's solo exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961, illustrating the artist's intention to let the viewer enter a state of complete harmony with his work, through both the canvases and the way they are hung.[68] According to Nayia Yiakoumaki, archive curator of Whitechapel, at that time visitors experienced a new way of looking, as they got immersed in two connected spaces: inside (or on) the canvas, defined by colour fields painted with simplicity and precision, and outside the canvas, defined by the specially created environment.

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[66] For instance, at the time of his retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961, Rothko got involved in many details of the design of the exhibition: the colour of the gallery walls, as they should have been white with a hint of red; the positioning of the paintings, to be installed very near to the floor; and the lighting of the rooms, which should have ideally been natural daylight. Klaus Ottoman, *The Essential Mark Rothko* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2003).
[67] Michael Auping, 'Four Horizons', in *Declaring Space* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2007), pp. 135–164.
[68] Two years before the Whitechapel exhibition, the ICA London presented the group exhibition *Place*, including the works of Ralph Rumney, Richard Smith and Robyn Denny, curated by Lawrence Alloway. With the creation of a serpentine environment, very similar to that of the Whitechapel installation, the exhibition aimed at conveying the thoughts of the three artists and the curator about the relationship between the spectator and the paintings. Because of the peculiarity of this setting, *Place* became one of the first examples of site-specific installation, an environment in itself.

Fig. 11: *Mark Rothko*, installation view at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1961. Whitechapel Gallery Archive © Whitechapel Gallery.[69]

Rothko's paintings were installed without any frames in order to leave their margins exposed. The blurring of the edges was further emphasised by their position very close to the floor, almost creating a continuum from the surface of the ground to the surface of the canvas. When staring at Rothko's works, the viewer interacts with the painting, which results in effects of chromatic afterimage through his/her gaze.

Similarly, Antonioni plays with perspectives and distances: he both immerses his characters in the landscape and constrains them with lines, shapes and 'colour fields'. In the final scene of *Blow-Up*, Thomas finds himself in the park assisting with a tennis match played without the use of a tennis ball.

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[69] *Mark Rothko*, installation view at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1961 <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/rothko-in-britain> [accessed 13 September 2015].

In spite of the oddness of the situation, he gets involved in the match, embracing the absurdity of his reality and the impossibility of finding a rational explanation for it. The last shot of the film is an aerial shot, framing the character in the middle of the space, lost in what we can name a green 'colour field', using Rothko's terminology: this is the canvas painted by Antonioni and offered to the viewers. Throughout the film, this canvas is investigated, cut, modified and photographed: it is the place where the story begins (as background for the opening credits) and where it ends. In this final scene, Thomas slowly fades out of the field, leaving the landscape as the only protagonist, the real artwork to look at.[70] The words 'THE END' fade in and take Thomas' place in the middle of the field, performing the practical function of end titles, but also signalling the same sense of ending, loss and death previously seen in *L'eclisse*.

Another sequence of the film supports the parallels between the two artists. There is a striking comparison between Thomas' photographic set and Rothko's installation at the Whitechapel Gallery, as shown in Fig. 12. Thomas positions the models, his human artworks, in front of, behind and close to transparent glass walls, creating an effect of reflection, repetition and illusion. When playing with lines and surfaces, Antonioni creates additional spaces inside the space of his frame/canvas, and lets both the models and the viewer/spectator get lost in it. Similar to the effect of standing in front of a Rothko painting, the setting of this scene and the method of jump-cutting used by Antonioni ask the viewer to wander around the surfaces, to follow reflections, shades and lights. Inside this constructed environment, the models exclusively serve the visual purpose of the scene, and for both the director and the photographer they are merely mannequins to adjust, without an identity. Their moves are mechanical, artificial and grotesque; as Forgacs emphasises,

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[70] Antonioni's interest in cinematic fade-outs is evident in many of his films and videos, including *Il mistero* and *Fotoromanza.*

the scene is characteristic of Antonioni's work in merging characters and space together, as these women have turned into objects under the male dominating gaze of the photographer/director.[71]

Fig. 12: screen grab from *Blow-Up.* Thomas' models during a shooting.

On these final notes, it is worth considering the camera movements in another climactic interior scene in the film, set in Thomas' studio (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13: screen grabs from *Blow-Up.* The Girl in Thomas's studio.

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[71] Forgacs suggests a duality, a trans-textual *dappelganger*, between the fictional character of Thomas and Antonioni: one of the elements of this parallelism is the similar arrogant and dominant approach of the two men towards their own models/actors. Forgacs, 'Face, Body, Voice, Movement: Antonioni and the Actors', in *Antonioni: Centenary*, pp. 167-182.

As the Girl enters the studio, the space overwhelms her: the camera frames her frontally, through the sliver of an open door. Because of the camera angle, the woman seems squashed between two white surfaces, and this effect mirrors her fear of entering this unfamiliar environment (Fig. 13, left frame). The camera follows the woman's passage through the atrium to the second floor   the 'centre' of Thomas' life   framing her in three ways, from the side, frontally from a distance, and from behind. The camera moves nearer and closes in on her, showing her surrounded by the many objects of the room. The right frame in Fig. 13, which is the last shot of this sequence, shows the Girl framed in a small triangular space. In the foreground the heavy wooden beam obstructs the view of the background, and the Girl stands anxiously, seemingly without any possibility of escaping. On a symbolic level, this beam echoes and represents the male-dominated environment of Thomas' studio, as well as his oppressive personality. On a stylistic level, they are examples of Antonioni's way of setting off the body of the female actors, but they also imply a tense, hostile relationship between the woman and the space.

In his milestone article, 'Antonioni: Space, Place, Sexuality', Forgacs points out that there is a clear contrast between natural and outdoor landscapes (coded as feminine) and industrial and indoor environments (coded as masculine).[72] In these scenes, the women feel uncomfortable and nervous in most of the interior places they enter; they are physically threatened by the prevailing male presence, which Forgacs notes as having the characteristics of the following: business environments, an abundance of objects, high-tech interiors, geometrical elements, glass and mirrors. In his interview with Godard in 1964, Antonioni affirmed: 'What interests me now is to put the characters in contact with things, because today what counts are things, objects, matter.'[73]

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[72] Forgacs, 'Antonioni: Space, Place, Sexuality', in *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. by Myrto Konstantarakos (Exeter: Intellect Press, 2000), pp. 101 111.
[73] Antonioni, 'The night, the eclipse', p. 298.

Starting with the films of the trilogy, he chooses female protagonists as ideal conduits for the contemporary problems of dealing with reality and emotions.[74] Anna and Claudia in *L'avventura,* Lidia in *La notte,* and Vittoria in *L'eclisse* represent the difficulty in coping with modern society: they cannot fully adapt to new industrial, commercial environments and instead wander aimlessly in natural or urban environments, forgoing any precise direction or intention. According to Carla Orban, landscape is ruled by dichotomies, such as natural versus urban settings, indoor versus outdoor.[75] Orban considers the social landscape to be male-dominated, an urban social system in which women tend to stay at the edges. As she discusses in her article, it is the female characters, not their male counterparts, who wander the city searching for spiritual and emotional connections, which are no longer possible in contemporary society.[76]

Thus, through composition and camera movements, Antonioni creates a sense of the dominant role of the space over his characters and places them at the centre of multi-layered, concentric spaces organised outward by the lens, the shooting location, and the constructed space created by the angle of the camera. Sharing with Rothko a similar perception of space and colour, Antonioni 'paints' lines and bands of colour (rectangular white walls, brown beams, vertical black lines), to suggest a space that works more psychologically than materially.

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[74] The films of the trilogy include quintessential examples of this female role. However, Antonioni's early black-and-white films, such as *Cronaca di un amore*, *La signora senza camelie* and *Le amiche* already show women's increasing inability to mould to their required social role, their dependency on male figures and their desperate attempts to find a way out. This is the case, for instance, of the protagonist of *La signora senza camelie,* Clara Manni, who is not able to fit any of the socially acceptable roles that have been offered to her (wife, lover, sexy starlet). Ultimately she realises she is trapped by her own persona.

[75] Carla Orban, 'Antonioni's Women, Lost in the City', *Modern Language Studies*, 31.2 (2001), pp. 11-27.

[76] Orban.

1.5   Illusory space

The third and final point of analysis concerns the construction of mental space through ambiguous and dreamlike atmospheres and environments (eg. blurry landscapes, swamps, fog, sand vortexes); and the use of misleading painted surfaces. Again, a parallel with Rothko's work may be helpful in understanding Antonioni's strategy. In terms of his stylistic evolution, in the 1950s, Rothko decreased the number of rectangular shapes in his works and redefined his abstract language; he started making geometric shapes without clear contours and playing with their boundaries.[77] According to Michael Auping, curator at the Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth, Texas, Rothko creates atmospheres rather than forms. Auping argues about his method: '[the artist] diluted the edges of his colour forms so that the boundary between them and the field in which they were suspended became ambiguous'.[78] Similar 'atmospheres' or 'ambiguous forms' are numerous in Antonioni's cinema: for instance, the fog in *Il deserto rosso, Identificazione* and *Al di là*; and the desert in *Zabriskie Point* and *Professione: reporter*. Like the viewer of a Rothko painting, Giuliana in *Il deserto rosso* seems to enter a different spatiality compared to that of the other characters. Her neurotic fears and visions give the director the chance to alter our perception of the cinematic reality as he plays with its borders: consequently the female character and the viewer find themselves doubting their own senses throughout the film.

Similar to Rothko's paintings, in *Il deserto rosso* the extension of the space inside the canvas/frame is not clear, and it changes depending whose point of

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[77] 'Limen' comes from the Latin word for threshold. It is thought that ritual activity is an exploration of the limits of an individual's personality, which takes place before they reach their new status (and position) within society. Thomas Crow, 'The Marginal Difference in Rothko's Abstraction', in *Seeing Rothko*, ed. by Glenn Phillips and Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2005), pp. 25–40.

[78] Auping, 'Four Horizons', p. 140.

view is privileged by the camera. Giuliana's husband Ugo perceives the alienated environment of his factory, their house, and a boat passing by his window differently than she does. For Ugo, these elements represent a work investment, a safe place for his family, a potential business; for Guiliana, these environments are at times confusing and oppressive, as well as melancholic. For instance, the boat, in the way it passes and captures Giuliana's attention midway in the film, works as an example of this alternation of vision.

Fig. 14: screen grab from *Il deserto rosso*. Appearance of the boat in the fog.

Despite the fact that a commercial boat in the waters of the Ravenna countryside is realistic and appropriate for the place itself, its presence embodies something surreal nonetheless. Guiliana notices it for the first time floating behind a group of trees in the distance, as if suspended in midair (Fig. 14); none of her friends seems to give it particular attention, and this happens again when the boat appears from the fog and stops in front of the window of the hut where they are resting. As the boat appears out of the vegetation, the sound of the boat's horn seems to call her three times while she is in the hut, and once again at the end of the scene when she runs outside. In an emotional

and sensory escalation, this sound and the boat itself evolve from something curious, to something threatening to Giuliana's stability, a sensation increased by the overwhelming presence of a dense fog. As Brunette claims, 'non-meaningful objects come to signify abstractly' in this film.[79] A common, everyday and immediately recognisable object assumes both a symbolic narrative meaning and an abstract visual role, thanks to the context in which it is inserted and the camera movements. With such statement, Brunette refers to a close-up of a white wall in Giuliana's shop, but the idea also applies to the boat.

Finally, Rothko was fascinated by the idea of shaping a room with art and using abstract painting as architecture. In 1964, he was commissioned to create a set of murals for a Roman Catholic chapel to be built in Houston, Texas.[80] The result is the Rothko Chapel, a dedicated structure in which Rothko positioned fourteen large canvases made for meditative purposes: its interior has false doors that lead nowhere, or rather into empty spaces behind the paintings.[81] Rothko's focus was thus simultaneously inside and outside the space of the canvas, and his main goal was to create and outline a space that conveys a dreamlike appearance.[82]

By including numerous close-ups of murals, paintings and signs in *Zabriskie Point,* Antonioni seems to adopt a similar set of concerns (Figs. 15-17). At the beginning of the film, when Mark and his friend travel in a red pick-up truck through the industrial Los Angeles landscape, the city is transformed in a sequence of visual stimuli from billboards to murals, conveying the idea of an idealised American West, and emphasising its main productive activities, such

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[79] Brunette, 'Red Desert', in *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 90 109 (p. 94).
[80] The commissioners, John de Menil and his wife Dominique de Menil, were art collectors and patrons in Houston. The Chapel, located near St. Thomas University, opened in 1971, one year after Rothko's suicide.
[81] For information on the origin and the project commissioners, see the official website of the Chapel at http://www.rothkochapel.org.
[82] Rothko, 'The Artist's reality'.

as agriculture and food industry. In an interview with Roger Ebert in 1969, Antonioni comments on the political value of the film and its references to the contemporary American social situation.[83] In his words, *Zabriskie Point* is a political film but it is not about politics; rather, it expresses his feelings that were triggered by the environment. Thus, the political value of his films lies in the representation of a feeling perceived by the director, of a particular situation or place, and not in any historical or political commentary.

Fig. 15: screen grab from *Zabriskie Point*. A meat truck sign, showing a cow painted on a light blue surface.

Sulgi Lie adds that in *Zabriskie Point* the director 'totalizes the science-fiction architecture in the reified world of images and signs that is Los Angeles'.[84] According to Lie, the city 'emerges as a hyperspace', made by the superimposition of planes, surfaces and camera angles: the sequence begins

[83] Antonioni, 'Interview with Michelangelo Antonioni' [19 June 1969], interviewed by Roger Ebert, *RogerEbert.com* <http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/interview-with-michelangelo-antonioni> [accessed 3 May 2015].

[84] Sulgi Lie, 'Absorption and Utopia: Mapping the Sixties in Antonioni's Zabriskie Point', in *Revisiting the Sixties: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on America's Longest Decade,* ed. by Laura Bieger and Christina Lammert (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2013), pp. 261-279 (p. 263).

with a close-up of a cow painted on a light blue truck, which at first seems to be a wall (Fig. 15).

Fig. 16: screen grab from *Zabriskie Point*. Detail of a mural showing a farmer tossing vegetables to his pigs.

Fig. 17: screen grab from *Zabriskie Point*. After the camera panned to the right, complete vision of the mural covering two sides of the building.

The truck moves suddenly to the left, exiting the frame, and the frame opens up on an agricultural landscape (Fig. 16). The exact spatial coordinates and features of this second plane are again difficult to determine, until it is revealed to be a painted wall (Fig. 17). Amongst the many interpretations of this

sequence, Lie gives a political reading and discusses it as a symbol of the process of complete absorption of the city within its economic mechanisms, up to its transformation in hyperspace. What the viewer witnesses is a process of optical illusion: without no points of reference, the coordinates of space and time get lost in front of the his/her eyes, thanks to a multiplication of visual planes and a merging of real and surreal elements.

In the film, the viewer faces a superimposition of planes and a progressive lack of distinction between the foreground and background. When talking about his impression of Los Angeles, Antonioni argued: 'The billboards are an obsession of Los Angeles. They are so strong that you cannot avoid them.'[85] From this perspective, in an excessive proliferation of images, 'the image of production becomes identical to the production of image'.[86] The construction and proliferation of signs (in this case, of the signs of an economic production) are embedded in and indistinguishable from the object they are bound to represent. There is a shift from the industrial world of *Il deserto rosso,* and now the image of the factory has taken the place of the factory itself. However, the director's underlying intent stays the same. The process of capturing the mutation of urban and natural spaces, initiated with *Gente del Po* and explored with *L'eclisse* and *Il deserto rosso,* now includes hyperrealist effects and a complete directorial appropriation of the language of art and pop art.

Through a close reading and comparative investigation of Antonioni's works of the 1980s (from *Le montagne* to *Roma*), the following chapters will develop such statement, and trace the directions that have been partaken in terms of treatment of space and colour. In this sense, equal attention will be given to both parallelisms with the issues discussed in this chapter, and those elements that suggest a change of perspective and language in the director's

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[85] Antonioni, 'Zabriskie Point', interviewed by Marsha Kinder, in *The Architecture,* pp. 304 312 (p. 307).
[86] Ibid., p. 265.

new vision. Following a chronological order, the art series *Le montagne* is the first work that will be analysed, which, in light of an interdisciplinary approach, offers an ideal starting point for understanding the deep link between Antonioni's cinema and the techniques of photography and painting, both at a theoretical and practical level.

CHAPTER 2
LE MONTAGNE INCANTATE: TWO MEDIUMS, ONE PROJECT

2.1 The act of painting

While chapter 1 has discussed Antonioni as a *connoisseur* of art, by drawing attention to the multiple references to painters and artworks within his films, this chapter will start tackling his figure as a *painter*, by presenting a detailed and comparative analysis of the series of *Le montagne.* Indeed, following the premiere of *Il deserto rosso* at the Venice Film Festival in 1964, journalist Virgilio Lilli wrote:

> Ho visto giorni fa a Venezia una vasta mostra di pittura. […] Mi riferisco alla mostra di pittura "Deserto rosso", presentata sotto specie di film, al Festival Internazionale del Cinema. Una "personale" del pittore Michelangelo Antonioni.[1]

Perspectives are reversed. Rather than looking at Antonioni as a filmmaker who paints, Lilli's words seem to suggest the opposite approach: he is a painter who makes film. In his view, the director releases a colour film and inaugurates the shift from black and white to colour; above all, he is an authentic painter who finds the story as an excuse to use colours and whose visual practice is in some ways harmed by his own tool, the cinematic medium. As a modern painter, contemporary to Fontana, Burri and Manzoni, he goes beyond tradition and experiments with matter itself, by painting with new instruments: in his case, these are the camera lens, lamps, cinema professionals and actors. The stylistic evolution of Antonioni's art practice is similar to that of many

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[1] Virgilio Lilli, 'Pittura e cinema', *Il tempo di Roma*, 14 September 1964.

modern painters. It starts with figurative subjects portraiture in particular
and undergoes a gradual but constant change, up to a point of complete
abstraction, as shown in his later paintings part of the exhibition *Il silenzio di
Michelangelo* in 2006.[2]

In the 1985 interview mentioned in chapter 1, Antonioni clarifies his
double role of connoisseur and art practitioner.[3] Alongside shedding light on
the subject, here he discusses his involvement in other creative languages,
approaching to filmmaking, and position on the contemporary Italian cinema.
Primarily, he acknowledges the role that the act of painting plays in his creative
process. Among the many inputs that he provides, he reveals that before
making his first film in colour, he felt the urge to visualise colours on paper
first.[4] Also, he refers to the unpublished series *Le vallate incantate,* which
echoes personal memories of his homeland Ferrara. He says about this matter:

> The strange thing is that when I paint I never feel I am a painter. I
> have painted several "enchanted valleys", but I don't think I'll let
> anyone see them. But the way I remember them, I think they are
> more moving than the "Mountains". People like me, born in a
> town on the plains, know only too well how imagination and ideas
> can unfold along these flat horizons. [*sic*][5]

From this description, the act of painting seems to be more as a private activity
than a professional operation, as well as to ensue as a subordinate act of
filmmaking for Antonioni. Painting also seems to result as a cathartic process,
occurring when the director is not fully engaged with the production of a film.
The statements 'when I paint I never feel like a painter' and 'I am not a painter
 more a filmmaker who paints' confirm the director's awareness to be first and

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[2] The late paintings are those included in the solo exhibition, *Il silenzio a colori* (Hadrian
Temple, Rome, 2006), showing 80 paintings and 30 small sculptures, made of different
coloured cardboards. See Appendix 2 for more information on the series.
[3] Antonioni, 'In conversation', interviewed by Tassone, in *The Architecture*, pp. 230 244.
[4] Ibid., p. 230.
[5] Ibid, p. 231.

foremost a filmmaker. In his view, the series of *Le montagne* may be read as a divertissement and unfinished artwork. As a filmmaker, painting is part of his irrational world, where the artist's hand is free to follow instincts, impulses and abstract forms, without that urgency to frame the space and reach the perfection in and through the image composition. This sense of freedom, and consequent imperfection, could ultimately be the reason of why the director eventually resorted to the medium of photography. As he affirms in the quote below, the watercolours 'weren't good enough' by themselves, but just a first step in his visual investigation. Further insights into this matter are given by Fico's interview in 2005, discussing the making of *Il deserto rosso*:

> I collage delle *montagne incantate* sono i cartoncini, che non sono altro che carta cotonata, che aveva utilizzato per *Il deserto rosso*. I suoi quadri di oggi invece sono coloratissimi [...][6]

The relevance of these words lies in the fact that they connect two periods of Antonioni's career. The act of going back to use the same cardboards of *Il deserto rosso* for the new project of *Le montagne* reveals an unexpected element, and undermines the perception of a distance between Antonioni's work of the 1980s and his remarkable production of the 1960s. In other words, in a period characterised by new aesthetic and technical discoveries, Antonioni comes back to those cardboards that helped him shooting his first colour film. The sense of unity in Antonioni's journey is palpable: the choice of using these cardboards may be read as the continuation of something that the director considered unfinished, or as the beginning of a new project.

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[6] Fico, qtd. in *Immagini e il Tempo: Michelangelo Antonioni*, dir. by Luca Verdone (Rome: RAI, 2005). The documentary is currently available in the archive of Teche Rai in Rome.

2.2   Photography does not show reality

Fig. 18: *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo. Antonioni e le arti*, retrospective exhibition, installation view. Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara, March 2013. Courtesy of and © Alix Agret.

In the installation process of *Le montagne* in the Ferrara exhibition, Païni set them up all together in one room of the Palazzo dei Diamanti, without distinguishing the enlargements from the watercolours, as it is shown in Fig. 18 above. This choice is in line with Antonioni's perception of the series, and stresses the intrinsic connection between the two used media, collage and photography. In his brief final note in the 2007 exhibition catalogue, Antonioni explains this duality, and puts emphasis on the material and tactile feeling of the cardboards as starting point for making the enlargements. Photographic enlargements represent the finished work, and the small watercolours are the sketches entering the area of the *non-finito*.

When I started to paint these tiny watercolours, I immediately thought they weren't good enough. That's why I thought I'd photograph and enlarge them; I really could not fathom they were actually mine.[7]

In this regard, art historian Ida Panicelli interprets the passage from the watercolours to the enlargements as the development of two different and consequent impulses towards the same artwork. The first phase corresponds to the act of painting, and features impulsiveness, curiosity and a desire to experiment; in the second phase, that of photographic enlargements, Antonioni applies a long and methodical process. This technical process betrays meditation, mental structure and a careful planning of the work in order to enter the pictorial surface and reveal the hidden depth.[8] The resulting images are loaded with attributes that confound proportions and play with the dynamics of abstraction.

In *Blow-Up*, after the discovery of the dead body, the photographer faces a more problematic reality than the one he expected. With the blowing-up of the image, the body disappears, together with the photograph and the negatives, and Thomas finds himself alone in facing the 'truth'. He now starts to see reality with different eyes. In this sense, there is a parallelism between this film and the concept of the enlargements in *Le montagne.* In both works, Antonioni's archetypal goal concerns the idea of going beyond the surface to discover what is hidden behind it; in this context, the act of enlarging the image is the instrument to investigate reality and to intrigue the viewer with new visual effects. Also, both *Blow-Up* and *Le montagne* convey the same feeling of repetition at multiple levels: in *Blow-Up* repetition is visible in the design of the setting, in the objects, in the duality of the lead character and, most importantly, in the concept of photography. In *Le montagne,* repetition involves

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[7] Antonioni, 'Untitled', in *Michelangelo Antonioni. Le montagne*, p. 46.
[8] Ida Panicelli, 'Untitled', in *Michelangelo Antonioni. Le montagne,* pp. 37 40.

the subject of the mountain, the duality of the series and, also in this case, the photographic enlargements themselves.

When discussing the idea of repetition within photography and film, Walter Benjamin's insightful essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) comes to mind.[9] When published, the milestone essay was addressed to a small circle of scholars, and aimed at positioning art in the context of the mechanical era and its wide political circumstances. Despite the many decades that have passed from its release, the text still offers many insights as it tackles issues of visual reproduction within a rapidly evolving mass media culture, and the concept of the authenticity of the artwork.[10] Two concepts that Benjamin points out in his analysis are particularly useful here in interpreting Antonioni's work: these are the use of the mechanical medium to investigate the true core of reality, and the consequent detachment from reality itself through the use of photographic reproduction and enlargement. The use of technology is key in this sense, as it allows the artist to enlarge the image and ideally to get closer to its inner nature.

A year after the release of *Blow-Up,* Antonioni explained his intention to recreate the reality of the film according to abstract terms, in order to question its true nature.[11] This concept is largely expressed in the film through the use of uncanny scenes, a fragmentary plot, repetition of objects and architectural lines, and manipulation of space. The lens of the camera is the instrument that

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[9] 'And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images, which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations, which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.' See Walter Benjamin, 'The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936], in *The work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media,* ed. by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 19–24 (p. 20).
[10] Ibid.
[11] Antonioni, qtd. in *Blow-Up, a film by Michelangelo Antonioni,* ed. by Sandra Wake (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 14.

both Thomas and Antonioni use in an attempt to decode both their internal and external world, and it is what feeds the inability of the eye to see truly. According to Benjamin, through mechanical processes like the close-up or blow-up, photographic reproduction helps to decipher what is invisible to the naked eye, and reveals deep and hidden fields within the painted surface.[12] However, at the moment of the enlargement, the images appear abstract, illusionary and farther from reality than before.

In *Le montagne*, photographic enlargement transcends the immediate stylistic function to serve Antonioni's quest for reality. The untitled enlargement in Fig. 19 is an example of the conjunction between abstract and figurative sensibility.

Fig. 19: *Le montagne*, Untitled, 1979-1983, 77.7 x 175.2 cm, colour print on paper, Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara. Courtesy of and © Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara.

While the overall shape of the figure resembles the side of a mountain, the brown-colour smears in the lower left of the image deny any realistic representation. With the enlargement, the dominance of colour brushstrokes over drawing is even more accentuated than in the original watercolour; the

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[12] 'Photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images, which escape natural vision.' in Benjamin, p. 19.

different grades of brown make the image and give it depth, movement and shape. As Antonioni suggests through the lines of the character of Sarah in *Blow-Up*, an enlarged detail visually provokes an explosion of colours and broken lines and takes the resemblance of an abstract painting more than a truthful gaze on reality. Hence, the ability of technology to understand reality has once again betrayed its function, because without the mediation of human interpretation, reality cannot be seen.[13]

2.3   Collages: repetition of a mountain landscape

First and foremost, the topic of *Le montagne* is the natural space. Born and brought up in the Italian area of the Po Valley, the director never denied an intimate connection with the territory, and in particular with its flat landscape. His early works offer a sublime and poetic description of his native geographies: rivers, never-ending roads that fade into the distance, reed fields and the fog. Then, more recent films show flat Sicilian fields punctuated by almond trees and wide shots of cities such as Milan, Rome, Ravenna and London. However, the mountain is a symbolic element in Antonioni's cinema and a space to explore. Indeed, the subject of *Le montagne* is the mountain landscape that the artist keeps repeating cardboard after cardboard, each time changing colours, nuances and forms.

Calvesi defines *Le montagne* as 'ripetizioni del mondo naturale', because the subject of the mountain is obsessively reiterated first in the watercolours and then in the enlargements.[14] Working between abstraction and figurative representation, Antonioni explores his majestic subject from different

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[13] Carey Harrison, 'Blow Up', *Sight and sound*, 37 (Spring 1967), 60.
[14] Maurizio Calvesi, 'Untitled', in *Antonioni. Le montagne incantate*, ed. by Carlo Pirovano, exhib. cat., Museo Correr, Venice, 29 August – 15 September 1983 (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia Edizioni, 1983), pp. 10–11 (p. 11).

perspectives: aerial, frontal and side. Mountains are therefore offered to the viewer through variations and repetitions, almost retracing a certain obsessive investigation of reality, historically originating with the Impressionist movement. In this regard, art scholar Vincenzo Trione draws out a conceptual and material connection between *Le montagne* and the late series of paintings that Paul Cézanne dedicates to the Mont Sainte-Victoire at the end of the nineteenth century.[15] In these paintings, there is a vibrant rhythm pervading the whole surface of the watercolours, which display harmonious colour balance, generally thanks to the use of blue, green and yellow. Cezanne uses separate large brushstrokes to build up his compositions, and goes beyond the impressionistic dissolution of form through light privileging materiality over impression. In *Le montagne,* in agreement with Trione, there is the same primary language featuring Cézanne's gesture.[16] Argan makes a further step by inserting *Le montagne* into the history of painting, and suggesting a reference to the feeling of sublime and solitude marking the mountain landscape of the Northern Romantic School.[17] *Le montagne* may be compared to the spatial transgression of J.M.W. Turner, in which the line of the mountains cannot be distinguished from the sky, as in a natural vortex.

The three images in Fig. 20 offer a perfect example of the variety of Antonioni's work within his series. The three images are made with the same technique of collage, and present the same subject explored through the use of different colours, forms and material. Antonioni's colour scheme spans blue, black, pink, red and violet, driving the overall shimmering effect. The large image on the left side of Fig. 20 is a detail of a snowy mountain pinnacle and

[15] Vincenzo Trione, 'Il grande colorista. Michelangelo Antonioni tra cinema e pittura', in *La città che si rinnova. Architetture e scienze umane tra storia ed attualità: prospettive di analisi a confront,* ed. by Elena Manzo (Milan: Franco Angeli Ed., 2012), pp. 5 14.
[16] For more information on this particular series, see Pavel Mathotka, *Cézanne. Landscape into Art* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1999).
[17] Argan, 'Untitled', in *Antonioni. Le montagne,* pp. 13 14.

features a violet and blue palette. The image on the top right resembles ethereal mountaintops, in which a stylisation is noticeable.
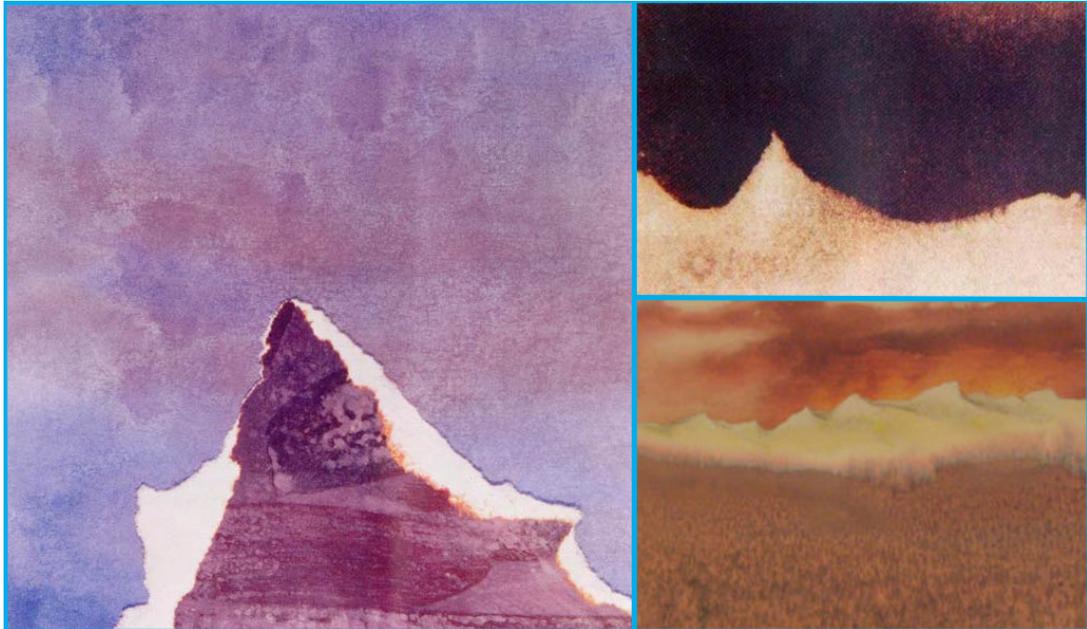
Fig. 20: Three collages from the series *Le montagne,* 1979-1983, mixed media, dimension variable. Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara. Courtesy of and © Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara.

The warm-coloured image on the bottom right appears divided into three main layers, namely a deserted field in the foreground, a white mountain chain and the sky. These three images are representative of key recurrent aspects of *Le montagne* including the colours, the significance of the spatial discourse to the director, the symbolic role of the mountain in his cinema, the abstraction and dramatic tension of some images, contrasted to the serendipity of others; and the inherent idea of repetition of the same subject.

The series of *Le montagne,* as intimate creative form of expression, suggests Antonioni's long-term photographic and pictorial investigation of landscape. Antonioni's many film location photographs (now preserved in the Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni) are potential indicator of the origin of the series. Also, it is possible to underline the many intersections with the history

of painting and the artworks, which may have inspired the series; and, it is possible to pinpoint a landscape of formal references to Antonioni's cinematic corpus. The director looks at painting as something that could not be divorced from making films and, in light of this consideration, the absolute, undisputed centrality of the mountain in this series is as a development of a process started with *Vertigo. La funivia del Faloria* and *L'avventura,* and ended with the short films *Vulcano* and *Stromboli*.

Vertigo was shot in the area of Cortina D'Ampezzo (the Dolomites) in the 1950s, and tackles the feeling of vertigo that occurs when staying on the aerial railway that runs from Monte Faloria to the village of Cortina. This short early film is particularly relevant in this discussion, whilst being Antonioni's first attempt to dealing with heights. The short shows one of the director's first experimentations with areal perspectives, accomplished with a succession of subjective shots and bird's-eye-view shots. In this film more than in others, verticality is used to amaze the viewer and to provoke a sense of instability in him/her.[18] The second film, *L'avventura*, may also be read as a further step in this direction, as Antonioni confronts the natural elements of rocky landscape, sea and islands. Here, the camera wanders around the territory of Sicily: several long shots are dedicated to the rocks of Lisca Bianca, South-East Sicily and specifically the area around Noto. Also, in the final scene of the film, it is possible to spot the volcano Etna, which visually seems to threat and symbolically to remind both the viewers and the two lead characters of the impossibility of happiness based on the infelicity of someone else.

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[18] According to David Rosenfeld, 'cameras were mounted perilously on the tops of these cable cars, a cinematographic feat that prepared Antonioni for a similar maneuver above the Barcelona harbour in *The Passenger* a quarter century later. A restoration of this early documentary was recently done by the Associazione Philip Morris Progetto Cinema in which the short was cut to 4-minutes and renamed in Italy, *Vertigine*'. Rosenfeld (note 6).

Furthermore, the theme of the mountain and its semiotic environment is explored in *Zabriskie Point* and *Professione: reporter*. For instance, in the opening sequence of *Professione: reporter*, the landscape presents itself as already overwhelming and an essential element of the story. The lead male character David Locke goes to the African desert for a journalistic reportage, and there he climbs up the dunes, in order to find information for his documentary on an unspecified guerrilla movement. After his local guide has left him alone, his car remains trapped in the sand and he is not able to fight the burning violence of the space. With a slow pan movement to the right, the camera moves away from Locke, in the middle of his breakdown and cursing towards the sky for his bad luck; it pans over a long and wide succession of dunes, and lingers on one of them (Fig. 21).

In the image below, the colours are unmixed and vivid.

Fig. 21: screen grab from *Professione: reporter*. The African desert.

With respect to the discussion on Antonioni's use of colour and reference to the history of art in chapter 1, the juxtaposition of pink and light blues, as well as the deep focus of the dunes, echoes the Renaissance artists of the School of

Ferrara using flesh tints and burnt-sun colours. By using a high-key lightning, the landscape is bright and conveys a sense of immobility and invulnerability; in spite of human agony, the leopardian nature does not move, does not change, and does not rest. A sense of order and peace is expressed by this image, and is in contrast with what it is happening out of frame. Antonioni's choice of leaving the main character in his highest emotional breakdown invisible and staying on the landscape is indicative of the relevance that this latter has in the film. As indicated by Fico's words in our interview in March 2013, Antonioni may be described as a 'man of the desert', in the sense that he was fascinated by overwhelming and powerful landscapes, which implies absence of people and social activities.[19]

Moreover, in Fig. 21 the line of the dunes coincides with the line of the horizon, and there is a net distinction between the sky and the ground. The same straightforward linearism is visible also in some of the watercolours of *Le montagne,* such as the enlargement in Fig. 22, below.

Fig. 22: *Le montagne,* Untitled, 1979-1983, mixed media on paper, 27 x 59 cm. Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara. Courtesy of and © Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara.

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[19] Fico, 'Congiunzione di'.

This image shows a clear division between the profile of the mountain and the sky; the dominant colours are brown, white and orange, which, again, give the natural space an unreal dimension. Also, both the formal levity and plasticity of the composition seem a memory of the deserted landscape of *Professione: reporter*. These images encompass a sense of mysticism, embodied by the man-Antonioni facing the infinity of the landscape.

In terms of the dialogue with the history of art, the reduction of space to its elementary form also recalls Mondrian's landmark paintings, and particularly the series of dunes that he depicted during the transactional phase of his career around 1910.[20] Successively to his early Impressionist attempts (pre-1908), the nature of Mondrian's work became more spiritualised, as he started to question the very existence of natural colour, moving towards ideas of pure colours.[21] As *Dune Sketch in Orange, Pink and Blue* shows (Fig. 23), the artist moved away from the Impressionist idea of capturing reality in painting and dissolving forms through light, and became more interested in shaping forms through colour. In the case of the image above, the unreal colours and the lack of naturalistic details makes it on the border between realistic and abstract representation.

[20] Hans Ludwig Jaffé, *Mondrian* (New Yorks: Abrams, 1985), p. 70.
[21] Yve-Alain Bois, 'L'Iconoclasta', in *Piet Mondrian,* ed. by Angelica Zander Rudenstine (Verona: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1994), pp. 313 374 (pp. 331 332).

Fig. 23: Piet Mondrian, *Dune Sketch in Orange, Pink and Blue*, 1909, oil on cardboard, 33 x 46 cm. Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Netherlands © 2013 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International USA.[22]

Along similar lines, Fig. 21 and Fig. 22 may convey a similar interpretation of abstraction, as well as a sense of purity and spirituality. The shape of the mountains seems to be made by colour. In this sense, the two landscape portraits in *Professione: reporter* and *Le montagne* represent a clear statement of Antonioni as a landscape painter, whose focus stays on the stylisation of form and colour.

Around the same period of *Le montagne*, Antonioni is working on *Il mistero* and experimenting for the first time with electronic colours and television cameras (Fig. 24). The operation implies discovering a new range of colour variations, and the polychromies mirror his excitement in using them.[23] The four stills below are some of the shots that Antonioni devote to the

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[22] Piet Mondrian, *Dune Sketch in Orange, Pink and Blue*, 1909 <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/piet-mondrian-dune-sketch-in-orange-pink-and-blue> [accessed 13 September 2015]
[23] Chapter 3 will address themes and colour choices of *Il mistero*, but it is worth pointing out the variety of the landscape now, as it echoes the operation in *Le montagne*.

mountains around the Castle of Oberwald, and establish a relation with *Le montagne* under many points.

Fig. 24: screen grabs from *Il mistero*. Four different views of the mountain landscape around the Castle of Oberwald.

Firstly, colours span violet, red, yellow, green, blue and black, mirroring the variegated palette of the watercolours; they also include a range of different angles, from details to wide shots and deep focus, showing just the mountain top or the whole versant. In this sense, the shots dedicated to the natural landscape, whether mountains or fields, may be read as a series of landscape paintings comparable to *Le montagne.* Or, according to another perspective, *Le montagne* may be read as the preparatory drawings for the framing of the landscape of Oberwald. Secondly, in *Il mistero*, angle and colour of the landscape mirror the concurrent emotion of the character. For instance, while red and violet in the top frames of Fig. 24 embody feelings of terror, danger and instability jeopardising the status quo of Oberwald and the Queen, blue and yellow tones in the bottom frames refer to the re-discovered happiness and peace. In *Le montagne,* Antonioni, the maker, is the only human presence.

Because of this, it may be argued that colours and texture reflect the director's emotional status and personal amusement only.

Moreover, a common ground between *Il mistero* and *Le montagne* lies in the attention to the materiality of the image. For instance, the red mountaintops in the first frame top left in Fig. 24 seem to echo the technique of collage of *Le montagne*. Having sharpened the black contours of the mountains, Antonioni brings out the material component of the colours and gives to the overall image a three-dimensional feeling comparable to that of *Le montagne, no 178* (Fig. 25).

Fig. 25: *Le montagne, no 178*, 1979-1983, collage on paper, 15 x 26 cm. Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara Courtesy of and © Archivio Michelangelo

Mountains are often associated with struggle, and their representation detaches from the apparent calm emerging from the last analysed images. According to Kezich, verticality enters Antonioni's visual vocabulary to unmask the apparent

peace among the characters, as well as to increase the narrative tension by dramatising the deep meaning of daily life.[24] The idea of a heart-breaking verticality, often combined with the graininess of both colours and material, all re-enters the series of *Le montagne*, and particularly in Fig. 25.

Paraphrasing Calvesi, there is a personal, almost physical, encounter between Antonioni and the matter of both tempera and card. The critic explains:

> Here Antonioni secretly, furtively consumes his marriage with matter, his own mini-alchemies, his own brief tactile compromises: he spreads or lightly rubs paints, glues, small pieces of paper, mixes techniques and processes, on the same page, reproducing a radical archetype: the horizon, the earth of the mountain, against the sky; wide open spaces, interrupted horizons; repetitions of the world, of the "landscape", of a visibility portrayed by elementary and scenic coordinates.[25]

Particularly in *Le montagne no 178*, the juxtaposition of the pieces of card glued together with the vigorous gesture of the painter evoke a clash happening in the land. The figure resembles the rocky tops of a mountain in winter, with the snow and ice covering the whole surface and shining under the sun, except for a few areas. As Calvesi suggests, these pieces of paper are positioned '*against* the sky' and seem to collide with it; indeed, the sky in the background encompasses a cold mixture of blue, grey and white nuances, as if Antonioni wanted to suggest the coming of a natural vortex.

Furthermore, the same themes and feelings may be found in Antonioni's last documentary work on natural space, and in particular in the astonishing images of the volcanic craters of *Vulcano* and *Stromboli*. Encompassing a

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[24] Kezich, 'Untitled', in *Michelangelo Antonioni. Le montagne*, exhib. cat. Museo Nazionale D'Abruzzo, L'Aquila, 30 October   9 December 2007 (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 2007), pp. 33 36.

[25] Calvesi, 'Untitled', A*ntonioni. Le montagne*, ed. by Imponente, pp. 29 32 (p. 30).

primordial atmosphere, the shorts explore the movement and the sound of the volcanic Sicilian landscapes and trace an impressive affinity with *Le montagne*, to the point of calling into questions such temporal distance between the two projects. Beyond the common thematic investigation, there are the same use of the colour palette, the granular rendering of the image itself, with its consequent abstraction, as well as the same type of encounter between the land and the sky (Fig. 26).

Fig. 26: screen grab from *Stromboli*. Detail of volcanic craters and ash cloud.

The images of *Stromboli*, made with a slow camera movement and filled by the pervading electronic sounds by Nicola Sani, suggest the idea of an overwhelming energy of the land, as well as its superiority over man.[26] *Stromboli* is a sublime image, yet dangerous and threatening across the lines of Antonioni's general attitude towards nature. Overall, because of the large use of the details of its volcanic ashes, it resembles more of a lunar landscape than an actual volcano. The light underlines the contrasts of colour, almost echoing

[26] Laura Putti, 'La Sicilia secondo Antonioni', *La Repubblica*, 17 December 1992 <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1992/12/17/la-sicilia-secondo-antonioni.html> [accessed 24 January 2015].

the technique of the collage; it sharply separates the different layers of the land as defined by the side of the crater on the foreground, the darker land in the middle, the tops in the foreground and the sky. The linearism and simplicity of forms, as well as the blurry effects, evoke some of the watercolours and photographs discussed in this section. *Le montagne* displays a prevalent distinction between sky and land, and whilst a sense of tension between the natural elements can still be evident, there is an overall fragmentation of the painted rocks, which also reminds of Cézanne. Above all, Antonioni renders nature as perceptually terrific, filled by the same feelings of violence that characterise most of the natural spaces in his films.[27]

Repetition in nature is traumatic, and a constant in the work of the cited Mondrian and Cézanne. On the one hand, it represents the affirmation and multiplication of the image/object; on the other hand, its outcome is the negation of the original meaning of the image. Repetition fully pervades *Le montagne*, both narratively and visually. Eventually, the subjects lose their own individuality, as often they are deprived of their original and functional role, to acquire a symbolic meaning. The *aura* of the work seems to be compromised, and irrevocably lost: the effect that rises from *Le montagne* is dazzling and confusing, because it is no longer possible to distinguish the original form from its own copies. In the watercolours, Antonioni nearly recreates the technical processing of the photographic impression, where the lens of the camera collects light in a non-linear form, and then focuses and projects it onto the surface of the film. Unsurprisingly, the same dizzying and blurring effect is even further investigated in the photographic enlargements, where the viewer can perceive the graininess of the final blow-up.

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[27] 'I have never felt salvation in nature. I love cities above all. A landscape with its crowd of trees, flowers and grass that repeats itself indefinitely the repetition makes me dizzy. [...] It's like a word you repeat too much.' Antonioni and Tonino Guerra, *Blow-Up, a film by Michelangelo* (London: Lorrimer Publishing Ltd., 1984), p. 23.

As if they were revealing another artistic dimension, the photographs are not copies of the original image, but are instead *new* final artworks with a different goal, surface and composition.[28] 'Photographic enlargements' Antonioni states 'modify some effects, change certain relationships with the objects, give colors a different tonality'.[29] As scholar Dork Zabunyan observes in his essay written for the Ferrara exhibition catalogue, 'Il cinema delle Montagne Incantate': 'non stupisce che proprio in quel periodo [1979-1980, when *Il mistero* was shot] il regista concepisse gli ingrandimenti fotografici delle sue *Montagne*: in questa fase, infatti, la sua esplorazione della materia procedeva parallelamente allo studio degli effetti cromatici derivanti dalle variazioni di scala rispetto ai dipinti originali.'[30] Paraphrasing Pomerance, the landscape transfigurations in *Le montagne* could be easily included in *Il mistero*, 'without thereby erasing the shadows, traces, silhouettes of other images'.[31]

The following chapter 3 is indeed dedicated to *Il mistero*. Given the intrinsic dialogue with the series of *Le montagne* and short videos *Stromboli* and *Vulcano* in terms of choice of colours and treatment of the mountain landscape, chapter 3 will open the discussion on new visual references that might have played a role in the colour palette of *Il mistero*. Together with the discussed links to a Romantic sensibility (i.e. topoi of sublime, supremacy of Nature, storms, etc.), a new hypothesis will see a connection between Antonioni and the painters of Transavanguardia. Moreover, the chapter will also serve as introduction for a broader discussion on Antonioni's relationship with television and, particularly, with videotape. The discovery of a new medium of expression the video occurs in true with *Il mistero*, and it will be developed in the following works such as the short music video *Fotoromanza*.

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[28] Panicelli, 'Untitled', pp. 17 18.
[29] Antonioni, 'In conversation', p. 231.
[30] Dork Zabunyan, 'Il cinema delle *Montagne incantate*. Pittura, fotografia, scelte espositive', in *Lo Sguardo di Michelangelo*, pp. 223 227 (p. 226).
[31] Pomerance, p. 172.

CHAPTER 3
IL MISTERO DI OBERWALD:
DISCOVERING A NEW TERRITORY

3.1 Adaptation of an adaptation: the reason behind *Il mistero*

As suggested in the Introduction to this dissertation, Antonioni's optimistic approach to stylistic and linguistic experimentations, as well as the potentialities of the new tool of video, are the springboards of *Il mistero.* Invited by RAI to make a film experimenting with electronic technologies and its cameras, Antonioni enthusiastically accepted, and opted for an adaptation of Cocteau's *L'Aigle*, adapted from his homonymous play.[1] Set at the beginning of the XX century in an unspecified central European country, *Il mistero* may be read as a unique piece in Antonioni's career, in terms of genre, subject and pace of action.[2] As Fico recalls, Antonioni did not enjoy re-watching the film, like he used to do with his other films;[3] moreover, in an interview with Chatman, he even denied its authorship.[4] In line with such approach, despite some alterations were made to the text, Antonioni decided to credit Cocteau as the only author of the script, with the consequence of increasing the distance between his own technical intervention and the subject of the French writer.

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[1] Jean Cocteau, *Dialoghi sul cinematografo* (Milan: Ubulibri, 1987).
[2] *Il mistero* tells the story of a Queen (Monica Vitti), who has been in mourning for ten years for her king, assassinated on their wedding day. The encounter and love relationship with the revolutionary poet Sebastian (Franco Branciaroli) instills new hopes in her, and persuades her to take responsibility for the fate of her country. Tragically, any hope for love, happiness and justice is very soon denied. Led by his love and desire to protect the Queen from the social embarrassment his presence might create, Sebastian decides to kill himself and swallows a pill of poison; desperate for his tragic gesture, and before he dies, the Queen provokes his anger, in a desperate attempt to be killed by Sebastian, in order to die *with* him. With impetuous anguish, Sebastian finds a gun and shoots her: they fall down and die together, looking at each other as they try to hold each other's hands.
[3] Fico, 'Congiunzione di'.
[4] Antonioni, 'Antonioni 1980: an interview', interviewed by Chatman, *Film Quarterly*, 51.1 (1997), 2‑10 (p. 5).

It may be suggested that the reason behind this film is the film itself, which stands out not as a critical reflection on society, but mainly as a critical (and experimental) reflection on its medium.

> I thought of *The Two-Headed Eagle,* not because it was a work that particularly appealed to me, but because it seemed as a good vehicle as any for trying out television cameras, which for years I had wanted to do. [...] It is a novelettish story, this tale of an anarchist who infiltrates the queen's castle and ends by killing her for love rather than ideology. Of course, I don't give a damn about this queen and the anarchist. [...][5]

Indeed, the reason for making *Il mistero* resides in Antonioni's interest in new technologies and the various possibilities that the new television medium offered to him. The film confirms the director's constant urge for new spaces and formats for artistic exploration and, in that historical period, television and video represented a place of almost endless and untraced roads. Antonioni looked at the new Italian media scene as an exciting challenge to experiment with television cameras, even with a subject such as that of Cocteau's play. Unlike his previous films, *Il mistero* was shot in videotape and then transferred on film in The Image Transform of Los Angeles laboratories, which was the only place where this film/video processing technique was possible, at the time. As Antonioni recalls, 'I have decided to have it done in California. I am not particularly satisfied with what they can do there, but I will go over myself'.[6] Working in videotape allowed him to *paint* a newly discovered blank canvas while he was still working on it, and actually made changes, cuts and alterations of colour within the single shot.

According to critic Gabriele Lucantonio, *L'Aigle* is probably the lesser-known work among Cocteau's films, as it does not show those specific traits

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[5] Antonioni, 'An Interview with Michelangelo Antonioni' [New York, 1978], in Cardullo, *Soundings on Cinema: Speaking to Film and Film Artists* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), p. 93.
[6] Antonioni, 'An Interview with Michelangelo Antonioni', in Cardullo, *Soundings on Cinema,* p. 94.

that have made his style identifiable.[7] In his commentary to the film, Sergio Blasetti emphasises Cocteau's attempts with sound experimentations;[8] Angela Prudenza describes it as 'il film più barocco di Cocteau', and compares it to a modern fable, because of the inclusion of all the classical elements for a fantasy story, such as love, justice and death.[9] According to her review, there is a clear distinction between good and evil, inside and outside, and among the characters themselves (the good Queen, the handsome and young rebel, the evil servant). Almost retracing the Italian and French tradition of the *teatro di prosa,* Cocteau's characters are mainly described by words: the film offers a great abundance of dialogues, letters and books. Memories, actions and events are told and described in detail, without leaving space to any ambiguity in the interpretation.

On the one hand, there are a number of fascinating intersections between *L'Aigle* and *Il mistero*. First, both may be read as experimental works, which did not meet the expected critical success, and they are adaptations of other works. Second, it is worth underlining the willingness of both filmmakers to respect the theatrical origin of the play. They both start from the theatre and decide to maintain some of its key elements in their films, yet in two different ways. According to Blasetti, *L'Aigle* keeps the structure of the theatrical play, although the position of the camera is comparable to the worst seat of a theatre auditorium.[10] Third, in both Antonioni and Cocteau's views, adapting a play for the cinematic screen is the chance to experiment with a new material. In the case of Cocteau, this is the occasion to transfer his theatrical play on the screen and endow it with those new elements that cinema offers to him. He can multiply the locations and the number of the secondary characters, along with offering greater amplitude of space. For Antonioni, this is the chance for making a

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[7] Gabriele Lucantonio, 'Untitled', in *L'Aquila a due teste,* dir. by Jean Cocteau (France: Raro Video Edizioni Arte Cinema, 1987) [on DVD].
[8] Sergio Blasetti, 'Untitled', in *L'Aquila.*
[9] Angela Prudenza, 'Untitled', in *L'Aquila*.
[10] Blasetti.

first step in the chromatic possibilities of video format, and a step further in his work on the psychological grading of colour.

On the other, Antonioni brings many changes to both filmic and theatrical texts. With the help of his co-adaptor Guerra, he intervenes on the script and offers a personal reading of Cocteau's play; he changes the location of the whole setting, from the castle of Krantz to the castle of Oberwald; he also reduces the prose, cuts several exterior and interior scenes (e.g. the small village and the ball), locations and many of the details of the mise en scéne. For instance, entire scenes, included in *L'Aigle*, in *Il mistero* become only evoked through characters' memories and dialogues (e.g. the Queen walking in one of the long corridors of the castle). In *L'Aigle*, Cocteau pans over characters, faces, voices and whispers extensively; he clearly draws attention to fashion, elegant and rich clothes, and the furniture. The castle of Krantz is alive, filled with objects, books and statues, servants, guests, animals and decorations. In *Il mistero*, Oberwald is the grave of the Queen, as Edith De Berg sarcastically defines it. The castle is perceived as a deserted space, where the Queen lives in her solitude, which may echo the environment in which Giuliana lives (*Il deserto rosso*). Visually speaking, Antonioni decreases the flamboyance of the Victorian tragedy, but enriches it with plastic and spectacular elements, such as mirrors, reflections, special effects, shadows and colour nuances.

Overall, in his adaptation, Antonioni confronts Cocteau's narrative structures with a seemingly respectful distance, but there are some dissonances in terms of characters. Antonioni is not interested in keeping the historical realism; instead, he includes a sense of intimate drama and pays attention more to human tragedy, intimate feelings and struggles. Above all, because of his experimental approach to cinema and his appropriation of a new form of expression, such as videotape, *Il mistero* asks to be regarded a step further in Antonioni's research on the possibilities that an image can give. Concurrently, in terms of choice of colours and tonalities, the film suggests Antonioni's participation into the contemporary

visual trends, including the inputs coming from the Italian group of
Transavanguardia. As suggested by the landscape transfigurations in *Le
montagne* explored in the previous chapter, as well as the chromatic palette
of *Identificazione, Renault 9* and *Fotoromanza,* this use of colour appears
indeed as one of the most recurrent traits of Antonioni's painterly evolution
of the 1980s.[11]

3.2   The *Transavanguardia*: return to painting

Beyond chronological and geographical parallels, there are many reasons for
including the phenomenon of Transavanguardia in the analysis of *Il mistero.*
It is not possible to assert with certainty according to which terms the
experience of the Transavanguardia and its intellectual milieu impinged on
Antonioni's preparation of the film. It is even more difficult to establish if
the director was familiar with the works of these artists. However, it is
possible to trace precise analogies between the visual and content issues of
this film and some of the paintings of the mentioned artists. This
comparison does not aim at arguing a proofed, stretched and direct dialogue
between the two, but at demonstrating how two different, even distant,
landmark experiences of the 1980s emerged in Italy from the same cultural,
social and political contexts.

   Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, a sense
of crisis and fragmentation pervaded the contemporary Italian art scene. In
Argan's view, 'art seem[ed] to have lost even the energy to live through its
own crisis'.[12] With this strong statement, the art historian denounced a
situation of stasis, in which art showed a lack of ideology and evolution that
instead had distinguished previous decades. Back then, artists had
responded, often in a violent way, to the emerging questions within the

[11] Pomerance, 'The mystery'.
[12] Argan, 'Introduzione', in *Avanguardia.*

society, and they were critically working to find an alternative way of expression, by simultaneously defending their independence from the art market. In the 1980s, the borders between high and low artworks became thinner, and the art world officially consolidated its relation with business, thanks also to the increase of private art galleries.[13] Paradoxically, mass civilisation allowed post-modern art to expand and increase its infinite possibilities of expression and communication, and denied any free and authentic form of individual expression. In this regard, writer Alberto Asor Rosa explains:

> L'arte trova il "suo" mercato proprio in quanto rifiuta certe leggi dominanti della produzione capitalistica; però nella misura in cui si crea un "suo" mercato, accetta le regole del mercato capitalistico ed è perciò costretta ad accostarsi sempre di più agli umori, ai gusti, alle abitudini, alle tendenze e alle richieste delle masse che chiedono visioni di libertà e di riscatto, ma impongono poi lo spessore delle proprie mediazioni intellettuali e morali per accettarle (e"comprarle").[14]

According to Argan, the Italian Transavanguardia was one of the few phenomena displaying a spirit of criticism towards the system, as well as elements of innovation and propulsion.[15] The group, including Sandro Chia (b.1946), Francesco Clemente (b.1952), Enzo Cucchi (b.1949), Mimmo Paladino (b.1948) and Nicola De Maria (b.1954), aimed at elevating art to another level, outside the culture of rationality and commerciality. Although

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[13] For further discussion on the first point see the Introduction to this dissertation; and also, Matteo Mazzato, 'Dietrologia degli anni '80' (unpublished Master thesis, Università degli Studi di Padova, 2000).

[14] Alberto Asor Rosa, 'Avanguardia', in *Enciclopedia Enaudi,* 2 vols (Turin: Enaudi, 1977), qtd. in Renato de Fusco and Raffella Rosa Rusciano, *Tre domande* (Firenze: Altralinea Edizioni, 2014), p. 240.

[15] Some of the main publications on the subject are: Oliva and Herold Szeemann, eds., *La Biennale di Venezia. Settore Arti Visive, Aperto' 80,* exhib. cat., Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere, Venice, 1980 (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia Edizioni, 1980); Oliva, ed., *Avanguardia, Transavanguardia 1968–1977*, exhib. cat. Mura Aureliane, Rome (Milan: Electa, 1982); Ida Giannelli, ed., *Transavanguardia,* exhib. cat., Castello di Rivoli, Rivoli (Milan: Skira, 2003); Nicoletta Boschiero and Laura Cherubini, eds., *Transavanguardia. La Collezione Grassi,* exhib. cat., MART, Rovereto (Milan: Skira, 2004).

each artist followed his own individual path and denied any form of categorisation, Oliva found a common ground among their creative actions and gathered them under the neologism of Transavanguardia, literally an art movement crossing and overcoming the avant-garde groups. In his landmark article *La Transavanguardia Italiana*, published in the art magazine *Flash Art* in 1979, he mentioned this name for the first time and described the core principles at the base of these artists' work.

> L'Arte finalmente ritorna ai suoi motivi interni, alle ragioni costitutive del suo operare, al suo luogo per eccellenza che è il labirinto inteso come "lavoro dentro", come scavo continuo dentro la sostanza della pittura.[16]

The statement above contains the summa of Transavanguardia, including the return to the manual act of painting, the artist's narcissism, themes including the double, violence, nature, the uncertainty of research, the unconscious, and the oscillation between figurative and abstraction representation. Promoting a return to the past and to figurative paintings, as well as an emphasis on self-projection in the artwork, the artists shared the desire to re-examine an aesthetic debate interrupted by the artistic experimentation during the 1960s and the 1970s, and by the dominance of the philosophy of de-materialisation. They did not fully deny the experience of the avant-garde, but contrasted its implication with politics and high ideologies, and moved back the focus of the creative research towards a more intimate dimension.[17] Along these lines, they worked for re-establishing the supremacy of the self and self-perception in their artworks, and for reinterpreting the *Italic* tradition of painting in light of rediscovered simple and lyric form.[18]

Among the main interests of Transavanguardia, there were the re-examination of the dialogue intellectual and popular topics, international

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[16] Oliva, 'The Italian Trans-Avantgarde', in *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Giannelli, p. 275.
[17] Oliva, ed., *Avanguardia, Transavanguardia*, pp. 122 125.
[18] Oliva, 'La Trans-Avanguardia Italiana', *Flash Art*, 92-93 (1979), 17 20.

and national interests, and the inclusion of references taken from high and popular culture. To these achievements, according to Oliva's essay, the media of painting and sculpture were particularly congenial, as able to re-establish the artist's paternity of the work, especially after several years dominated by Conceptual Art. Supported by a widespread re-born nationalistic pride, Transavanguardia and Oliva aimed at promoting a renewed Italian painting tradition, to differ from the Anglo-Saxon Conceptualism.[19] In this sense, some of the artists, particularly Chia, Cucchi and Paladino, took inspiration for their work from local traditions and rituals, tracing a connection between their personal and professional spheres. Urged by a kind of nostalgia, these artists ceased to question the past, but just re-made it, being inspired by the Italian generation of the thirties and forties, including Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, Filippo de Pisis and Mario Sironi.[20]

Despite having been a limited movement both in terms of space and time, Transavanguardia gained international recognition thanks to the support of independent curators and the promotion of commercial galleries, such as Emilio Mazzoli, Gian Enzo Sperone and Lucio Amelio's, where Chia had his first solo show and Clemente and Paladino often exhibited. Group and solo exhibitions were organised by art institutions and fairs, including Kunsthalle (Basel, 1980), Whitechapel Gallery London (*Francesco Clemente: the Fourteen Stations,* 1983), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 1983), Metropolitan Museum of New York (1984) and Nationalgalerie (Berlino 1984 and 1992).[21] Among the main exhibitions that consecrated these artists there also were *Arte Cifra* (Paul Maenz Gallery, Cologne, 1979), that selected six Italian artists using traditional media such as drawing and painting; *Opere fatte ad Arte* (Palazzo di Città di Arcireale, 1979), by Bonito Oliva and featuring the works of the five exponents of the group; and the first group

[19] Ibid.
[20] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'The Italian Transavantgarde: A Rereading', in *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Giannelli, pp. 75 92.
[21] Giannelli, 'Prefazione', in *Transavanguardia,* unnumbered.

exhibition, *Aperto 1980,* curated by Oliva and Harold Szeemann for the Biennale di Venezia 1980. *Aperto 1980* was meant to be an innovative exhibition, as it included a new generation of artists, and represented a different trend compared to the concurrent show devoted to art in the seventies at the Giardini di Castello.[22] Finally, *die Enthauptete Hand: 100 Zeichnungen aus Italien* (Städtische Galerie, 1980) was a major exhibition of drawings focusing on artist's subjectivity and *hand*, which was interpreted as mediator between the self and the world.[23]

3.3   The colours of nature are the colours of the soul

Three interwoven points will be at the centre of the comparative analysis between *Il mistero* and Transavanguardia. First, the idea of self-consciousness and playful approach of the artist; second, the central role of the medium itself, whether painting and drawing in the case of Transavanguardia, and video and painting in the case of *Il mistero*. While the painter approached painting and drawing as a distinct feature of their own group, Antonioni engages with video as a new tool for experimentation. The third element of discussion will be the issue of colouring, and the resulting oscillation between abstraction and figurative representation. Here, common thematic aspects (i.e. violence, death, love and the double) will be discussed as recurring elements both in Antonioni and in the artists.

   Il mistero hints at Antonioni's enthusiasm towards the magnetic tape, as every scene (and every shot) shows a constant changing of colour, tonality and nuance. This proceeding follows the director's intention to underline the characters' emotional world, and mirrors his need to experiment with the new potential of the magnetic tape. A passage from film scholar Núria

[22] Cherubini, 'Chronology', in *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Boschiero and Cherubini, pp. 269 325.
[23] Ibid.

Bou's essay on the director's approach to colouring adds further insights in this sense.

> Antonioni's experiments with the chromatic possibilities of video format (electronic addition of colours, selective colouring of the image, among others) decidedly leans toward the dramatic and passionate in the story he tells, while not forgetting the expressive restlessness which has set its seal on the development of his career: the search for "beyond" the image, the "behind" the image, is set up by a chromatic brush-stroke which overflows the strict limits of the figures and objects represented, somehow becoming a "stain" which is perfectly integrated into the plastic discourse of an author obsessed with the inquiry into the surface of the real.[24]

Experimenting with colour and white balance changes and varies the viewer's perception of the *true* colours of the image, as this depends on the individual interpretation of light. Parallel to earlier films, in *Il mistero* Antonioni alters reality to uncover the truth 'beyond' or 'behind' the surface of the image and to accentuate one aspect rather than another of it. Thus, in agreement with Bou's passage, the act of experimenting with chromatic possibilities may be read as a development in Antonioni's visual quest.

Whilst being all of this, chromatic experiments encompass the ideas of lightness and amusement in using the new magnetic tool. Indeed, another reason why *Il mistero* has been considered as an unusual film compared to Antonioni's previous works resides in the lightness of the subject, and in the fact that his authorial intervention appears more identifiable. The director writes in the preface to the film script:

> What a sense of lightness I felt in facing those events, so devoid of the complexity of the real, to which we are accustomed! What a relief to escape from the difficulty of a moral and aesthetic obligation, from the haunting desire to

[24] Núria Bou, 'The conversation of a tragedy by Cocteau into a cinema melodrama: a reading of *Il mistero di Oberwald*', *Rivista del Comunicacio Audiovisual* <http://www.iua.upf.edu/formats/formats1/a02at.htm> [accessed 7 June 2013].

express yourself! It was like rediscovering a forgotten childhood.[25]

This particular passage is part of a longer declaration of intents that was published after, rather than before, the film release, and that may be read as an explanation of the making of *Il mistero*. Being known for his long takes, the slowness of the narrative and the sense of impotence pervading the characters, Antonioni reveals in the new film a more playful aspect of his personality. Working with electronics and a console 'full of knobs', as he himself puts it, is a sort of game for him. Videotape is something that he had never experienced before, and which is going to open new possibilities of representation for his visual representation.
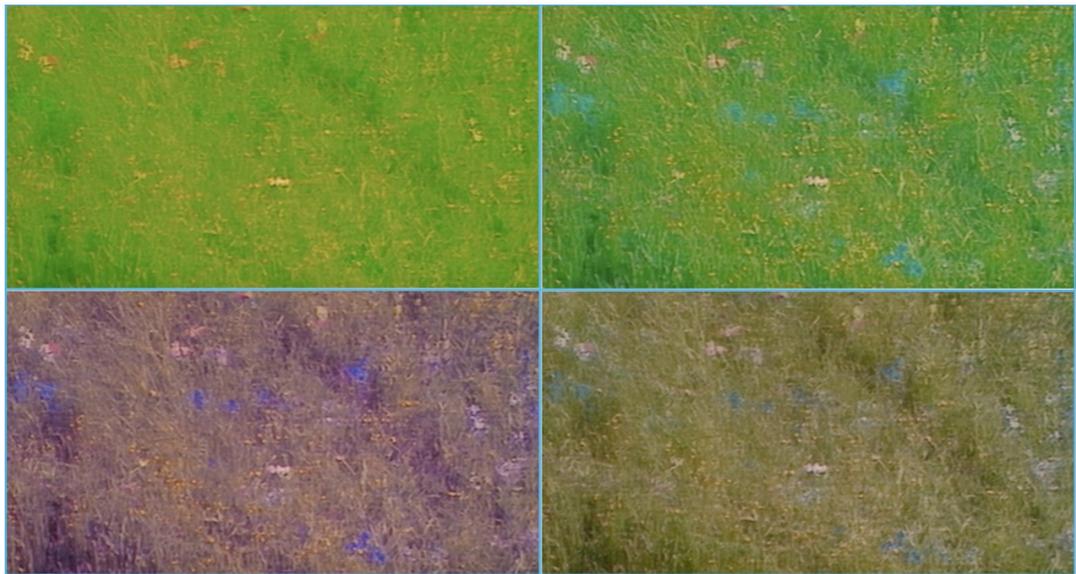
Fig. 27: screen grabs from *Il mistero*. Natural fields around the Castle of Oberwald.

The four frames in Fig. 27 (above) illustrate Antonioni's work in addressing issues of visibility and his willingness to play with electronics. They are part of one of the last exterior scenes of the film, when the Queen and the young rebel Sebastian decide to amuse themselves in the park around the castle of Oberwald. Although less saturated than in Antonioni's earlier films, the colours are brilliant and spring-like, echoing the joyful status of the two lead

[25] Antonioni, 'Almost a confession', p. 128.

characters. This is the only moment of happiness, real peace and hope in the film, in which Sebastian and the Queen finally declare their love to each other, and decide to live fully this new feeling, while accepting the consequences of their decision. On this occasion, Antonioni's camera lingers for a few seconds on the richness of a blooming nature and seizes the moment to play with colouring and shimmering effects. Grass and flowers rapidly change their colours within the same shot: from vivid green, with yellow and orange flowers, to violet grass, blue, pink and yellow details. This also represents a way of investigating reality. Similarly to *Le montagne,* Antonioni uses colours to shape and direct the viewer's perception of both film and nature. Through these macro shots it is indeed possible to see the different nuances of the light, those that may not be visible to the naked eye.

Together with the concept of lightness, in *Il mistero* another recurring semantic idea is surprise. Antonioni often refers to this feeling in relation to a re-discovered childhood, and particularly when he talks about his engagement with painting ('Such fun!'),[26] photographic enlargements ('There is never lack of surprises!')[27] and science ('[…] there is always something new, another horizon, that presents itself to you').[28] In *Il mistero* fun, surprise and excitement are all included. Both director and viewer are repeatedly surprised by the range of possible effects that the magnetic tape is able to produce and reproduce, as proved by Fig. 27 (above) and 28 (below). The scene represented in Fig. 28 occurs during the first night at the castle of Oberwald, after the entrance of Sebastian. Exhausted, the Queen is falling asleep on an armchair in her bedroom, covered by just a white blanket and framed by a blue and white light. The composition of the image is theatrically staged. Visible in the lower left of the frame, some pottery is still on the floor, remnant of the previous scuffle between the woman and the young man. The Queen seats frame centre/right on an elegant chair, close to the fireplace, and her body position, defined by the right arm

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[26] Antonioni, 'In conversation', p. 231.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., p. 237.

resting on the arm of the chair and the left hand supporting her face, may indicate signs of her difficult and turning point day.

Over fifty seconds, the apparently static figure of the Queen slowly changes under the viewer's eyes, until just her white blanket is left. Fade-ins and fade-outs are not a new element in Antonioni's cinema; they are part of his traditional film language, and linked to the dissolution of vision and material.

Fig. 28: screen grabs from *Il mistero*. The Queen is falling asleep on her armchair and her image slowly dissolves.

They may be read as transfiguration of objects through which Antonioni investigates the physical quality of space and time and alter the viewer's perception. Borrowing from film scholars Michele Mancini and Giuseppe Perrella's terminology, Antonioni shows these 'phantoms' appearing, disappearing and transfiguring in the fog, vapours, smoke and light as in this case.[29] The sequence of frames in Fig. 28 discloses the director's idea on the passage of time, as well as it declares the technical procedure he uses to obtain his visual outcome.

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[29] Michele Mancini and Giuseppe Perrella, *Architetture della visione*, I (Vicenza: Arti Grafiche delle Venezie, 1986), p. 80.

The concepts of lightness, as linked to the content of the work, and surprise, as linked to the form of the work, are not far from Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria and Paladino's approach to art. Choosing painting as medium of expression, these artists play with discordant colours and force figurative representation to bleed into abstract landscape. Often featured by a macabre and sarcastic cheerfulness, their work mirrors the artist's playful, quarrelsome and ironic attitude towards society. Among them, particularly De Maria leans towards this approach.

Fig. 29: Nicola De Maria, *Il regno dei fiori*, 1985, oil on canvas, 110 x 150 cm. Galleria Cardi, Milano.[30]

As *Il regno dei fiori* shows, the artist's works are far from the darkness and obscurity conveying by Chia, Clemente and Cucchi; rather he leans towards the concepts of rhythms and gaiety. His poetic of lightness finds its roots in Italo Calvino's value of *leggerezza* explained in the essay *Lezioni Americane*

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[30] Nicola de Maria, *Il regno dei fiori*, 1985
<http://www.exibart.com/notizia.asp?IDNotizia=18569> [accessed 13 September 2015].

(1988);[31] it may be read like a reminiscent of Aldo Palazzeschi's Futurist poetry and of Gino Severini's painting work (1883-1966).

Using a spiritual and symbolic language, De Maria's works echo the illusory and colourful space of Matisse and Paul Klee's canvases, and lead the viewer's gaze far from narrative and figurative representation. His works are usually of large size, and feature fantastic environments, romantic visions of the night, sensuous and defocused forms without any preoccupations of appearing naive.[32] Fig. 29 is part of the homonymous series *Regno dei fiori*, started by De Maria at the beginning of the 1980s. In this blue, violet and quite dreamlike landscape, the artist seems to convey the joy and lightness of painting and drawing. The main line is elementary, and the painting is an explosion of colours, showing a bizarre harmony in which the viewer is asked to get lost. Similarly to Antonioni's chromatic choices in Fig. 28, De Maria makes an extensive use of blending, and creates large castings of intense blue and violet. As *Il regno dei fiori* shows, the painter does not follow the way of the explicit figurative representation, but he prefers to work with evocative and symbolic elements, often combined with short poems embedded in the painting, or underlined by long and detailed titles.[33] He never drives down the route of the violent, expressionist act, but opts for a light and rarefied atmosphere, spangled by millions of points of light.

The second element of intersection between Antonioni and the artists of the Transavanguardia is the significance of the medium itself. Both of them pay a particular attention to the choice of their tool. On the one hand, Antonioni looks at the future of cinema in shooting the film in videotape, and rediscovers one of his long-term and preferred activities, which is

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[31] Italo Calvino, *Six Memories for the next Millennium* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1988).
[32] For more information on the artist's poetics, see Foriana Piqué, 'Nicola de Maria. I fogli che il vento mi sparge sono disegni di vento e di animali', *The Art Section. An Online Journal of Art and Culture Commentary* < http://www.theartsection.com/#!nicola-de-maria/c6sw> [accessed 28 February 2015].
[33] As an example of this, see Nicola de Maria, *Regno dei fiori musicali. Universo senza bombe*, 1985 < http://www.fondazioneartecrt.it/collezione.php?id_artista=18> [accessed 13 September 2015].

painting. On the other, Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, de Maria and Paladino look at the past for inspiration, borrowing from the long-standing tradition of Italian painting. In spite of their individual differences in terms of figurative or abstract language, the medium of painting is one of their distinguishing features as a group.

As Antonioni uses the magnetic tape for the very first time, he plays with it and pushes some of the effects to excess, achieving often surreal and unnatural atmospheres and lighting. As Fig. 3o shows, actors result usually bathed in coloured lights, suggestive of moods and motives; ghostly figures appear and disappear, obedient to the characters' memories. Moreover, in most of the scenes, backgrounds are replaced with images that are suitable to emotions rather than realistic representations. In this sense, Antonioni's presence as maker is more perceptually identifiable by the viewer than in earlier films, in which such chromatic effects are subtler.

The following film still, referring to the first and only direct confrontation between the Queen and her nemesis, chief of the police Count Foehn, incorporates all these visual elements (Fig. 3o).

Fig. 3o: screen grab from *Il mistero*. The Count Foehn and the Queen in conversation.

Willing to see the Queen and to report on the facts of the previous night, Count Foehn arrives at the Castle. As he enters the room, he appears illuminated by a strong violet light, which serves the director's purpose of emphasising and immediately making his evil nature recognisable. Inscribed in the classic tradition of tragedy, the character of the Count Foehn is verbally introduced in the first act as 'un uomo cattivo' by the Queen's words during a tarot reading session. Like the other characters of the story, he is one-dimensional. His only characteristic is being evil, and for this reason, he is connoted by a single colour, *violet*, whose aura follows him as he moves across the space.

Fig. 3o is a still from the tense dialogue between the two characters, theatrically positioned as they were on a symbolic stage, in which the fourth wall is still unbroken. In particular, they respectively occupy frame left and frame right, they sit facing the camera, occasionally looking at each other, but never revealing their back to the spectator/viewer. An empty chair is visible centre stage between them. This object may be read as an indication of the memory of a long gone figure (the King), or someone whose presence is strongly perceived, albeit not physically present in the frame (the Archduchess or Sebastian). According to the unspoken rule that 'colour follows emotion' in Antonioni's cinema, while in the left side of the frame the light is visibly violet and artificially modified, in the right side is natural and warm. The coldness or warmness of the colour reflects the personality of the characters is associated with.

Along similar lines, the artists of the Transavanguardia give particular emphasis to the medium of their artworks, and privilege painting and drawing to video and performance, which are instead symbolically associated to the avant-garde language of the sixties and seventies. Overall, returning to painting in the second half of the 1970s, they consciously choose to confront the contemporary irrelevance of this medium and to restore its primacy in light of the Italian art tradition. They embrace pragmatism, the joy of colours, as opposed to a logo-centric approach to art,

which characterises Conceptual Art.[34] In other words, they aim at reestablishing the link between the gesture and the concept behind the artwork. For instance, Clemente uses and blends photography, drawing, mosaic and painting; his work plays with repetition, stylisation and stereotypes that give his art an apparent facade of conventionality.[35] Cucchi's creative process embraces writing, painting and drawing. While making great use of symbolism, his works show a study on Giotto, Piero della Francesca and Masaccio. His paintings are animated by a few essential images, such as the rain, houses, dogs and anthropomorphic figures. Described as an experimental artist, he also uses non-conventional surfaces, like ceramic, metals, as well as the insertion of objects and materials as supports of the painted image.[36]

The third point of comparative analysis between *Il mistero* and the work of the artists of Transavanguardia regards the use of colours and themes. In Antonioni's cinema, the issue of colouring is inextricably connected to the thin border between visibility and non-visibility and to the projection of the characters' emotional status. In *Il mistero* this appears to acquire an immediate, more physical, connotation, as it is not manually added rather intrinsic to the medium. As Pomerance notices, in this film and in the whole corpus of work of the 1980s they are not the same primary colours that Antonioni uses during the 1960s, rather they are altered, heightened and often distorted.[37] Their narrative function and visual effect are so dramatic to be almost 'uncharacteristic of Antonioni'.[38] Along similar lines, the artists of Transavanguardia explore the limits of colours shifting between warm and cold nuances, showing an extensive iridescence, long

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[34] Stefano Chiodi, 'Transavanguardia', *Doppiozero* <http://www.doppiozero.com/dossier/anniottanta/transavanguardia#_ftn16> [accessed 2 March 2015].
[35] Oliva, 'Transavanguardia: davanti c'è il bel canto, dietro la tortura', *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Giannelli, pp. 17 37.
[36] Oliva, 'Opere fatte ad arte', in *Transavanguardia,* ed. by Boschiero and Cherubini, pp. 21 39.
[37] Pomerance, 'The Mistery of Oberwald', pp. 131 156.
[38] Ibid., p. 171.

shades and large brush strokes. In broader terms, in the 1980s national and international artists started to use very bright colours and to experiment with their psychological values in the viewer's perception; in this sense, they began to recognise the power that colour may achieve in pushing the expressive state of an artwork.[39]

For instance, the extensive use of bright red, used by Antonioni to convey ideas of violence and tragic death in *Il mistero*, occurs in Paladino's work as well, and particularly in *Rosso Silezioso*, 1980 (Fig. 36).

Fig. 31: Mimmo Paladino, *Rosso Silenzioso*, 1980, pigment on canvas, 300 x 462 cm.[40]

According to the art critic Norman Rosenthal, since his first works exhibited at the Lucio Amelio Gallery in Naples, Paladino's paintings and sculptures reveal the influence of primitivism and a great admiration for Modigliani

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[39] For further information on colour perception, see Steven Bleicher, 'Color Phycology', in *Contemporary Color. Theory and Use* (Cengage Learning, 2012), pp.39 57.
[40] Mimmo Paladino, *Rosso Silenzioso*, 1980 <http://www.artitude.eu/it/news/783-mimmo-paladino-e-un-genio,-mimmo-paladino-e-un-bluff> [accessed 13 September 2015].

and Matisse's works.[41] Among the artists of the Transavanguardia, Paladino is the one who is the most interested in an idea of continuity with the Italian tradition of painting, starting from Giotto, Piero della Franscesca and Paolo Uccello, but also with the conceptual work of Jannis Kounellis and Joseph Beuys. His figurative representations, such as *Notte di Pasqua* (1981) and *Senza Titolo* (1982), are immersed in a silent and dreamlike atmosphere, in which images (i.e. macabre banquets, hunting scenes, archaic rituals and objects) and colours are strictly connected to the idea of death.

Rosso Silenzioso is the result of a process started in 1977, when Paladino abandoned photography and moved to abstract painting (Fig. 31). Whilst the red painted in this work is symbolic and linked to the intimate memories of the artist, it invites the viewer to retrieve the endless sounds of her/his emotions. The artist, who is not interested in the world around him, submerges himself in the microcosm of the canvas produced by his own imagination and populated by signs and symbolic elements. In this case, this imaginary space is all coloured a lively red, with dramatic white brush strokes center frame and a white screaming head falling down from the surface. Giving a large emphasis to the artist's interior space, as well as to an emotional use of colour, is one of the main traits of the artists of Transavanguardia and already strong in Paladino's poetics at such an early stage of his career.[42]

Red, in a multiplicity of nuances, is also the first colour to appear during the long opening credits of *Il mistero,* and one of the main colours of Antonioni's palette. For instance, red is the colour of the sky in the thunderstorm; mountains in the background, and of the blood pouring from killed animals are also of a vivid red (Fig. 32). Successively, a red light submerges a part in the park around the Castle where a killed deer is found, the flowers in honor of the dead King and Sebastian's wound. Among these

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[41] Norman Rosenthal, 'C.C.C.P.: Back to the Future', in *Italian Art in the 20th century,* ed. by Emily Braun (London: Prestel, 1989), pp. 369 415.
[42] Cherubini, 'Mimmo Paladino. Solo con gli attrezzi e la superficie', *Transavanguardia,* pp. 35 38.

examples, the frame in Fig. 32 (below) is part of an exterior scene narratively inserted by Antonioni on the day after Sebastian's arrival at the Castle. In the morning, the camera exits the interior rooms of the Castle, and moves around to discover the life and the daily activities of the servants; distracted by one of them in the act of beheading a chicken, the camera lingers on the blood pool as a consequence of this action. The resulting image reveals impressive assonances with Paladino's abstract composition *Rosso Silenzioso*.

The white plume in the middle of the frame echoes the white small head in Fig. 31, and so does the white touches of colour in the red background. The emotions are similar as well. In Paladino's work red is associated with silence and interiority, but also with the concept of death; in *Il mistero* this colour encompasses the ideas of death and violence.

Fig. 32: screen grab from *Il mistero*. Blood pouring from a killed chicken in the courtyard of the castle.

In truth, albeit apparently insignificant in the narration, the detail (and the overall scene) represented in Fig. 32 takes part of the red line of violence crossing the film, starting with the initial thunderstorm and ending with the suicidal death of the two lead characters.

Furthermore, while violet is the colour of the Count Foehn, green is the colour of the wind, and of the thunderstorm that energetically enters the

rooms of the castle of Oberwald when the windows are fully open.
Traditionally associated with jealousy, green is also the colour of Edith de
Berg, the young and ambitious lady companion of the Queen. For instance,
a green cold light, with quasi-fluorescent tones, pervades the frame,
surrounds Edith de Berg's body and underlines her false personality (Fig.
33). Narratively, the woman's main peculiarities are ambiguity, vanity and
ambition. Considered as a spy by the Queen, her jealousy towards the latter
will bring Edith de Berg betray her own role of companion. The action
captured in Fig. 33 occurs at the beginning of *Il mistero*, when the woman is
in conversation with her former loved-one Willenstein. The still introduces
the woman's double personality, which is also one of the core themes of *Il
mistero*.

Fig. 33: screen grab from *Il mistero*. Edith De Berg at the beginning of the film, in
conversation with her former lover Felix (out of frame).

The idea of the double inheres in the overall film and incorporates the
battle between good and evil, the personality of the Queen and, as it will be
discussed successively, the character of Sebastian. A mirror, positioned
centre frame, shows Edith de Berg's true face, with a vague smile, moved by
a compliment she has just received. The element of the mirror is in itself
significant in the presentation of this character as it encompasses the idea of

conflict, yet its iconological significance varies. In the diegesis of Antonioni's cinema, mirrors, together with reflective surfaces in general, are extensively used, as they enter the director's work on visibility issues. However, by definition, the mirror is the true element of duplicity, as it projects the temporary image of a person or an object, rather then the person or the object itself.[43]

Additionally, it may be read as the vehicle of the true feelings and personality of a person, as it actually happens in the case of Fig. 33. Linked to the broader concepts of beauty and vanity in the history of art and literature, the mirror inheres usually a negative and deceitful meaning. It is traditionally found in intimate interior scenes, or as attribute to the female allegories of Pride, Lust and Venus, and often included in *vanitas* painting.[44] Differently from the iconography of a woman looking in the mirror (i.e. *Ritratto di giovane donna allo specchio,* Giovanni Bellini, 1515), Antonioni does not portray Edith de Berg in the act of contemplating her reflection. Rather he inserts her image successively and uses the mirror at this initial point of the narration to suggest the woman's personality. In light of this, while Edith de Berg is not to be intended as the modern representation of Venus or any other mythological figure, she combines all their qualities, and her portrayal may be inserted in the same semantic area.

A similar treatment of colour, themes and allegories is evident in Chia's work as well. One of the first artists to defend the primacy of painting, Chia's work takes direct inspiration from the masters of modern painting such as late Cézanne, De Chirico, Carrà and Picasso. The subject of *Figura con teschio* (Fig. 34) both recalls the iconography of the penitent Magdalene (i.e. Georges de Latour, *The Penitent Magdalene,* 1638-43, MoMa,

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[43] Cesare Ripa Perugino, *Falsità d'amore ovvero d'inganno* [1765], III <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=yIZaAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en_GB&pg=GBS.PP5> [accessed 2 February 2015].

[44] See, for instance the vice of *pride* (foreground, bottom left) in: Jacob Matham, *Virtues and vices,* 1588 <http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3039973&partId=1&people=5196&peoA=5196-1-7&page=1> [accessed 13 September 2015].

New York) and displays all the attributes of a *memento mori* and vanitas paintings, including a thoughtful female figure looking at a skull. In this case, the feeling of death is emphasised by the line of cypresses in a small part of the background, and also contrasted by the element of water, which is traditionally connected to life and new energy. However, the peculiar position of the woman close to a source of water (whether a pond or marble fountain) adds further insights. This may be read as an allusion to the myth of Narcissus, which itself is linked to the concept of death, together with the ideas of vanity, ambiguity and double.
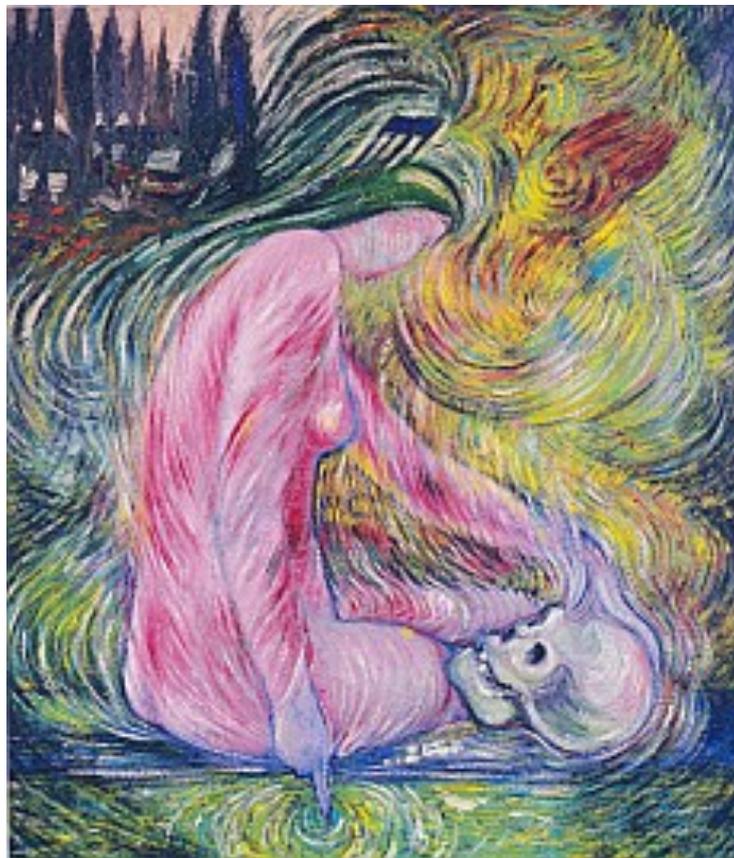
Fig. 34: Sandro Chia, *Figura con teschio*, 1980, oil on canvas, 150 x 130 cm. Collezione Grassi, MART.[45]

Among the many other elements to be noticed in *Figura con teschio*, it is worth underling the striking assonance between the painting and *Il mistero*

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[45] Sandro Chia, *Figura con teschio*, 1980
http://www.mart.tn.it/UploadImgs/5230_115038_Sandro_Chia_Figura_con_teschio.jpg
[accessed 13 September 2015]

colour palette in terms of the use of fluorescent and shifting colours. The tones of pink and violet of the female subject may be found in the light glowing from the Count Foehn and in the natural landscape around Oberwald; yellow and green are also evident in many of the shots in which Edith de Berg is protagonist, and in many exterior scenes of *Il mistero*. Finally, the same bright blue of the marble fountain, on which the woman is seated in Chia's painting, usually appears in *Il mistero* to indicate the positive character of Sebastian. On a last note, quoting the Futurist pictorial dynamism, the aura of colour enveloping the subject of *Figura con teschio* gives her volume and softness, while it frames her in an ethereal atmosphere. This aura is a common trait in Chia's works and, in the painter's view, aims at creating an effect of oscillation of the human bodies on the edge of gaseous and solid state.[46] The same effect may be seen in Antonioni's frames, particularly those referring to the characters mentioned above.

Going back to the theme of the double, the following frames (Fig. 35 and 36) make even clearer the inherent presence of this concept in the film. Fig. 35 gives insights on Edith de Berg's ambiguity and her relationship with the Queen. The still is inserted during the first dispute between the Queen and her lady's companion, when the first appears for the first time in the film.[47] While Edith de Berg is identified with the royal etiquette, the Queen introduces herself as the unorthodoxy and the thunderstorm. She proudly states in front of the other woman: 'L'arciduchessa è l'etichetta, ed io il temporale'.

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[46] Stella Cervasio, 'Le figure della Transavanguardia', *La Repubblica,* 16 July 2008 < http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/07/16/le-figure-della-transavanguardia.html> [accessed 2 March 2015].
[47] Similarly to the Count Foehn, the Queen is introduced in the first act by the dialogue of two characters (Edith and Felix in this case) according to the theatre tradition. Thanks to this early introduction, the viewer is aware of the Queen's personality and of what to expect from her behaviour.

Fig. 35: screen grab from *Il mistero*. Edith de Berg in the Queen's private room.

This is the first night at Oberwald, a night of commemoration of the King's death, which happened ten years earlier on the day of their wedding. Irritated by her lady companion's insistence in closing the windows, and proud in her battle against the social conventions that the royal etiquette imposes, the Queen asks her to leave the room and not come back for any reason.

The frame in Fig. 35 above happens while Edith de Berg is declaring her disobedience to the Queen: 'I am afraid I cannot obey you', she says. Here, Antonioni applies a suppression and duplication of the image for a few seconds, with the goal of making visible the other aspect of woman's personality, otherwise hidden to the viewer's eyes. As previously discussed, repetition is also inherent to the series of *Le montagne,* in which photographic enlargements emerge as double images of the collages. In an apparently different direction from them, in Fig. 35 there are no enlargements of the original figure, but only a replica; yet, the double image still proves the director's intent to see what is hidden behind reality, and in this case, behind Edith de Berg's behavior.

The quintessential double figure in *Il mistero* is certainly represented by the character of Sebastian (Fig. 36). Antonioni uses a blue light since

Sebastian's first appearance, in the act of climbing and entering the castle. Quoting a passage from Bou's essay on the film:

> […] the announcement of the new lector's arrival tinges the space near the window with a bluish tone. In both cases, the two chromatic vibrations evoke the penetration of an outside element (the storm wind, Sebastian's arrival) and their influence on the emotional temperature of those living inside.[48]

Thus, in the colour palette of *Il mistero,* blue seems to encompass positive feelings of renewal and changing, and so to offer an answer to the Queen's long-time quest for love. The same bluish tone quickly appears when Sebastian enters the royal private apartments, after being introduced narratively by a tarot reading, performed by the Queen in a surreal conversation with the image of her dead husband. 'Ecco il ragazzo su cui ammanaccavamo tanto', she says flipping a card on the table.

Fig. 36: screen grabs from *Il mistero*. Sebastian enters the Queen's private room. The two close-ups show the strong similarity between Sebastian and the King's face.

As Fig. 36 shows, Sebastian is the exact copy of the dead King. Yet, he represents the death of the Queen. He arrives at Oberwald to kill her for a political reason, and at the end of the plot he indirectly provokes her death because of his love for her. 'You are my death', the Queen pre-announces to him at the beginning of their conversation. While Sebastian represents the Queen's spirit of rebellion and love for culture, primarily he is the King's physical and symbolic incarnation. Antonioni seems to underline repeatedly

[48] Bou, 'The conversation of a tragedy', unnumbered.

this idea through his camera movements and close-ups ad hoc. In the scene, Sebastian appears behind the portrait of the King (Fig. 36, left frame), leaving the Queen speechless and dazed by his presence. Antonioni, then, closes on the King's painted face (Fig. 36, right frame) to come back rapidly to Sebastian. Following this parallelism in the following actions in the film, the young man is offered to take the King's chair, and soon he will conquer this latter's place in the Queen's heart. Sebastian has, without any doubts, a dual and hybrid nature. He is a poet and a rebel, the assassin and the savior of the Queen, and the beginning and the final point of the plot. His positive, young and energetic personality is indicated by the colour blue, which is also the tone of the moon, the sky and all the moments of inner peace among the characters.

The theme of double, together with the connected ideas of repetition and replica, is one of the main points of dialogue between the artists of the Transavanguardia and Antonioni that have been investigated in the chapter. Together with such issue, the comparative analysis has indicated multiple encounters between them in terms of common participation in the overall aesthetic debate of the 1980s; colours and approach to the medium, as well as other themes, including the feelings of lightness and surprise. Above all, the most important element of intersection between them, and the reason why this study has put them in parallel, does not lie in an established, direct and personal relationship. Rather, it lies in a common experimental and critical approach that they had in respect to the Italian contemporary system of art and visual representation. Yet with different mediums and channels of communication, these artists   intended as both Antonioni and Transavanguardia's   brought forward a process of change, starting a revolution through and in their art practice.

Ultimately, despite not having been properly included by Antonioni in his films, *Il mistero* expresses an important aspect of the director's personality and his whole journey in cinema. As a first step in videotape and electronic colouring, the film is the first step made by Antonioni towards a

new way of visual representation. Along similar lines, the next film *Identificazione,* which will be explored in the following chapter, represents in itself both a consolidation of Antonioni's authority as film director, and a change in treatment of filmic elements such as bodies, soundtrack and colours. In this sense, while *Il mistero* plays with abstraction (i.e. the subject of the story, the colours), *Identificazione* distances itself from it and enters the sphere of realism. This is a peculiar version of realism, though, which transforms itself into disturbing surrealism because of the fragmentation of the text, the loneliness of the characters, the non-sense of the language and the high volume of the soundtrack.

CHAPTER 4
ABSTRACT REALISM IN
IDENTIFICAZIONE DI UNA DONNA

4.1   From novel to film

When discussing Antonioni's association with abstraction and realism, this study agrees with the research conducted on the subject by Rhodes, who argues that the two spheres merge in the director's work.[1] To complete his definition, Rhodes introduces the concept of 'abstract realism', in that Antonioni uses an abstracting gaze to register social reality, as defined by the individual's interactions with his context.[2] Social reality is the subject of this film: it is *observed* by the main male character's gaze; *represented* by the female universe and by an erotically explicit language; and *filtered* by Italian/international mediascape and soundscape. Because of this tripartite composition, chapter 4 will include three different sections: 'The Gaze', 'The Object' and 'The Filter'.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the three sections, it is necessary to establish the temporal coordinates of Antonioni's operation, the content of the film and its relationship with the source novel.[3] Both film and novel are primarily the story of two love relationships between a middle-aged film director, Niccolò, with two women, the high-class Mavi and the middle-class actress Ida. It also includes the process of constructing a film, of the search for its perfect female lead character, and the growing awareness of the impossibility of such projects. In both of them, Antonioni presents a

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[1] Rhodes, 'Rethinking Michelangelo Antonioni's Modernism: A Conversation between Karl Schoonover and John David Rhodes', in *Minnesota* <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/theme/rethinking-antonioni> [accessed 10 July 2014].

[2] Ibid.

[3] Antonioni does not give a title to the novel, and in the monograph dedicated to the film (1983), Tassone calls it just 'racconto del film'. For practical purposes I will refer to it as *the novel.* Antonioni, 'Il racconto del film', in *Identificazione,* ed. by Tassone, pp. 15 57.

reflection on his own cinema and puts on stage the same aesthetic formality and preoccupations of his earlier works, such as the investigative story and the tight bond that the film has with its historical and social context.[4]

As a matter of fact, there are historical references to the 1980s in Italy, including drugs issues, terrorism (e.g. the double portrait of the two members of the Red Brigades, Valerio Morucci and Adriana Faranda), scientific discoveries, social behaviours and the moral fall of the aristocratic class, etc.[5] These are key elements of the overall spectacle that help Antonioni to contextualise his story. However, in *Identificazione,* the director does not provide a photographic and opinionated portrait of the surrounding society: instead, the political value of this film lies in the representation of a *feeling* perceived by the director, of a particular situation or place, and not in any precise historical commentary.

Like most of his films, *Identificazione* was adapted from a short novel, and then re-written as a script in collaboration with Gerard Brach and Tonino Guerra.[6] Analysing such a literary text is beneficial to understand the source material of the film, and Antonioni's subsequent work of abstraction. The core of the film lies in the representation of a female universe as observed by a male decentred gaze and filtered by a new use of sound and visual representation. Within this portrait, narrative dissolution and fragmentation are key elements and the 'fil rouge' of *Identificazione*, as suggested by the forthcoming comparison between the film and the novel. Specifically, alongside alterations of little relevance, such as the change in location for some episodes, three aspects of dissonance will be taken account: the fragmentation of the editing; the reduction of cinematic

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[4] The hypothesis is suggested by other authors, including: Siegel, 'Identification of a Medium'; Kelly, 'Identification of a Woman', 37–43.

[5] See the Introduction of this dissertation for a broad analysis on both social and cultural context of the 1980s.

[6] Tassone recalls Antonioni's words about the genesis of the film: 'L'idea di fare un film con dei personaggi femminili è antica. Avevo preso degli appunti e scritto anche delle scene. Un giorno, quel materiale è risaltato fuori e mi è sembrato che valesse la pena rimetterci le mani.' Antonioni, qtd. in *Identificazione*, ed. by Tassone, p. IX. As soon as the story was ready, Antonioni mailed it to Italian writer and novelist Roberto Roversi for comments on the text and, only after, he worked on the script.

episodes (particularly the ones referring to Niccolò's professional sphere), and a greater visual and narrative investigation of women in the film.

The first point of discrepancy is about the fragmentation of the editing, yet there is a similarity between the film and the text in terms of the general order of the sequences. In the adaptation process, *Identificazione* shows a lack of temporal and chronological clarity in the narration of the events, which may explain the large role of flashbacks: in Lorenzo Cucco's words 'il concetto di evoluzione narrativa viene meno', because the temporal dichotomy before/after does not really exist within the specific narrative reality of the film.[7] The film distorts time at several junctures and, by the time the viewer puts the pieces together, a palpable sense of disorientation has already set in. Because the script is very lean and dry, the cutting is erratic, and many scenes are not connected in an immediate logical order, thus flashbacks have the goal of leading the inexpert viewer through the present events.

This narrative dissolution is not part of the novel, in which the omniscient narrator narrates in detail both events and main characters. The novel gives the reader an extensive vision of the story's context, and answers to many of the viewer's questions in terms of the progression of events and significance of certain encounters. For instance, some of the scenes have been cut from the film, have changed location, or have been temporally re-arranged. In *the novel* the dialogues are richer and more informative about the characters' past or future actions, and there is more focus on supporting characters, such as the Chief of Police. In *Identificazione*, similarly to what happens during the process of adapting *Il mistero,* Antonioni is not interested in retaining the authenticity of the text, neither on facts; rather he focuses on the human drama and emotions of his characters. In the film, while avoiding the linearity of the original novel, he gives birth to a new abstract narrative.

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[7] Lorenzo Cucco, *Antonioni. Il discorso dello sguardo e altri saggi* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 1997), p. 98.

The events of *Identificazione* follow the same temporality of the novel, with the correspondence between filmic flashbacks and narrative memories of the characters. Moreover, the relevance of the three main characters, the male point of view and the investigative story in the background are respected in both the novel and *Identificazione*. The first episodes of the story may be considered as example of this point. In parallel to the film, after the 'threat episode' occurred in a Roman ice-cream shop, the novel introduces the character of Mavi, and her first conversation with Niccolò by phone. Then, it describes their first dates and sexual activities, followed by their dialogue about the recent threat, similarly to what happens in the film. However, while Mavi's physicality is described in a detailed paragraph at this point of the narration, her lovemaking scenes with Niccolò are only suggested in a few words, opposed to the numerous close-ups of her body inserted in the film.[8] The reader does not have any visual information about the man's house or any other location; there is no reference to any kind of music - which is key in the film. Also, while in the novel writer-Antonioni endorses the fluidity of the events and does not linger very much on individual scenes nor on visual descriptions, in the film, filmmaker-Antonioni creates a fragmented text.

In *Identificazione*, the narrative is dissociated, as Antonioni purposely distorts the viewer's perception of space and time. The separation between the scenes is marked by the use of linguistic/editing punctuations such as bold cuts and sound/visual fades. Antonioni himself asserts that '*Identificazione* is a film which is completely based on editing, a very nervous sort of editing with cuts that are sometimes very bold but do reflect the content of the film.'[9] The analysis of a few scenes may help explain this point better. The transition between the two initial episodes ('Appartamento Niccolò. Interno, notte' and 'Bar. Esterno-interno, giorno') is marked by a

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[8] 'Questa è la contraddizione di cui [Niccolò] si sente vittima: da una parte un rapporto fisico che lo isola da tutto, tanto è travolgente; dall'altra una realtà che, sempre a causa di lei, diventa di giorno in giorno più ossessiva.' Antonioni, 'Il racconto', p. 19
[9] Antonioni, 'In conversation', p. 243.

clear separation and a change of camera angle (from an over-the-shoulder close-up to a frontal medium shot of the character);[10] a complete interruption of the music, and a cut from night-time to day-time. Successively, once the viewer realises that the present time of the narration is in Niccolò's studio ('Casa Niccolò. Studio e Soggiorno. Interno giorno'), both the man and woman's flashbacks begin with a crossfade, with a consequent overlapping of the characters' morphology in the content of the following scene. These two flashbacks, which refer to two distant moments in the love story that are Mavi and Niccolò's first conversation on the telephone, and the woman's experience at the Atlantic College, are about two minutes in length and are followed by the first of the total three sexual experiences between the characters. Finally, a cut in the editing leads the viewer to the last scene of this sequence, and reveals Niccolò sitting at his desk in the act of drawing the face of the mysterious man he met at the ice-cream shop. It is only at this point that the viewer realises that the two flashbacks are part of Niccolò's long subjective flashback.

The second main element of dissonance between the film and the novel is the reduction of many episodes, particularly those related to Niccolò's professional sphere. Such a slimming down of his personality is connected to the fact that Niccolò is not the core of the film, as it would seem at a first glance. Although the camera is constantly with him, the man appears as the illusory protagonist through whom Antonioni carries out his work of abstraction. In particular, while in *Identificazione* Niccolò is not represented as an artist experiencing a deep crisis, and only seldom he reflects on his career, in the novel this character shows more professional awareness. In this regard, at the beginning of the novel, Antonioni writes:

> Tutto ciò di cui è protagonista o testimone chi fa di professione il regista di cinema è visto attraverso una lente professionale, non c'è scampo.[11]

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[10] Antonioni, 'La sceneggiatura', in *Identificazione*, pp. 68-156 (pp. 68-70).
[11] Antonioni, 'Il racconto', p. 16.

These words indicate the type of approach that the man has towards his personal life and, potentially, an interesting connection with Antonioni himself. While in the novel there are direct references to the man's career, in the film these same references are mainly functional to discuss further philosophical subjects such as life, love and God. The novel introduces the figure of a producer in Niccolò's life, who is described as a middle-age man passionate about cinema, named Mario. Looking closely at Antonioni's words in *the novel*, '[il produttore] pensa si possa fare [cinema] con civiltà e onestà', it is clear that he hints to a potential positive influence of this character on the director's work.[12] Such a distinguished character is excluded from the film, yet he is evoked in the figure of Niccolò's friend Mario.

Additionally, the novel incorporates other scenes and comments, which have been successively omitted in the film, such as the episode at the Theatre Parnaso in Rome. Antonioni writes that the night before Niccolò's conversation with Ida, Niccolò went to this theatre to watch the play with one of his female friends; there, he was recognised as a famous filmmaker by the public and immediately surrounded by actors. In *Identificazione*, this episode is only suggested and, consequently, the distinction between Niccolò and Ida's first and second meeting is not immediate to the viewer. Within his work of distortion and abstraction of time and space, Antonioni asks his/her viewer to pay attention to the progression of the episodes hinted by the characters' lines and/or clothes/accessories. In this case, it occurs when Ida asks Niccolò why he came *back* to watch the play for the second time and when, during the same dialogue, Niccolò wears a different suit than the one he wears in the scene before.

Finally, the third element of dissociation between the novel and film consists in the visual representation of the woman and of her naked body,

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[12] Ibid. Successively, Niccolò and the producer meet by chance on the street to discuss about the timeline of the new film and future potential distribution.

particularly. *Identificazione* includes three lovemaking scenes, and several erotic allusions to both hetero- and homosexual acts, which are only referred to in the novel. Mavi's nudity and her acts of pleasure may be considered to this purpose: they are an indispensable element of the film's content, and also differentiate Mavi's personality from the one of other characters. Their visual and narrative weight is so relevant to the extent that, in Laura Mulvey's words, they do interrupt the flow of the narration, by freezing the action in 'a moment of erotic contemplation'.[13] This mechanism is only suggested in the novel. While Antonioni-director often follows a process of reduction in terms of factual details, he adds more scenes when it comes to female sexuality. On one side, from the novel, the reader discovers that Ida's real name is Armida, she is twenty-two years old and shares her apartment with a female housemate with a strong British accent. On the other, the visual nature of the filmic medium leads Antonioni to focus more on the physicality of his characters, rather than on their words or social contextualisation.

As will be discussed in the next sections, in *Identificazione* there is an overpowering presence of women: gynaecologic pamphlets, art books showing erotic female poses, photographs and supporting characters such as Carla and Nadia. For instance, while Antonioni dedicates a few words to Nadia in the novel, without describing her physically or emotionally, she instead is the main character in the corresponding episode in the film.[14] This particular scene happens midway through the narration, between the end of Niccolò's love story with Mavi and the beginning of the new affair with Ida. Nadia, interpreted by Antonioni's wife, is a wealthy woman, presumably an old friend of the man, and she introduces herself as a happy and stable person, who has just left urban life to move to the countryside. In spite of

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[13] For more information on Mulvey's theories, see the landmark article by Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6-18.
[14] Nadia is Niccolò's friend who accompanies him to the Theatre Parnaso. In the novel, Antonioni refers to her as simply as 'una ragazza', without offering any details on her personality. Antonioni, 'Il racconto', p. 38.

the brevity of her appearance, narratively speaking she helps Niccolò to meet Ida.

Grounding on these evaluations, the parallelism between *the novel* and *Identificazione* sets the scene for a more comprehensive analysis of the film. Firstly, it proves Antonioni's process of narrative abstraction and fragmentation in the film: the editing is erratic, music enters to help the narrative, and individual characters become concepts, feelings and images, sustaining Antonioni's work on the malaise of the sentiments. In particular, it has been observed that while there is a reduction in terms of details of the story, there is a thorough visual exploration, like the incorporation of female sexuality. Secondly, this novel film parallelism has revealed the process of selection of those elements that constitute the real main focus of *Identificazione*. Indeed, narratively speaking, the focus is on both the male gaze, Niccolò's decentred figure, and a re-discovered femininity as a whole. Aesthetically speaking, there is more: an evolution in portraying this female sexuality and a new treatment of the soundtrack.

4.2   The male gaze: a decentred man

Identificazione is a slow, accurate, work of introspection on characters. As the camera stays close to Niccolò, the film elects him as the ideal lens through which seeing the world, and women as the centre of his identification. The importance of this section lies in the fact that Niccolò is the illusory protagonist of the story and the gaze through which the viewer is watching the events of the film. Depending on the movements of this gaze, the viewer will have a less/more realistic vision of the subject. For this reason, having a comprehensive view of Niccolò's decentred personality and emotional and professional failures provides the instruments that are required to consider the subject of the film better.

Accused by Ida of being an 'intellettuale marcio', Niccolò is a white Italian heterosexual man at the peak of his emotional and creative block; he is sentimentally involved with two women, and concurrently searching for the perfect female face for his new film. He shares with Antonioni the urgency to see the world through cinema, and his love for science and astronomy; eventually, he is emotionally confused, and the sole criterion for action appears looking inward and following the needs of the self. There is no doubt about his inability to engage in a love relationship truly and generously. 'You do not love me, you need me', Mavi tells him during their last meeting, 'this is not love. You only need me to live, or to survive'.[15] Niccolò is first of all an artist, a director in search of a female muse, whom he is not able to find (or to keep) on his journey. About this matter, Jacobowitz and Lippe suggest another level of complication in the male-female relationship: the male's ideal female companion no longer exists, as the modern woman refuses to be contained by an archaic vision of the artist and his muse.[16]

An aspect emerging from the construction of this illusory protagonist is Antonioni's focus on the discomfort of the intellectual persona in contemporary society and the stasis of the Italian cinema industry. In this regard, the director argued in 1985:

> In the 1960s one could feel the strong aftershocks, sentimental and sociological, of the immediate Post-war period. *Today these forces are spent*. [Italics added].[17]

A particular passage in both the film and the novel, the dialogue between Niccolò and his friend/producer Mario, seems to indicate such a feeling expressed by Antonioni. By following the two characters entering the space of the studio, they appear very comfortable with each other, and Mario

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[15] The dialogue occurs midway the film, at the villa in the Roman countryside.
[16] Jacobowitz and Lippe, p. 73.
[17] Antonioni, 'Un film sui conflitti', interviewed by Tassone, in *The Architecture*, pp. 356 358 (p. 358).

demonstrates a certain familiarity with the house. During their conversation, Niccolò shares with him his thoughts about love relationships, his professional crisis, his failure in finding a female character for his story, and the frustration that all of this encompasses. Together with a large use of superficial concepts, stereotypes and trivial expressions, the pace of their voices, gestures and looks out of frame add pathos to the atmosphere. The emptiness and futility of this encounter is expressed in many ways. For instance, because of his body language, Mario appears visibly distracted and does not seem to be particularly engaged with Niccolò's philosophical preoccupations towards the inscrutability of reality.

Rather than taking an inside look at the overall process of making a film, their dialogue points out the general malaise of a particular historical context. Mario asks his friend, 'Mi domando che senso ha al giorno d'oggi una soria d'amore, in questo sfacelo, in questa corruzione', and Niccolò cynically replies, 'la corruzione è la colla di questo paese, e sono i corrotti i primi che vogliono vedere una storia d'amore'. Here there is the presence of multi-levelled mise-en-abymes: on the one hand, Antonioni comments on the current society and, on the other hand, Niccolò, who is himself the protagonist of a love story, reflects on the idea of writing a cinematic love story. The ending of the film reiterates the concept, as Niccolò decides to make a science-fiction film, which is the same path Antonioni was intended to follow after *Identificazione*. This intersection of multiple levels concerns both the novel and the film; here it is visually emphasised by the multiplication of reflective surfaces, such as mirrors and glasses.

Niccolò searches for something or someone who can fill in the emptiness of his life and, specifically, he follows two parallel investigative journeys, only to fail in both occasions. As suggested earlier, he looks for a new face, a 'sentimento dalle forme femminili' from whom he can take inspiration. During the film, the viewer sees him attempting to reach his goal by collecting magazine and newspaper clippings, photographs of models or 1920s actresses (i.e.

the figure of Louise Brooks), random portraits of women and erotic photograph catalogues. Nothing seems to give him the answer he is obsessively searching for. He spends a significant part of his time building and looking at his photo board, whilst attaching new photos, and reflecting on them (Fig. 37).

Fig. 37: screen grabs from *Identificazione*. Three detail shots of the photo board.

This area may be considered as the visual centrepiece of the film: it is the closest place to Niccolò's emotional space, as it is constantly included in any of the interior scenes of the room where the man appears. Also, it changes during the development of the story and is the point where the man always returns (six times in total during the film). It is relevant for the narration that when Niccolò is in his studio, alone, after his Venice trip, the camera films him over-the-shoulder and excludes the photo board from the frame. This is the only time the viewer does not see the board in the studio, and it

may suggest that looking for a female figure is no longer Niccolò's focus, but rather the images of a burning sun are.

The process of the 'identification of a woman' leads to nowhere, as Niccolò fails in terms of personal relationships. After having gone in a circle from one woman to another, in the film finale Niccolò begins an imaginative flight by looking outside the window in search of something distant from his sentimental preoccupations. Mavi has abandoned him and decided to officially engage in a lesbian relationship; Nadia would have never become his ideal woman, because of her ordinariness; and, Ida, forced to make a choice, has chosen to keep her baby over him. This ending was already hinted at during a dialogue with Ida in front of the photo board. On this occasion, Niccolò states that love relationships paradoxically become complicated without drama and dangers, implying both a pessimistic approach to love and his peculiar personality. When Ida and Niccolò eventually break up in Venice, Ida repeats similar words, and emphasises the impossibility of an ordinary and socially accepted relationship with him. This narrative link between two temporally distant moments in the love story acts as a preparatory scene for the conclusive events in the narration, and the reason of their breakup demonstrates once again Antonioni's interest in liminality in love relationships.

The man's professional trajectory is inevitably changing as his query has failed, whereas his initial ideas of making a sentimental film is no longer present, nor are the images of Mavi, Ida or any other woman. However, while this choice may be seen as a failure in Niccolò's career, it may be indicative of a turning point in Antonioni's cinema, underlined by the little boy's question 'and after?'.[18] In truth, the director considered *Identificazione*

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[18] Antonioni did not believe in autobiography in cinema. However, personal and professional spheres merge in the director, whereas his personal life *is* his films, his paintings, his writings. Thus, the concept of autobiography may be read as the self-written account of his *professional* life, defined by the director's self-reflection on his own style. In *Identificazione*, Antonioni comes back working on some of the main themes that he has been investigating throughout almost forty years, including the artist's quest and the inevitable impossibility to reach a conclusion.

as the last of his sentimental works, as he expressed his willingness to go in different stylistic directions.[19] His passion for science, his words on such a matter and his writings in *Quel bowling sul fiume Tevere* indicate that sci-fi could have been one of them.

Moreover, the love relationships in this 1980s film are not going better than the ones of the previous works of the 1960s. Incommunicability is still an issue for the couple, but the reasons for this feeling do not seem to be the same. As Siclier writes the year after the release of *Identificazione,* the general malaise provoked by national terrorism as well as by Italian political instability has deeply affected both society and private relationships.[20] In this sense, the film may be read as a reflection of the complete fracture and crisis of Western values, and more specifically of the Italian social environment. Despite the positivity or negativity of the changes, men in particular, faced an overall sense of disorientation, as suggested by Cottino-Jones: Niccolò is a divorced man, who does not seem to fully understand the reality around him.[21]

About this matter, asked by Gideon Bachmann in 1982 to what extent *Identificazione* was meant to tell a love story, Antonioni argued that the film is about a 'love of today', which departs from the traditional description of passion because of the inevitable changes in society. In his opinion, in modern times, controlling one's own emotions is the individual's only way to face reality and to survive its cruelty - to be intended as terrorism, disorder and corruption. As discussed earlier, Antonioni transports the same concept in the construction of his characters. The overwhelming feeling of emptiness and fear in the film rises from what Antonioni sees as being the main issue of his contemporary Italian society: the individual's

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[19] Antonioni, 'In conversation'.
[20] Siclier, 'Il ritorno'.
[21] Cottino-Jones, 'Decentering the Masculinity and Spotlighting the Feminine in the Films of the 1980s', in *Women, Desire and Power in Italian Cinema* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2010), pp. 187 210.

self-oriented nature and superficial behaviour. Rome is depicted as a vulgar city without any sexual inhibitions (i.e. the shop assistant, several dialogues about sexual habits); empty and superficial (i.e. Mavi's friends from Roman high-society); and dangerous (i.e. the police's inadequacy in helping Niccolò, the general feeling of danger perceived by the characters). In Mavi's opinion, the aristocratic class she used to be part of is characterised by no political orientation, no sense of responsibility and no unitary values or moral principles. In regard to her statement, Pomerance defines the world portrayed in *Identificazione* as one 'of personality and disconnection, in which the social life has dried up and everyone who can afford to escape has jumped to richer pastures.'[22] This is visible in the locations of many of the scenes in the film. At the Roman soiree, for instance, the guests' reluctance towards Niccolò, the discernible ostentation of richness, as well as the decadence of the setting, suggest the feeling of a very individualistic society and arid individuals.

In Antonioni's cinema, location and visual composition are intrinsic to the character's personalisation, and, in this film, Niccolò's domestic space is disorienting and decentring, and to some extent a 'non-place'.[23] The male character is passing through these interior locations as a passive spectator of a show, instead of an active traveller, without engaging with any relationship with them. In spite of being visually and narratively linked to his house, and

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[22] Pomerance, 'Identification', p. 55. See the Introduction for further analysis of Pomerance's contribution to the literary dedicated to this film.

[23] According to French anthropologist Marc Augé's landmark theory, an 'anthropological place' is formed by individuals through the complicity of language, local references and uniformed rules; it is relational, historical and concerned with identity. On the contrary, a 'non-place' is everything a 'place' is not: it refers to something transitory, and evokes travels and memories. Place and non-place are not completely disconnected from each other. Augé argues: 'In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together'. According to these categories, for instance, the birthplace, the house, even a village can be considered 'places' in that they are symbolically and emotionally shaped on the basis of the body existing there; locations as airports, supermarkets, railways stations are products of the 'supermodernity' and are instead read as 'non-places' because they do not establish any personal relation with the body and cannot be related to any kind of identity. Both the quotations are from Marc Augé, *Non-places. Introduction to Supermodernity* [1995], 2nd edn, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 2008), p. 86.

particularly to his studio, this emotional centre is but an illusory idea for the character, as he is neither able to resolve his professional conflicts nor to find any trace of his personal identity. In this sense, Niccolò's house may be read as a 'non-place' because it is transitory, it does not establish any personal relationship with the body and it is not transformed by his presence.

Not surprisingly, the first sequence of the film begins in the entrance hall of Niccolò's building, a familiar and usual daily space for the character (Fig. 38).

Fig. 38: screen grab from *Identificazione*. Opening shot of the film, showing the entrance hall of Niccolò's building.

This is one of Antonioni's traditional openings: a static frame lasting approximately twenty seconds, on which the opening credits appear. The design of this image is strictly abstract and geometric, and the chromatic elements span acid green, purple, grey, white and black. The real nature of this setting is not clear, as it may be a mural decoration, a painting, floor or roof; only the volume and the shade of the small wooden chest at the top left hand corner hint to a portion of the floor. Niccolò's entrance makes this place identifiable with a very elegant and middle-class lobby of an urban *palazzo*, and reveals the aerial position of the camera. It is worth noting that

showing this lobby as the first spatial element says something about the transitory and elusive features of both the locations and characters of the whole film. This is the quintessential transitory place and a moment of passage recurring throughout the film.

According to William Kelly, doors are the dominant visual motif of *Identificazione* and suggest the moral status of the male character. Doors are the ultimate element featuring the architectonic transit point, or barriers that both separate and connect two places or two characters.[24] The film begins with an opening door and Niccolò's movement towards the inside; it also ends with the man opening a door and then extending his gaze outside a window. This double-directorial choice is another element that underlines Niccolò's continuous circuitous movement around an absent centre, and both the circularity and liminality of the film itself. Architecturally speaking, liminal places are doorways, windows, stairways, hallways and corridors. All these elements are traditionally part of Antonioni's visual language, and can also be found in this film. Mirrors and reflective surfaces appear in both interior and exterior settings; stairs have a significant visual and symbolic impact, and are visible at the beginning, middle and end of the film in Niccolò's building, as well in the emotional encounter between Mavi and her father. Together with doors and windows, they support Antonioni in defining the character's psychology. In the case of Ida, for instance, they have rational implications, while for Mavi they are connected to her irrationality and emotions.[25]

Labyrinthine corridors are another feature of Niccolò's space. Once he reached his apartment, he realises that he is not able to turn off the alarm of his own door, as he forgot his key fob; later on, he is literally uncomfortable in his own space, and moves frenetically from one room to the other, as his telephone rings throughout the night. The camera keeps following his movements and reveals the composition of the very filled space, furniture

[24] Kelly, pp. 37–43.
[25] Antonioni, 'L'école des femmes', *Positif*, 263 (January 1983), 28–29.

and interior design. After a few minutes, the camera stops and stays in the studio, revealing the serpentine corridors, as well as the elegant details of the fixtures and the floor (Fig. 39).

Fig. 39: screen grab from *Identificazione*. View of the serpentine composition of the house from Niccolò's studio.

A sequence of open doors in the centre of the frame highlights the rigid geometry of the house, and gives the viewer a brief glance into other corners and the hallway leading to the master bedroom. As the image above shows, this environment looks anonymous and middle class; it may be possible to sense the emotional detachment, previously suggested by Niccolò's movements and words about it.[26]

However, in Fig. 39 there are two objects of the interior design to be considered. First, the small *natura morta* engraving in the top right corner by Giorgio Morandi, one of Italy's modern masters and most appreciated painters by Antonioni.[27] Inserting Morandi's painting in *Identificazione* hints

[26] Unable to open the door, Niccolò complains about the presence of a burglar alarm installed by his ex-wife; moreover, near midway the film, he tells Ida that his ex-wife decorated their house.

[27] One of Morandi's still lifes (*Natura morta*, 1960, oil on canvas, cm 30x35, now at the Museo Morandi, Bologna) was included in the setting of *La notte*, and letters from the painter to the director have been found in the Antonioni's Archive in Ferrara. On Antonioni/Morandi's relationship, see the recent study by Benci, "'All that is behind

to Niccolò's sophisticated and modern taste, and also establishes a further connection between Antonioni and the character. Second, the Winchester-style white leather armchair positioned in the lower frame: apart from the case of this particular angle, during the whole film the armchair will be seen between the window and the desk, which is the space where Niccolò's photo board is positioned. Identifying these details of the furniture gives insight on Antonioni's fine work in set-designing and it would be a mistake to consider them as just objects.

Finally, Niccolò oscillates between the inside (his studio) and the outside (social reality). Together with the first and the final scenes, he is presented alone in his studio several times, usually searching for something (i.e. the stamps for his nephew), looking at the sky, reflecting on his work (i.e. the scripts, the *International Herald Tribune* articles) and collecting female photographs. When the loneliness of his studio is no longer enough, he decides to go beyond Rome and arrives in Venice, the only external place where he properly fits. This location is ideal for the character, as he is depicted as a lonely intellectual, and thus he seems to be in control of himself exclusively in moments of solitude.

There is undoubtedly a strong sense of the void pervading the entire film, which reaches its peak in this culminating sequence in Venice. The small trip on the lagoon evokes memories of romantic pictorial images, and acts as a counterpoint to the earlier fog scene starring Niccolò and Mavi. Narratively, it runs up to the end of the love relationship with Ida, after the woman's revelation of her pregnancy by another man (Fig. 40). The setting in Fig. 40 does not show any landmark elements that might help the viewer to locate it geographically. Instead, it mirrors Niccolò's personal disorientation and its value lies in its symbolic meaning more than in its geographic description.

colour":'.

Fig. 40: screen grab from *Identificazione*. Ida and Niccolò at the Venetian lagoon.

It is winter, the melancholic seascape is deserted and a cold colour palette spans grey, light blue and pink. This is perhaps one of the few scenes of this film in which the overall setting has a strong symbolic potentiality, and may suggest a quiet dialogue with Antonioni's earlier works.[28]

Along these lines, there are further Antonioni's trademarks during this exterior scene. In terms of camera movements, the camera takes a wide aerial shot of the landscape and then introduces the boat coming from the left; the two characters are alone, but never lost, in the vastness of the seascape and detached from the rest of the world. Also, there are both the same colours and feelings of hopeless and sadness of the waterscapes depicted in the earlier black and white works *Gente del Po* or *Il grido*. However, compared to *Il deserto rosso,* for instance, Ida and Niccolò are not oppressed or particularly influenced by this emotional desert; rather they share with it the same state of loneliness. In truth, while *Il deserto rosso* focuses on the dialogue between the individual and the industrial landscape

[28] As if he felt the urgency to justify the choice of the place, Niccolò explains to Ida that this is an 'illness, a professional mind-set searching for places such this'. This sentence may also be valid for Antonioni's himself. As scholar Nowell-Smith discussed in his essay on Antonioni's 'climatescapes' at the 2012 Ferrara conference, during his career the director has demonstrated a predilection for cold climates, foggy and humid, as well as for deserted locations.

of Ravenna, *Identificazione* looks at the urban and rural spatiality as the background. Antonioni's focal point is the character, rather than the landscape or the setting.

In this sense, Niccolò emerges as the main point of view of the film. And, as the main *gaze*. Together with being decentred, he is portrayed as incapable of engaging with any sort of long-term relationship, meaning both professional and personal. His personal space, described as abstract and transitory, mirrors his individualistic and empty condition. Consequently, his   and the viewer's   gaze upon women will be fragmentary and distorted by his own expectations.

4.3   The female object: all women, only women

Women, their behaviour and feelings, are certainly the main aspect of social reality that Antonioni is registering in *Identificazione*. Whereas he is not attempting to offer his viewers a comprehensive portrait of the contemporary woman, he uses different female figures to express some of the feelings or aspects rising from the Italian social landscape. These aspects include female/male domestic dynamics and gender roles, and a growing inclusion of both hetero and homoeroticism. All of this is filtered by lead characters such as Mavi and Ida, and secondary characters such as Niccolò's sister and the girl at the swimming pool. The title of the film, *Identification of a Woman,* indicates to the ideal viewer the subject of both investigation and process of identification, as well as it hints to the presence of Antoniennui hallmarks.

In the plot, following the end of his love relationship with Mavi, Niccolò enters a state of confusion as is not able to concentrate clearly on his work as before. In the novel, Antonioni writes: 'Tutte donne. Solo donne. Da quando [Niccolò] ha scelto come protagonista del suo film una

figura femminile, non vede altro.'[29] While Niccolò is mentally and physically surrounded by women in his familiar life, on the streets and at parties, he does not have a clear vision of the female character he is hunting for his new film and confuses the real women he meets in his life with the ones of his imagination and photo board.[30] The mythical figure of Brooks is one of these female images and, unlike Nadia's ordinariness, she represents the ideal and unreachable woman. The selection of this icon among all the other images on the board reinforces Antonioni's interpretative work on the visual and popular language of his time.[31] Moreover, Antonioni makes a homage to this Hollywood silent cinema actress at least two in other occasions: firstly, when he chooses Brooks' unequivocal hairstyle for Luisa Ranieri in *Al di là*; and secondly, in the way the director styles Lucia Bosè in the early film *Cronaca di un amore,* emphasising the unique and libertine spirit of that 1950s woman.

The way Niccolò stares at her photograph in the following frame (Fig. 41), as well as its privileged position on the windowpane, implies she is *the* simulacrum with whom the man is establishing a silent dialogue. 'Io vorrei stare zitto con una donna. Insomma, poter avere con lei un tipo di rapporto come con la natura', the man tells his friend in a previous scene.[32] Only with

[29] Antonioni, 'Il racconto', in *Identificazione*, p. 36.
[30] Antonioni, 'Ten questions', in *The Architecture*, pp. 226 229.
[31] Brooks was a well-known actress in the 1920s, who disappeared from stardom a couple of decades later, and died in 1985. As Robert Farmer recalls, her figure was successfully revisited between 1956 and 1978, after promotional work led by Brooks herself, who published a series of articles in film journals such as *Objectif, Sight and Sound,* and *Positif.*[31] Following Brooks' own articles, *Louise Brooks: Portrait d'une Anti-Star* (the first book about her work) was released in France in 1977. This book was produced with the actress' cooperation, and was translated and published in English in 1986. In 1979, theatre critic and writer Kenneth Tynan shed more light on Brooks' personal and professional life. See Kenneth Tynan, 'The Girl in the Black Helmet', *The New Yorker,* 11 June 1979, pp. 45-48; republished in *The New Yorker* <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1979/06/11/1979_06_11_045_TNY_CARDS_000326353> [accessed 10 July 2014]. Moreover, in 1989 Barry Paris published her comprehensive biography. Finally, the comic artist Guido Crepax was inspired by her figure to draw his most famous character *Valentina* in 1965, and film director Marco Tullio Giordana showed extracts from her work as an actress in the 1980 film *Maledetti vi amerò.*
[32] Antonioni, 'La sceneggiatura', in *Identificazione*, p. 99.

this female icon, which is outside the real world, is truly able to establish such a relationship.

Fig. 41: screen grab from *Identificazione*. Niccolò alone contemplating Louise Brooks' portrait.

A few moments before the action in Fig. 41, a lento pianoforte begins in the background; Niccolò tapes the photograph to the windowpane and sits in his armchair to contemplate it. Moments later, the camera zooms in on the photograph, framing it exactly in the centre of the glass, and suggesting that the actress' face is clearly the focus of both the director and viewer's attention. Overall, the visual and sound elements of such a composition emphasise the melancholic mood of the character, as well as his disorientation on his love journey. In this sense, music is particularly relevant as it introduces a stylistic deviation from Antonioni's early film production. As will be developed further in the discussion, Niccolò is frequently seen turning on the radio in his apartment, and music often invades, and literally comments on, the whole scene.

At a narrative level, the scene represented in Fig. 41 marks the passage from the love story with Mavi to another one with Ida. Similarly to Brooks, Mavi is characterised by a sexually liberated personality, scandalous, charming and anti-conventional. At this point in the story, Niccolò is still

searching for a female figure for his next film, and both his personal and professional investigations seem to reach a unified identity exclusively in the portrait of Brooks.

4.3.1 Intimacy

Identificazione is not the first Antonioni's film to handle erotic content, but it represents the first time in which the director tackles this issue with accentuated realism, denying any attempt at poetic abstraction. The language used by the characters is explicit and often vulgar, like for instance 'dov'è il tuo letto?', 'l'unico problema è che non si poteva scopare'; sexual activities and private moments are also openly visible to the viewer (i.e. Ida in the toilet). Thanks to the inclusion of these elements, *Identificazione* mirrors the new popular language of Italian people, and the progressive decrease of sexual taboos in the country. In this sense, the film takes account of the changes in the national normative concerning gender relations.

As the result of the process of changes initiated in the 1960s and culminated at the end of the 1970s, in Italy the structure of the traditional family started to transform itself, and many steps were taken towards women's parity and sexual privileges. At the level of law and norms, despite the backward direction of the Catholic Church and the violent anti-divorce campaign of the Christian Democratic government of that time, the 1974 referendum confirmed the legislation to be in favour of divorce, and the 1975 Reform Law on Jurisdiction on the Family established the equality of the couple.[33] In addition, the legislation of 9 December 1977 affirmed equal rights for women at work and condemned any sexual assaults against them.

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[33] For more information, see: Cottino-Jones, 'The Sexual Power Game and its Impact on Women and Men in the Films of the 1970s', in *Women, Desire and Power*, pp. 141 186; Luisa Passerini, 'Gender Relations', in *Italian Cultural Studies. An Introduction,* ed. by Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 144 159; Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943 - 1980* (London: Penguin, 1990); Zygmunt Baranski and Lumley, eds., *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy* (London: The McMillan Press, 1990).

In 1981 the Italians were asked to vote on abortion, and this right was eventually confirmed and regulated within a short time.[34] This was just the beginning of a long process of emancipation, leading to a new vision of family and of relational dynamics between the two sexes. As critic Luisa Passerini outlines in Forgacs and Lumley's seminal publication *Italian Cultural Studies*, homosexuality started to be a heated topic of discussion in Italy too. Homosexual groups, such as *Fuori* (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Italiano) for instance, were founded across the country and, similarly to the feminism movements, showed a collective-based structure.[35] Through their publications, these groups started to promote glorification of the body, as well as liberalisation of sexual taboos and ultimately embarked upon a criticism of the bourgeois family and reactionary practices.[36]

These sociological aspects have contributed in shaping both visual and content landscape of *Identificazione,* as it may be argued that Antonioni makes precise aesthetic choices reflecting the *air du temps.*[37] Moreover, in connection to this, Pierre Sorlin points out peculiar traits of television-style films in more than one place in *Identificazione*. Particularly, he finds some parallels in the weakness of the story, the awkwardness of some episodes, 'the informality' of the film and the large use of close-ups.[38] He explains that, within a context where television was levelling both languages and themes, close-ups were generally associated with the language of the daily Latin American soap operas as an instrument to convey pathos and dramatic moments.[39] Additionally, Antonioni portrays characters on the margins of common morality, shows explicit sexual scenes without any filters, and close-ups of intimate body parts. He does not dematerialise reality through

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[34] Passerini, p. 146.

[35] Some of the lesbian groups and initiatives happening in the 1980s are the following: the groups Linea Lesbica (Florence, 1981) and Coordinamento Lesbiche Italiane (Turin, 1981), and the International Conference of Lesbianism (Turin, 1981). For more information see Cottino-Jones, 'The Sexual Power Game', p. 239.

[36] Passerini.

[37] Casetti.

[38] Pierre Sorlin, 'Fifth generation: the World in the Box', in *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 144   159 (p. 157).

[39] Ibid.

the alteration of colours, as he did in his previous films. Rather, he renders the coldness of true colours with tones of greys, light blues, acid greens and pinks.

Among the three main female characters, Niccolò's sister, Carla, helps Antonioni to contextualise the man within a personal and familiar sphere, and to provide an inward-looking dimension to the film. She works as a gynaecologist, she has a son of about nine years of age and she seems to be balancing her double role of a mother and a professional. She usually dresses modestly, with no visible make-up and her hair twisted behind her head in an old-fashioned style. Presumably older than her brother, she is the motherly figure in his life and shows a protective and often judgemental attitude towards him. Although she is often mentioned, she takes part in three scenes only. The first episode is set up in her ambulatory and introduces to the first telephonic conversation between Mavi and Niccolò; the second scene is again set up in the woman's studio, where she announces to his brother that someone else has taken the directorial job she was expecting to get next; and in the third and last scene, Carla pays a visit to her brother with her son. Overall, these three episodes play a key role in the development of the story, and help the viewer to clarify obscures passages of the film.

After the break-up with Mavi (Fig. 41), Niccolò receives a visit from his sister and nephew Lucio at home. The child finally gets the stamps Niccolò has promised to him; concurrently, the two adults sit silently at a table in the living room; their minds are elsewhere, seeing that Carla is still hurt about missing out on the work promotion, and Niccolò keeps thinking about Mavi. During their brief dialogue, the camera remains fixed on the woman's head and shoulder; in the moment shown in Fig. 42, she realises about the end of her brother and Mavi's relationship and expresses her disappointment by slightly moving her head down and closing her eyes. The slow pace and low volume of Carla's words, Niccolò's voice out of frame and the intimate atmosphere encompassing the entire sequence amplify the

pathos. Similar to what happens in the television language of soap operas, this is a confrontational, emotional and revelatory moment in the narration, which may even be labelled the *moment of truth*, when both the character and spectator receive confirmation of the end of the main intricate love affair.

Fig. 42: screen grab from *Identificazione*. Close-up of Carla, Niccolò's sister, in conversation with her brother.

While in earlier Antonioni's films the drama was evoked and exclusively expressed through colours, sounds and silences, in *Identificazione* there is a multiplication of moments when verbal confrontation between two characters enhances the tension for the viewer and explains certain passages.

Another episode of this kind, when the pathetic level reaches its maximum, still occurs at the end of Niccolò's relation with Mavi. The scene is set at night, in the countryside villa outside Rome, where Mavi and Niccolò escape from the preoccupations of their daily routine, and from the mysterious man who is following them. Once they have entered the cold living room, Niccolò leans down to light the fire, and there, on his knees, looks at the woman. He is visibly moved and confesses his warm feelings for her, saying 'Ti voglio bene' (Fig. 43). However, the man is unable to feel love,

or even to define it, and consequently to express it; he is not able to emotionally provide for his woman and to give himself to her unconditionally. The position of his body, as shown in Fig. 43, underlines both this concept and the unbalanced relation between the two characters. Mavi's shoulder in the foreground, together with the white fireplace jamb, amplifies the distance from the man and suggests a switch in the traditional male/dominating   female/dominated environment. In the frame above, while Niccolò is conceptually and physically framed by his own space and words, Mavi is in control of herself and her body.
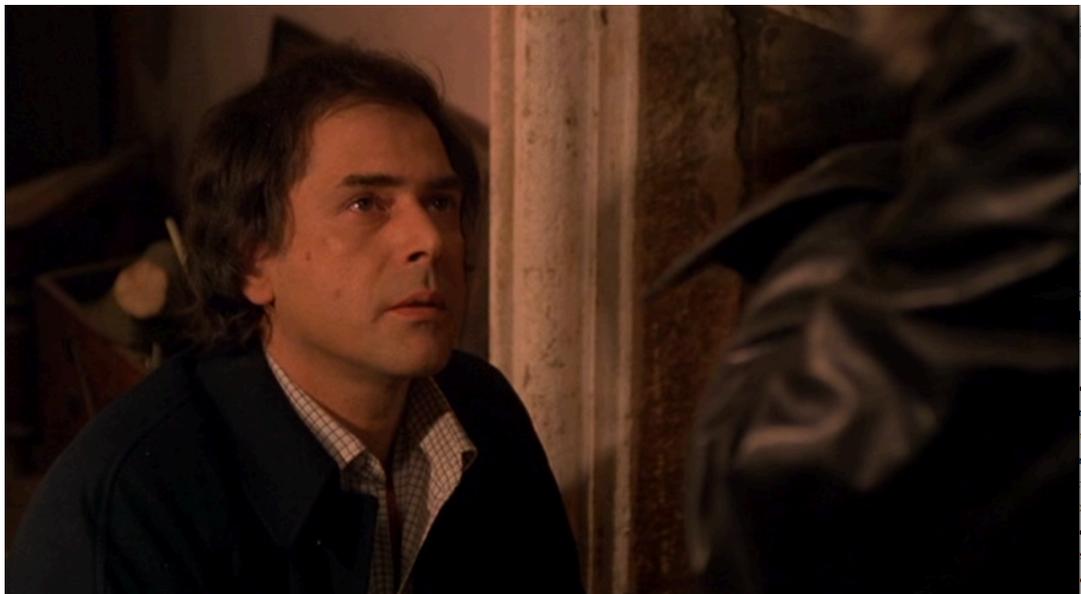
Fig. 43: screen grab from *Identificazione.* Niccolò confesses his feelings to Mavi.

Parallel to what happens in the film, in the national normative Italian women's behaviour has now evolved: they are economically independent from their partners, focused on their career, and they are not afraid of making morally inconvenient decisions, including openly admitting their sexual preferences or raising a child by themselves.

After the man's love confession, Mavi becomes nervous and expresses her doubts about the sincerity of his feelings for her. She fears the man, ready to fight against him, and assumes a childish behavior. Taking off her sweater, despite the freezing temperature, is a childish gesture, yet it

symbolises her autonomy from and rebellion to the man's protection. She is also extremely lucid and her words imply the forthcoming end of their relationship and her disappearance from the narration.[40] During the whole dialogue, until the moment of Mavi's passionate jump into Niccolò's arms, a slow piano track plays in the background, setting the tone of the scene and highlighting feelings of melancholia and nostalgia. A few seconds later, the camera pans left. Leaving the characters out of frame, the camera stops in front of the door of the master bedroom and, through a crossfade, lets the spectator look inside the room (Fig. 44, below).

The music changes and suggests the forthcoming events in the narration before the images. The shot stays the same, but the joyfulness and andante tempo of the soundtrack encompass the possibility of a newly re-discovered passion between the two characters and presumably a lovemaking scene.

Fig. 44: screen grab from *Identificazione.* Nocturnal composition of the villa.

Visually speaking, the composition of this static shot — a central perspective with a dramatic chiaroscuro — is part of Antonioni's visual formality and an

[40] Mavi tells Niccolò: 'mi fai paura', 'non voglio più restare qui', 'la vita che facciamo da un paio di mesi è provvisoria per tutti e due'.

homage to the European painting tradition of the XVII century, including the *masters of light* Caravaggio, Georges de La Tour and those of the Flemish School. Antonioni re-traces one of these artists' most effective ways to achieve pictorial depth within domestic settings. He draws out a see-through doorway, allowing the spectator to view beyond the room in the foreground and bring his/her imagination to the partially visible space of the bedroom in the background. The vanishing points are clearly marked and merge in the focal point, which is the bedside lamp in the centre of the composition. The use of lighting, including two sources, natural from the window and artificial from the lamp, is à la Caravaggio, and therefore both dramatic and realist. Overall, the contrast lamp-lighted   night, the simplicity of the wooden furniture and the decadence of the whole villa produce an effect of intimacy and mystery.

Finally, the last scene encompassing a high intimate value and a change in female representation stars Ida visiting Niccolò's house for the first time. Like Carla, Ida is an independent woman. She drives a scooter, lives by herself in the countryside just outside Rome and, above all, is career-focused. Her acting profession foreshadows her personality, as underscored by the order of events in the story. Her image on a flyer of a theatrical play appears in the story before her physical person; then, the viewer sees her running to get ready to act, and finally coming out of the Theatre Parnaso in normal clothes. As part of the working middle-class, Ida has a different mentality from Mavi: while the latter is linked to body issues, Ida is part of a more intellectual sphere. She is warm and open, rational, practical and her actions always follow a clear purpose in her mind. Her first visit to Niccolò's house happens immediately after their first meeting. Antonioni's camera follows closely the woman's passage from the door, to the window in the hallway and to the man's studio, as represented in Figs. 45 and 46 that follow.

Once she has entered the house, Ida goes directly to the window to look outside. She enters the frame from the left, the camera pans right and

tracks her until she stops in front of a window and stares at the view of Rome (Fig. 45). As the image below shows, the camera frames Ida's upper body against a flat surface, as in a geometrical composition, defined by the black curtain and the white window frame. A few moments later, Niccolò enters the frame from the right and attempts to kiss Ida, but she creates a distance and rapidly moves into another room.

Fig. 45: screen grab from *Identificazione*. Ida in Niccolò's house for the first time.

Fig. 46: screen grab from *Identificazione*. Ida in Niccolò's studio, sitting on the windowpane.

While the camera lingers on the outside view for a few more seconds, she moves towards the living room and finally ends up in front of the window in the man's studio, which has been argued as the emotional and professional nucleus of Niccolò (Fig. 46). During this very last passage, Antonioni's camera follows the woman going inside the room and settles on the background. Niccolò's body enters the mid-ground and maintains his distance from the woman. More than in other scenes, there is a strict correspondence between Niccolò's body language and the camera. The man follows her, stays close to her body and attempts to close it in a corner, where instead she runs, moves, gets some distance and eventually stops. The use of *temps morts* is fully denied in this sequence, as the main focus of investigation is not the space, rather the woman's actions, body and emotional reactions to the man.[41] Once again, a see-through doorway establishes the presence of the central perspective. The focus of the image is the small rectangular window, which frames Ida's figure, and it is a position emphasised by Niccolò's hand gesture. As elsewhere in Antonioni's film, here there are several layers between the viewer and the central focus: the white door jamb, Niccolò's gesture, the two doors in the hallway and, of course, the camera lens.

While Fig. 45 is an over-the-shoulder medium shot of the woman, the second still in Fig. 46 is a frontal long shot. The setting, the frame and the camera angles in both images are an integral part of Antonioni's cinema, as well as his traditional way to insert women into the space. Sarah Carey and Thomas Harrison's article is particularly helpful about this matter. Within a critical reflection on framing and mise-en-scene, elements of liminality, marginality and spatial instability, they re-emphasise Antonioni's recurrent choice of putting a character close to a window, or in the act of looking

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[41] When talking about this matter in an interview in 1982, Antonioni confirmed that the focus of *Identificazione* is on characters rather than on visual setting: 'If there is any visual beauty, then it's due to the truth value of the emotions', the director affirmed. See Antonioni, 'Identification of a woman', interviewed by Nicole Cornuz-Longlois and Jean-Dominique Bauby, in *The Architecture*, pp. 361–364 (p. 361).

outside, or framed by a door in the films of the 1960s.[42] In their view, 'a window signals to a situation to be extended by the narrative'.[43] In *L'avventura* – the film discussed by the critics Anna's gaze towards Claudia from Sandro's apartment at the beginning of the film suggests 'the [forthcoming] substitution of one woman in this relationship for another'.[44] In *Identificazione* this extension involves Ida's intrusion into both Niccolò's private space and obsessive search for the perfect female identity.

In light of the sequences discussed above, a visual and conceptual evolution of the intimate dynamics among the characters from the films of the 1960s may be suggested. The first element consists in the woman's relationship with the male environment. In *Blow-Up* the Girl feels threatened by the oppressive architectural geometry in Thomas's studio: in *Identificazione,* women react and leave, and Ida feels comfortable with exploring Niccolò's house, looking at the furniture, asking him questions about his work and avoiding his sexual advances. Moreover, Carla does not have the instruments to fight her battle, but she is perfectly aware of her rights; Mavi fights for what she wants and eventually leaves the man. The relationship man-woman has changed and the camera movements underline it. The second element is the use of the soundtrack. *Identificazione* is a more verbose film than earlier films: words and music have taken the place of silence, and help the viewer to understand the passages and turning points of the narrative. In the last example starring Ida, for instance, as the sequence begins and Niccolò opens the door, an acoustic guitar starts playing and contributes to the overall relaxing spirit of the scene, by both filling the silence between the characters and working as a background to their dialogue. Compared to earlier films, where music had an independent yet subtle meaning, in *Identificazione* it appears to be particularly intrusive in

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[42] Thomas Harrison and Sarah Carey, 'The World Outside the Window', *Italian Culture*, 29.1 (2011), 37-51.
[43] Ibid., p. 48.
[44] Ibid., p. 44.

intimate scenes. It accompanies and defines the tone of the images, but also as it makes its presence extremely noticeable.[45]

4.3.2 The naked body

In Antonioni's cinema the portrayal of sex does not imply pornography; rather it forms the basis of any kind of relationship. In *Blow-Up,* two young girls act in a sexually provocative way in front of Thomas, and eventually let him take their clothes off. The resulting scene is daring and fresh and part of a context such as that of a fashion photographer's studio in London in the 1960s. Naked bodies in *Zabriskie Point* become part of the sand and the whole rocky landscape: their laughter, movements and erotic acts never reach the point of being vulgar; rather they express youth, freedom and playful love. The explicitness of the sexual scenes in *Identificazione* definitely plays an incisive role in capturing the viewer's attention and not surprisingly Daniela Silverio's (Mavi) eroticism is one of the most discussed performances of the film.

This film commences a new path that Antonioni will take for the later works *Al di là* and *Il filo,* according to which the naked body is part of the everyday imaginary, and the privacy of the characters is exposed with casualty and explicitness. However, sex still implies a quest for feelings and comprehension, and it is the ultimate instrument of love. In *Identificazione,* the camera enters the characters' private and intimate spheres, showing hidden aspects of people's daily routine. Examples of this intrusion may be found in the scenes set in Niccolò and Ida's bathrooms, where the viewer spots Mavi and Ida looking at their skin imperfections, sitting on the toilet, and looking at themselves in the mirror. One of these episodes occurs in

[45] Asked by Mario Verdone in 1961 about the contribution that music should make to a film, Antonioni answered: 'I must also say that I am personally very reluctant to use music in my films, for the simple reason that I prefer to work in a dry manner, to say things with the least means possible. And music is an additional means. I have too much faith in the efficacy, the value, the force, the suggestiveness of the image to believe that the image cannot do without music.' See, Antonioni, 'A talk', in *The Architecture,* p. 42.

Ida's apartment (Fig. 47). In the following Fig. 47, Antonioni creates a see-through doorway and elects the naked figure of Ida sitting on the toilet as the focal point of the vanishing lines. As happens also in previous Figs. 44 and 46, this is one of Antonioni's trademarks of framing the body and implicates a distance between the spectator and the focus, but also a feeling of voyeurism and mystery.

Fig. 47: screen grab from *Identificazione*. A private and intimate moment: Ida in her bathroom.

In *Identificazione,* this mystery is identified by the female universe, sensuality and intimacy. Yet less evident than in the two previous frames, Antonioni composes the shot in Fig. 47 following the rules of chiaroscuro, in which the source of light is coming from the little bathroom window above Ida's head. In spite of the setting being a generic bathroom, Antonioni elevates such space to a higher level, in which a classical formality of the composition is not retained. Entering private and usually hidden moment responds to the director's willingness go beyond the traditional representation of a romantic story, and encapsulates real couple dynamics as they are. In truth, the choice of shooting this scene has a relevant, yet subtle, narrative meaning. Although it is not immediate to the

spectator, Ida is checking to see if her period has started.[46] As if he were testing the viewer' level of attention, Antonioni gives him/her a hint about the forthcoming events and anticipates the woman's future pregnancy. Ida's simple gesture implies her being confident in being naked, in the bathroom with the door open in front of her recently-met lover, and her desire for a family.

The design of Ida's space is the last element to take into consideration, as it mirrors her young and intellectual personality. While Niccolò's house is painted white from the walls to the doors, the woman's house has pastel colours and soft country-style decorations. Colours span pink on the walls, light brown on the doors and blue light in the bathroom. Furthermore, on the left hand wall, Antonioni inserts an unframed and original yellow poster of Victor Cavallo's theatrical play *L'altro amore*, which had been showing in Roman theatres since December 1979. According to a review by journalist Carlo Infante, the play focused on the troubled relationship between a very stereotypical Roman uncouth and aggressive man ('coatto e romanista') and three different types of women, indicated as 'la mora apollinea, la rossa vamp e la bionda spigolosa'.[47] Acknowledging the subject and nature of this theatrical play is relevant because it is an element of characterisation of Ida's space; it echoes the social dynamics included in *Identificazione*; and it informs the viewer that Daniela Silverio was one of the three actresses. Eventually, this poster is an additional element that indicates the historical and intellectual context of the film, and may suggest that Antonioni investigates the reality of his characters as much as the reality of the actors playing such characters.[48]

In the same way the camera penetrates the characters' intimacy, it captures their unveiled naked bodies and closely looks at their sexual acts.

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[46] This passage is explained in the *novel of the film.*
[47] Carlo Infante, 'Il sorco   situazionista e le tre belle', *Lotta Continua,* 12 January 1980, p. 13.
[48] In Niccolò's house, it is possible to spot a large poster of *La Traviata,* another play loved by Antonioni, and another story about the many difficulties and incomprehensions in a love relationship.

In the film, sex is represented explicitly, through the use of extreme nudity and bold camera angles; narratively, through verbal allusions. In the first case, there are three scenes that are worth recalling, which happen in the first part of the film, and refer to Niccolò and Mavi's lovemaking acts. The first one corresponds to their first sexual encounter, when their impetuous movements introduce their forthcoming love relationship. In this scene, the camera opts for medium shots and close-ups, positioning the characters in the centre-frame and allowing the spectator close to their acts of pleasure. The second sex scene is set in Niccolò's bedroom and shows a sequence of erotic positions (Fig. 48). In the third scene, Niccolò and Mavi are filmed in a long shot lying beside each other, playing under a white bed sheet.

As mentioned, *Identificazione* inaugurates Antonioni's visual exploration of naked bodies and explicit acts of pleasure, which will be continued in the following *Al di là* and *Il filo*.

Fig. 48: screen grab from *Identificazione*. Erotic scene with Mavi and Niccolò, at the man's house: close-up of the woman's body.

In the scene, which Fig. 49 is taken from, the music acts as a commentary of the lovers' movements and adds soft and fluid feelings to the atmosphere. The woman receives pleasure from Niccolò, who touches, kisses and excites all the sensitive parts of her body. Consequently the camera closes in on her

legs, genitalia, breasts, hands and facial expressions. The female body is explored and fragmented, and the camera captures every single reaction and vocal moan. Here the identification process of the woman is translated in her comprehensive femininity, in the way she moves her hands and searches for the source of her love and pleasure. For the first time in Antonioni's career, there are no filters or barriers between the spectator and the bodies. The soft nuances of the light in the room, emphasised by the bright white colour of the bed sheets, increase the poetic pathos of the scene, denying any impression of vulgarity and hard pornography. Antonioni does not show this moment of high eroticism to impress the spectator, rather he wants to offer him the most complete and realistic picture of the love story.

Furthermore, as shown in the below images in Figs. 49 and 50, in the two later films the director opts for a similar bodily exploration.

Fig. 49: screen grab from *Al di là*. Carmen and Silvano in the woman's bedroom; close-up of the man's hand on her body.

As mentioned in the previous section, the first story of *Al di là* tells the impossible love story of two young Silvano and Carmen, who casually meet under one of the "portici" in Ferrara; met again a few time later, and

attracted to each other, they almost make love in the girl's apartment. In the scene above, the gesture of man's hand moving slowly above Carmen's body entails an aspiration for the perfection of a physical and emotional love relationship (Fig. 49).[49] Contrary to what happens in *Identificazione,* Silvano's hand does not touch the body of the woman, as he decides to keep the contact between them at the level of hope and imagination. The young man lives inside his passion and mental expectations towards a love that he will never consume, despite the woman's mutual attraction. As underlined by the central position in the frame, the hand is the protagonist of the whole scene. Instead of following the little movement of the woman's body, the camera lets this hand indicate the way to explore her.

In *Il filo,* similar to *Identificazione*, the female body is inspected closely, and each of her parts is shown without any filter. This scene of unfulfilled physical pleasure entails an even higher value of eroticism than the one in *Identificazione,* as it leaves more imaginative options open to the viewer. Nothing instead is left to the imagination, although, also in this case the actual sexual penetration is not shown.[50] For instance, the lovemaking scene featuring Linda and Christopher and represented in Fig. 50 follows the woman's masturbation scene on her bed, and ends with a cut evoking the woman's orgasm. It begins with the man's provocative, yet trivial, question to the the-already-naked woman, 'Cosa succede se mi sdraio anche io?'; the

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[49] Recalling the content of *Al di là delle nuvole,* in this film Antonioni works on some relational issues through the narration of four different love stories. The first story includes the display of lyric eroticism, which is searched for and dreamt of by the two protagonists, Carmen and Silvano, but which is never consummated. In the second story, Antonioni portrays explicit and casual sexuality, in which the female body becomes the focus of both the camera and character (setting in Portofino, *La ragazza, il delitto*). Then, the third story shows sex as an instrument used by a woman to keep her man and his consequent inability to leave her (*Non provare a cercarmi*); and finally, the fourth story is a tale of a young man who trails a woman to church, and eventually falls more in love with her the more inaccessible she makes herself. Overall, in spite of the abundance of dialogues, the impact of these stories is not in the words, but rather in the visual intensity of looks, gestures, spiritual and erotic allusions.

[50] The film tells about a young couple in crisis (Christopher and Cloe), living somewhere in Tuscany, who are not able to really communicate with each other and have an unhealthy sexual life. After having casually spotted two naked girls bathing at a waterfall, they silently have lunch at a restaurant. There, Christopher and Cloe notice an attractive girl (Linda). Successively, the man decides to visit her at her tower house, and make love to her.

woman answers, 'ti dico il mio nome'. The camera cuts and frames the woman's upper body, revealing that she is smiling and experiencing pleasure thanks to the man's actions towards her genitalia out of frame.

Fig. 5o: screen grab from *Il filo.* Close-up of Linda in the act of licking Christopher's mouth and face.

The static camera lingers on the woman and, as shown in the image above, it will focus exclusively on the two lovers' upper bodies and faces through the use of close-ups and extreme close-ups. The music plays in the background and accompanies the female character's laughers and moans. Unlike the encounter between Silvano and Carmen in *Al di là,* Christopher and Linda's sexual act is carefree, joyful and does not imply any sentimental or intellectual implications between the two. Like in *Identificazione,* sex is explicit and carnal, and eroticism is amplified by the use of music.

Identificazione, Al di là and *Il filo* are distant from Antonioni's earlier films because of their sexually explicit content and detailed analysis of female nudity. However, they tackle the earlier issues of incommunicability between the couple and show an expansion in the director's use of the body. Contrary to the Hollywood paradigm of the happy ending in a female-male relationship, the three films imply the impossibility of such closure by choosing an open ending for the narration. In *Identificazione* Niccolò

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abandons any attempts to find his ideal woman; in the story of Carmen and Silvano, they prefer not to consummate their love, rather to live it in their imagination; and in *Il filo,* Christopher is in Paris, while Linda and Cloe casually meet naked on the beach. This last-mentioned finale, perhaps suggesting a forthcoming lesbian sexual encounter, is one of the most mysterious final choices in Antonioni's cinema, but it is grounded on the idea of irreconcilability between the two sexes. These two women seem instead to have found themselves, first in their loneliness and, then, in one another. Linda and Cloe see each other in a natural space, of which they become part; they are independent of any mental construction or patriarchal dominance of heterosexuality. They are finally free to take off their clothes, to feel the natural elements under their feet and to express their nudity. In other words, they reach the point that none of Antonioni's female characters has ever reached in the past.

Homosexual references and masturbation acts are included in *Identificazione* as well, but concern exclusively the female universe. While for Niccolò, sexual genders are disoriented, for women, such as Mavi or her young friend, they are not. After leaving the man, Mavi decides to move in with a woman, by confirming in his and the viewer's eyes the suspicion about her past lesbian experiences. Earlier in the narration, in his circular search for Mavi, Niccolò ends up at a swimming pool and runs into the girl he met at the Roman soirée.[51] In this brief scene, she remains very evasive towards Niccolò, but she tells him three things: she once slept with Mavi, as a reaction against their male partners, she is not able to truly love anyone and she likes masturbating. In agreement with Pomerance, from their dialogue, both character and viewer receive verbal confirmation that Mavi has had at least one lesbian experience, but it is not very clear how to interpret this information. The girl's lines leave questions unsolved

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[51] In the *novel of the film,* the writer/director sets up the scene in another place and gives the reader a logical explanation for this meeting. According to the plot, Niccolò meets the young girl at one of the usual dinner parties he used to go with Mavi. See Antonioni, 'Il racconto', in *Identificazione*.

regarding Mavi's actual sexual preferences, as well as Niccolò's hopes of winning the woman back.[52] However, these lines indicate the young girl's confidence in answering about her sexual experiences and in naively admitting her love for masturbation; her words reiterate the emotional distance between the two sexes and raise incommunicability issues.[53] Furthermore, the above idea is exposed in the female masturbation scene of *Il filo.* Although the viewer does not see the woman reaching an orgasm, he/she sees Linda wearing nothing but underwear whilst touching and satisfying herself, far from the male gaze. This depiction of female masturbation is overall less provocative than the heterosexual lovemaking scene in this same film, as it is not framed as sexy or intending to attract the male gaze, neither to substitute the sexual union. It is a woman's solo act, occurring in her private and personal space.

These discussed elements are not necessarily Antonioni's political subtle message in support to the new gay and lesbian communities of the 1980s. Rather, this historical context provides Antonioni with a certain freedom to work with bolder images than in the past, using explicit language and showing full frontal nudity. Whilst being all of this, erotic allusions and sexual scenes may be read as Antonioni's representation of the ultimate femininity and female pleasure, reachable without any male intervention. Mavi's words, pronounced in her last encounter with Niccolò, come to mind: 'Ho paura che tu mi rovini la vita'. Mavi is afraid that her feelings for him and their standard relationship would ruin her life by mining her freedom. Escaping from a socially accepted love relationship, even one as libertine as those of Mavi, Linda and Cloe, seems to be the only possible way to access a primordial self.

[52] Pomerance, 'Identificazione'.
[53] The girls tells Niccolò: 'mi piace masturbarmi [...] e se è con una donna è meglio [...] una donna lo fa per farmi piacere, mentre un uomo per dimostrare che è virile'.

4.4 The new filter: Italian pop music vs John Foxx

4.4.1 Brief overview of Antonioni and soundtrack

As well as an evolution in portraying women and female body, in
Identificazione it is possible to identify a change in the choice and use of
music. The overall soundscape of the film, as well as the director's approach
to it, is new in Antonioni's cinema and another factor of dialogue with the
1980s cultural context. As well as the treatment of the female body, this
'Filter' is a deviation from Antonioni's usual way of proceeding, yet there
are many traits in common with the past, such as his comprehensive control
over the scores and his preference for contemporary music. This section will
briefly summarise the role of music in Antonioni's cinema; then, it will
discuss to what extent music has been changed in later films, by continuing
the analysis started in the previous sections. Some of the elements that will
be taken into account will be the overwhelming role of soundtrack in
intimate and lovemaking scenes, as well as the presence of diegetic sources
(the radio in Niccolò's house) and non-diegetic sounds (mood music).
Finally, among the composers used in the film, particular attention will be
given to the Italian singer Gianna Nannini, in relation to the social space,
and to John Foxx, in relation to Niccolò's inner universe.

　　According to Calabretto, music enters Antonioni's overall cinema with
a clear individuality and strength since the very beginning of his career.[54]
András Bálint Kovács discusses the director's minimalist approach to music
and his overall preference for diegetic sources, such as the voices of
characters, the sound of objects and the melodies coming from instruments.
In his opinion, Antonioni uses soundtrack in the opposite way to traditional
cinema. For example, rather than emphasising moments of tension and

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[54] Calabretto, 'Da ragazzo suonavo'.

drama, the musical accompaniment creates a background atmosphere.[55] Music is independent from the images in the sense that, similarly to space, Antonioni manipulates daily noises, sounds and original tracks in order to avoid natural representation and convey a sense of abstraction in reality. The result is a poem created by brief musical excerpts, footsteps and natural elements, of which Antonioni is the only author.

In this regard, many of the film composers he collaborated with during his career, from Giovanni Fusco to the young Herbie Hancock and British band Pink Floyd, have defined their professional relationship with the director as complicated. For instance, Fusco, who scored most of Antonioni's films of the 1950s and 1960s, lamented the excessive number of hours spent in the recording studio, as well as the drastic reduction of his symphonies in the final version of the films. According to him, 'forgetting to be a composer is the first rule for a composer working with Antonioni', whereas the director could only tolerate music if it was strictly motivated by the situation and guidelines.[56] On this matter, Calabretto reports about the exhausting experience that Pink Floyd had when scoring *Zabriskie Point.* According to the band's statement, Antonioni continuously rejected all of their first proposals, complaining that they were too loud or too overwhelming compared to the images, and eventually asked them to re-do the songs over and over again.[57]

Zabriskie Point is part of what Calabretto considers the fourth phase of Antonioni's work on film music and sound. The first phase, including films from *Cronaca di un amore* to *Il grido*, features the collaboration with Fusco and lays the foundations for a new conception of music, by cementing the value of diegetic musical accompaniment. In the second phase, from *L'avventura to L'eclisse*, the collaboration with Fusco evolves. Music becomes

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[55] András Bálint Kovács, 'Sound and Image', in *Screening Modernism: European Cinema 1950-1980* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), pp. 298 302.
[56] Giovanni Fusco, 'Antonioni et la musique', in *Michelangelo Antonioni,* ed. by Pierre Leprohon (Paris: Seghers, 1961), pp. 192 195.
[57] Roger Waters, qtd. in Calabretto, *Antonioni e la musica*, pp. 26 27.

more rarefied, abstract and with a consequent amplification of ambient music made by natural and mechanical noises. A third step is inaugurated by *Il deserto rosso*, which is when the soundtrack becomes an essential part of reading the film. Here, Antonioni introduces Vittorio Gelmetti's electronic music and fuses it with industrial and mechanical noises coming from different locations in the film. The fourth phase, starting with *Blow-Up*, is characterised by the use of contemporary music, as well as by a multiplication of diegetic sources such as radio, live concerts and instruments.

4.4.2 The case of *Identificazione di una donna*

Although *Identificazione* is inserted by Calabretto in the fourth phase of Antonioni's cinema, and shows many elements in common with the included films, its musical universe deviates from this structure. It is geographically and stylistically less circumscribed (from electronic music to Italian pop music) and often works as a commentary of many of the scenes in the film. Antonioni's distinctive sober approach to music is denied in this film, and instead he establishes a tighter relation with the usual practice of sound in Hollywood films.[58] In *Identificazione* musical accompaniment is strictly synchronised with a change in shot; there is an unusual and loud presence of ambient music; songs usually introduce flashbacks and music often enters to literally describe some of the aspects of the film. For instance, the decadent environment of the aristocratic Roman villa is emphasised by Fausto Cigliano's guitar sound; Edoardo Bennato's "L'Isola che non c'è" (a song describing the search for an imaginary island) is in the background of Niccolò travelling alone in search of Mavi across the streets of Rome; and very popular songs by Gianna Nannini, "Come un treno" and

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[58] Calabretto, p. 161-172.

"Vieni ragazzo", introduce and accompany the scene when Niccolò and Mavi walk in the centre city.[59]

As soundtrack of the scenes in the city centre – one of the topoi of Italian urbanism, nucleus of modern life and quintessential meeting point for city dwellers – Antonioni opts for Gianna Nannini's music, which was very popular, yet provocative at the time.[60] After the brief and melancholic dialogue between Niccolò and Carla at the hospital, Antonioni cuts to a medium close-up of a flashy shop window and lets Gianna Nannini's "Come un treno" start playing in the background. More specifically, this is the last strophe of the song, which says: 'e questo stare nella merda bene / quasi quasi sempre in libertà / ma questa sera è un'altra sera'. These lines contribute to insert this sequence in the contemporary reality, and also announce the entrance of Mavi, by referring to her unreliable, unchained and fatalist personality. The volume of the music increases, whilst the camera pans over the woman running towards Niccolò from left to right. The volume, then, decreases during their dialogue in the small shopping centre, and finally completely dissolves by the end of the man's lines.[61]

The few vulgar and simplistic words of Mavi's reaction to Niccolò's news – 'Che inculata' – coincide with the beginning of the second Gianna Nannini's song, "Vieni ragazzo", included in this sequence. The song in the background follows the characters wandering through the Roman shops and along the main street, only to stop upon Mavi's brief emotional breakdown, when she reveals to Niccolò the issues she is having with her natural father. The following cut brings the viewer inside the shopping centre once more, and finally frames the young shop assistant, who was

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Gianna Nannini, born in 1954, is an Italian pop/rock singer, who has now become a symbol of cultural and sexual freedom, and anti-conformism. Her first hit, *California*, was released in 1979, followed by *G.N.* in 1981; she attained Italian and European success with the 1984 album *Fotoromanza*, for which Antonioni made the official video clip. This short video will be discussed in chapter 5 of this dissertation, together with the advert *Renault 9.*

[61] In the dialogue, Niccolò tells Mavi about the abuse of power that his sister Carla is currently coming under, and the reasons why, in his opinion, she did not get the rightful promotion in the hospital.

noticeable earlier in two shots in the background (Fig. 51). The volume of the music rises again ('È un richiamo / è un richiamo', Gianna Nannini sings) and, together with the over-the-shoulder medium close-up of the girl, it suggests a change in mood and focus.
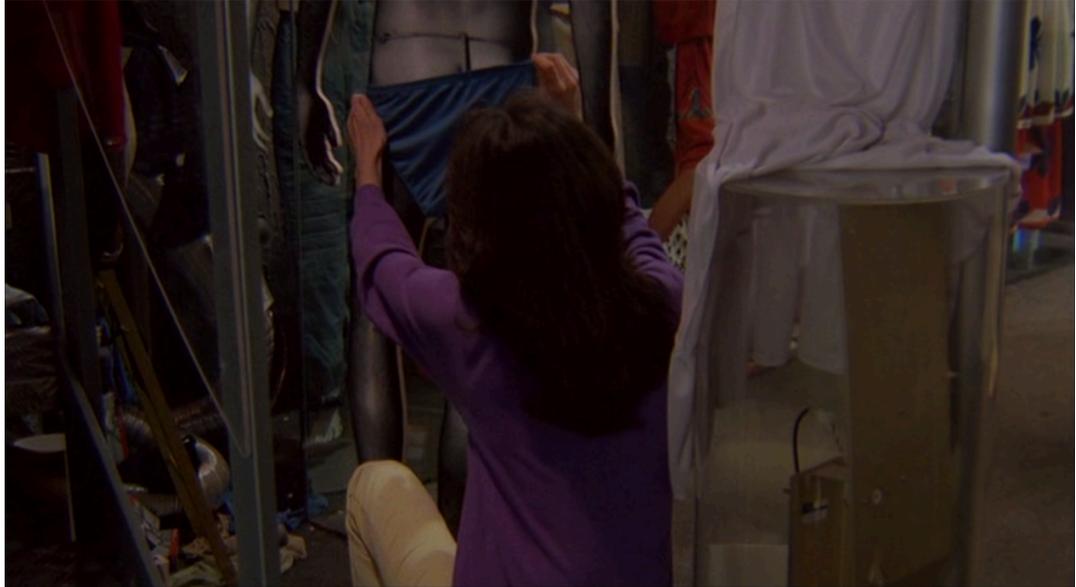
Fig. 51: screen grab from *Identificazione*. A shopping assistant dresses a mannequin, whilst Gianna Nannini's song is playing in the background.

The figurative call that Gianna Nannini is singing about may refer to the shopping assistant's attempts to catch Mavi's attention or, more conceptually, to the call of Eros pervading the whole film. The image in Fig. 51 shows the shop assistant from behind, whilst she is dressing a male mannequin in a pair of blue underpants in her window display. Her purple jumper is perfectly in line and contrasts with the other colours of this scene, such as blue, dark green, red, grey, white and purple. In this case, the purple may be read as a vehicle of a sense of eroticism and of an unchained personality, encompassed by the girl who will touch the mannequin's genitalia to send Mavi a signal.[62] Moreover, the song "Vieni ragazzo" remains

[62] During this scene, there is a silent dialogue between Mavi and the girl: they look at each other, they understand each other and finally they smile to each other. During these brief moments, Mavi tells Niccolò that she met the girl two days before for the first time, when she saw her in the countryside in a car, completely naked with a guy.

beneath the characters' voices for the entire scene, before slowly disappearing with the change in location and time.

Alongside Italian popular music and synthesised scores by XTC, Japan, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark and Tangerine Dreams, the soundtrack of *Identificazione* includes original music by British composer John Foxx, who was internationally known at the time for his electronic, robotic-style tracks.[63] When this film was made, the choice of Foxx was not surprising, if considering Antonioni's interest in electronic solutions, new technologies and science. Foxx is considered as the pioneer of electronic music, and became quite famous in Europe since the 1970s.[64] As stated in the composer's interview for *Ondarock,* his personal approach became influenced by J.G. Ballard's science fiction texts, which tackle the relationship between man and technology.[65] Foxx also shared with Antonioni the same interest in exploring the issues of urban space, as proved by his engagement with ambient music and songs such as "Shifting City", "Quiet City", "Cities Of Light", and "Uptown/Downtown". At the time of his encounter with the director, he was in the process of starting his solo career with the albums *Metamatic* (1980) and *The Garden* (1981). This last one in particular encapsulates, both in sound and lyrics, the decadence of the European culture and deals with the phenomenon of architectonic stratifications, occurring for example in cities such as Rome, where ancient

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[63] Alongside John Foxx's original score, other musical texts are: *The Fire Inside, Palm Trees* and *Mucick of the Trees* interpreted by Steve Hillage; *Stanlow* and *Souvenir* interpreted by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark; *This Day,* interpreted by Peter Baumann; *Tangram* and *Ricochet,* interpreted by Tangerine Dream; *Ten Feet Tall,* interpreted by XTC; *Sons of Pioneers,* interpreted by Japan; *Come un Treno* and *Vieni Ragazzo,* by Gianna Nannini; *White Tornado* and *Arc en Ciel,* by Mercenaries; *Soavesito* by Mario Casadei and Henghel Gualdi; *Ossessione 70 Crepuscolo, Identikit* and *Romantic Waltz* by Fausto Cigliano, *L'Isola che non c'è,* by Edoardo Bennato; *Garage* and *Clips* by Dante Maiorana; *Calma nella Foresta* by E.H.Grieg, interpreted by Antonio Pirolli.
[64] Foxx, 'John Foxx: The Quiet Man', interviewed by Marco Bercella and Laura L. Rossi, *Ondarock* <http://www.ondarock.it/interviste/johnfoxx.htm> [accessed 10 July 2014]. Born in 1973, Foxx founded the *Tiger Lily* and started playing frequently in London between 1974 and 1975; in 1976 the band became *Ultravox* and became known for fusing punk, glam, electronic, reggae and new wave in their music.
[65] Ibid.

ruins have been utilised for new constructions and private houses.[66]

Interviewed by Glenn Kelly, following Antonioni's death in 2006, Foxx talks about his positive experience of working with the director in *Identificazione*.[67] However, he mentions that Antonioni used to show him exclusively the scenes that needed to be scored, but did not give him any directions on their role in the film. As happened in the case of other musical moments (for instance the ones by Tangerine Dreams and Steve Hillage), Antonioni modified these original songs in postproduction, in order to accommodate his vision of the sound, even if this meant sacrificing its originality.[68] Foxx explains in the interview:

> The music was intended to be almost innocuously ersatz like background music that might be used in a hotel or bar (somewhere those characters might meet) a slightly elevated elevator music.[69]

Identificazione shows a long series of musical scores, which often work as a background for entire sequences. As discussed, the film is seen through the gaze of a desperate man, and the music follows this illusory protagonist on every step of his journey, and even replaces his words in moments of silence and reflection.

It is possible to identify seven key situations when diegetic and non-diegetic sound has a relevant role, all concerning Niccolò's sphere and set in his apartment. The first episode occurs at the beginning of the film. The viewer follows Niccolò entering the main door of his building, slowly going up the stairs and briefly stopping to listen to his neighbours' television playing the pop-folk song "Suavesito" by Mario Casadei and Henghel

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Foxx, 'In the Company of Glenn, the online hangout of *Premiere* film critic Glenn Kelly', *Glen Kelly Blog* <http://glennkelly.premiere.com/blog/2007/08/john-foxx-remem.html> [accessed 17 July 2013].

[68] Calabretto, 'Nuovi universi sonori', in *Antonioni e la*, pp. 166 199.

[69] Foxx, qtd. in Glenn Kelly, 'Identification of a Woman', *Mubi* <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/monday-morning-foreign-region-dvd-report-identification-of-a-woman-antonioni-1982> [accessed 10 July 2014].

Gualdi.[70] Then, once in the apartment, he turns on the radio and ambient music starts, making its own presence very clear: the musical score includes two re-elaborated versions of OMD's "Stanlow" and Peter Baumann's "This Day". On the third occasion, occurring at around the eleven-minute mark, mood music proceeds and introduces a Niccolò's long flashback. It lasts a few seconds, which is just enough to evoke the man's pleasant memories.

The fourth episode happens during Mavi's first visit to Niccolò's house. In the scene, occurring at around the thirteen-minute mark, a wide static shot reveals the man turning on the radio at the left hand side of the frame and then walking towards Mavi, who is now in front of the window on the right. As he is approaching the woman, ambient music fills the room and encourages calm and positive feelings. It is their first meeting and will end in an intimate dialogue between the two. With a change in shot and a close-up of Mavi and Niccolò's faces, the music suddenly ends. The fifth episode, in which Foxx's music plays a key role, sees Niccolò as the protagonist once again. It is night-time, Mavi is asleep in his bedroom and the man is looking at newspaper clippings in his studio. The only sound effects the viewer hears are those of the man's gestures and of the paper crinkling. With a jump-cut, the camera closes in on Niccolò's upper body. An acoustic guitar starts playing in the background, and the man, as if he heard the instrument voice coming from another room, leaves the frame and advances towards the source where it is coming from. Finally, Foxx's electronic music reaches its main authority in the seventh and last sequence of the film, when dramatic nuances of acid green, yellow and red take the place of the character's face. This dissolution of the physicality of the image is not a new element in late Antonioni. The slow fade-out of Niccolò's face in the green space links to some of the colour effects shown in *Il mistero,* which includes electronic alterations, addition of colours, selective colouring of the image, fade-outs and fade-ins of the characters. In his case,

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[70] *Suavesito* is not one of Foxx's original tracks, but rather a popular song on Italian television at the time.

the subject of his quality investigation is moved into another spatial and temporal level: from the XIX century theatrical landscape of *Il mistero,* to the futuristic out-there of sci-fi.

With the flow of the images, the music raises and offers a triumphal and dramatic ending to the film. The out-there, the unknown space, has now taken the place of the characters, showing a red burning sun in the centre frame (Fig. 52).
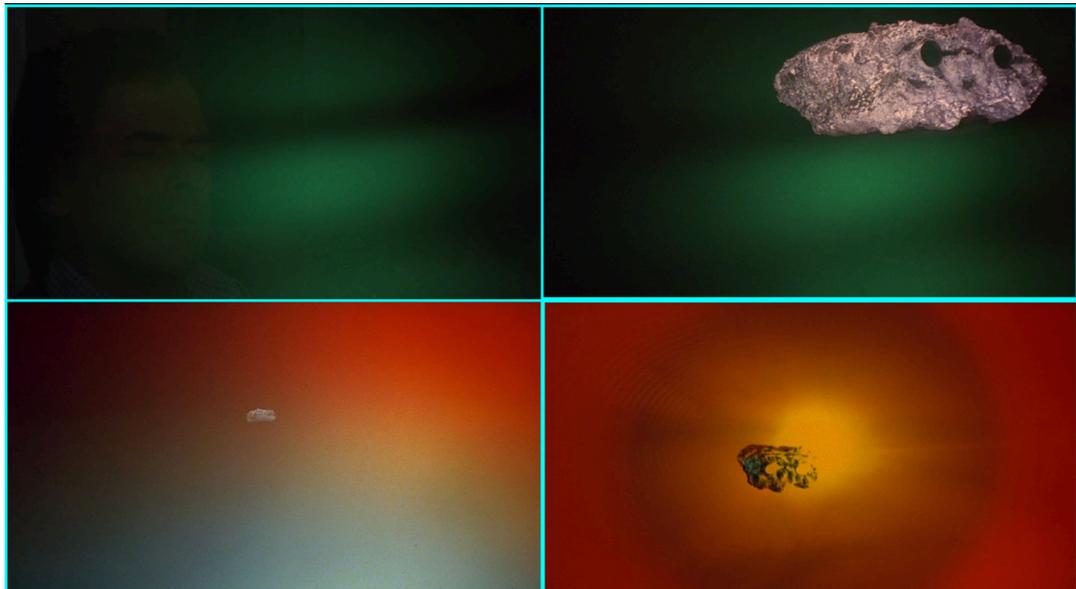
Fig. 52: screen grabs from *Identificazione*. A sequence of four shots (clockwise from top left) from the film finale, showing Niccolò's face disappearing, and a spaceship entering the frame and flying towards the sun.

Once Niccolò closes his eyes, when sitting on the window in his studio, his words in voiceover tell his nephew the imaginary story of a spaceship travelling very close to the sun in order to study it: 'Won't it get burnt?', his nephew asks him. 'In sci-fi one can never tell what is true for certain', Niccolò answers. As a matter of fact, in the film there are several allusions to the approaching possibility of the sun exploding and destroying the earth, which implies the cosmic inferiority of the human being compared to celestial bodies.

For instance, near the middle of the story, Niccolò is seen sitting on his white sofa in his studio, in the act of reading the *International Herald*

Tribune. As it occurs in all the sequences located there, the music starts and, in this case, it is a pianoforte andante. The headline of one of the articles the man is interested in is 'Scientists say Expanding Sun Poses Threat to Earth's Future'. The camera zooms in and encourages the viewer to notice what Niccolò is reading. The inclusion of a reference to such a scientific phenomenon confirms Antonioni's long-term passion for science, and may also be read as another expedient used by the director to reinterpret the language and the main scientific preoccupations of his time. For instance, according to American writer David Saul Rosenfeld, the fear provoked by the Cold War, latent in *L'eclisse,* has been replaced in *Identificazione* by the new fear, spread in the 1980s, of the sun's nuclear fission.[71] The combination of the stills in Fig. 52 and this music may hint to a reference of at-the-time very popular American sci-fi genre and films like *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982).[72] In *Blade Runner,* one may find the same sense of disorientation perceived in Antonioni's film.

The complexity and intricacy of the city produce a loss of position, and the inability of human senses to put things into place. Like in traditional sci-fi films, during the final minutes of *Identificazione* both viewer and protagonist are sucked into the far realms of the universe, an endless succession of light, colour and strobes, to the point that the journey becomes an experience of pure light and sound, in front of which we are left alone, clueless. Indeed, in the 1980s, American sci-fi was experiencing a new appreciation by both the public and critics across the world, thanks to the release of *Star Wars* (George Lucas) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

[71] David Saul Rosenfeld, 'Endnotes', in *Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Eclisse. A broken piece of wood, a matchbox, a woman, a man*, 2007 <http://www.davidsaulrosenfeld.com/> [accessed 10 July 2014], (note 33).
[72] Antonioni discussed in several interviews about science, astronomy and technologies, as well as his admiration for American cinema (i.e. Coppola, Scorsese, Altman and Kubrick). For instance, see Anna Maria Mori, 'Il regista e l'elettronica: credetemi è il nostro futuro', in Antonioni, *Fare un film è per me vivere,* ed. by Di Carlo and Tinazzi (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), pp. 312 315 (first publ. in *La Repubblica,* 15 November 1983). See also Antonioni, 'My Method', interviewed by Serge Daney, in *The Architecture*, pp. 366 380.

(Steven Spielberg) in 1977. According to Vivian Sobchack, films of such a generation may be differentiated from earlier ones of the 1950s and 1960s, as they encompass a different concept of space and time. They emphasise the new sensibility of the 1970s, in the sense that they incorporate the growing cultural investment in electronics and an optimistic vision of the future and technology. As sci-fi has traditionally distinguished itself by its poetic representation of social relations, the technological transformations of this new decade alters the artistic and technical values of the films.[73]

Furthermore, one of the canons of the traditional sci-fi genre is endorsing new mechanisms and thoughts with an unprecedented form, such as odd creatures, aliens, spaceships and far-off galaxies.[74] These are first and foremost the cinematic representation of man's fear of the unknown, the other and the subconscious. Among them, the spaceship is one of the elements that occur also in *Identificazione*. Whilst it is one of the strongest icons of sci-fi, the spaceship has been historically represented in different shapes, meanings and roles according to different films. Regarding its design aspect, it varies from being a perfect rounded disc in *Forbidden Planet* (Fred Wilcox, 1956) to a shapeless mixture of dark mass in *Silent Running* (Douglass Trumbull, 1972). Niccolò's spaceship appears to be more of a natural asteroid than a cold mechanical construction made by aliens or humans. It does not have the same astonishing beauty of other flying objects; rather it shows a bizarre similarity with the human face. Like a mask that the protagonist of the flight would wear to make his journey, it promises adventures to discover new spaces far from the cruelty and apathy of the world. Through Niccolò's imaginative flight of the spaceship towards the sun, the director links his vision to an optimistic view of the future.

It may be argued that sci-fi contributes to the discussion on Antonioni's approach to soundtrack in *Identificazione,* as an element of innovation in his cinema and a conjunction with Foxx's electronic music.

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[73] Vivian Sobchack, *Spazio e tempo nel cinema di fantascienza*, 2nd edn (Bologna: Bonomia University Press, 2002).
[74] Ibid.

First, there is a continuation and evolution of earlier directorial lines, as defined by the use of contemporary music and by an absolute control of the director, who alters, if necessary, the composer's original music. Second, there is a change in the main role of music, which comments on the events of the narration, underline concepts as expressed by the characters and sets the tone of the scene. Fluorescent colours, imaginative flights in the universe and spaceships indicate Antonioni's evolution in terms of chromatic effects, and a dialogue between with the popular contemporary North American film production.

4.5   Final evaluations

To answer Tassone's provocative question, *Identificazione* may be considered as an 'opera di rottura' in the same way *Il deserto rosso* was at its time.[75] The film is *daring* because Antonioni addresses inconvenient issues of the period and appropriates unusual ways of telling stories. The film is *honest* from a personal point of view   because, although not autobiographical, it responds to the director's state of solitude and anguish whilst facing an emotional impasse; and finally, the film is *ritual* in Antonioni's decision to close a substantial phase of his career.

While with *Il mistero*, the main, exciting focus was the range of the latest advancements in audio-visual technology, from contemporary electronic music, art movements to videotape, with *Identificazione* the nuclei became Mavi's voracious eroticism; the sense of disillusionment encompassing the reality, as well as a feeling of political, sentimental and intellectual defeat. Similar to what happened in the 1960s with *L'avventura* and *Il deserto rosso*, Antonioni makes a film based on the deep transformations of mentality and customs rapidly occurring in his society,

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[75] Tassone, 'Identificazione', p. 168.

and it is precisely for this reason that he *cannot* represent them through the same language he has used in the past.[76]

The pervading sense of uncertainty stems from the elements of novelty that this film entails. A key contribution to this uncertainty is due, to a large degree, to the clash of the highly abstract fragmentation of the narrative with the film's linguistic realism. In *Identificazione*, on the one hand, the impact of this linguistic realism is defined by the characters' use of everyday and casual language, the explicitness of many erotic scenes and numerous references to actual historical facts and social customs. On the other hand, Antonioni questions the spectator's awareness of time and space through erratic flashbacks, complex reflective surfaces and soundtrack, while in earlier works he was interested in deconstructing his characters' vision. Contrary to Giuliana in *Il deserto rosso,* Niccolò has a clear perception of the true colours of his own reality, yet he is not able to respond to them actively, and consequently to strategise a process of transformation and redemption for himself.[77] Multiplicity and circularity become key features of his decentered state: the multitude of female images, the repetition of the music, and the endings that his new film could potentially consider.

Throughout this chapter, it was discussed that the film naturally pinpoints (and expands on) many of Antonioni's earlier thematic and stylistic preoccupations, including the dialogue with the Italian *zeitgeist*; emotional incommunicability within the couple; the open-ending of the narrative, the rejection of any form of the Hollywood-shaped happy ending and the formality of the framing. However, any aesthetic and narrative expansion of these elements leads Antonioni to grow a new branch in his career, which will bring him to the direction of commercial short videos during the 1980s, and features such as *Al di là* and *Il filo* over the following

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[76] Kelly, 'Identification of', p. 38.
[77] For instance, among the many remarkable outcomes and narrative/visual elements Antonioni has used, it may be mentioned: the long take of the tennis match in the final scene of *Blow-Up*; Giuliana's distorted and chromatic visions in *Il deserto rosso*; and the climactic explosion of the house of Daria's father in *Zabriskie Point*.

decade. The new elements are then the focus of the film, and correspond to: the portrait of a disoriented and emotionally disabled male intellectual; the representation of a new type of female, freed from her male counterpart and audacious in her personal choices; the discovery of an explicit sexuality, which never implies pornography but which is meant as the ultimate instrument of communication. And finally, a change in the use of music. It enters the cinematic space with a visibly identified fashion, making many scenes over scored by a specific track, tone or mood.

In this sense, the film takes possession of the new languages of mass-media society and, because of the very mobile, faceted and chaotically prolific socio-cultural landscape of the 1980s, it does result in being much less immediate to the viewer than earlier films from the 1960s or 1970s. The director's operation proves to be more philosophical than pictorial. Antonioni does not painterly represent Italian society of the 1980s; rather he meditates on its cultural and social instances, insecurities and fragmented paths. In this case, the film's modernity and urgency do not come in representational form: they are not on the streets of Rome, not in the exploration of design, and not in the exposure of the female body. The reason why the viewer cannot *see* them is because modernity and urgency reside in the director's renovated participation in contemporary contingencies. All those elements that are hallmarks of Antonioni's cinema, and include the use of visual art, the treatment of space and the relationship body/space, are still here in order to register the social reality.

A step further in the treatment of space, female body, colours and music, as well as in the use of electronic technologies, will be made in Antonioni's next short works *Renault 9* and *Fotoromanza,* which will be explored in the following chapter 5. Given the secondary importance of these works in the director's cinematic corpus (as they are an ad and a music video), particular attention will be directed to those elements indicating an innovative approach, such as: Antonioni's engaging with commercial fields, experimentation with video tools, and use of colours.

CHAPTER 5
EXPLORING THE MEDIUM OF VIDEO

5.1 'I think video is the future of cinema'[1]

Among the many labels that have been given to Antonioni, Tassone describes him as 'uno che si preoccupa solamente del futuro'.[2] This is probably one of the most significant aspects to keep in mind when dealing with the director's career and personality. Antonioni is an artist who leans towards the future, in terms of media and visual solutions, and this may be read as the reason behind some of his most unpredictable choices. Based on colour alteration, and motived by feelings of confidence in the new technologies, his relationship with video is an avant-garde love story. *Il mistero*, *Renault 9* and *Fotoromanza* are nonetheless an anomaly in the director's career, but they validate his multimedia endeavour and constant participation in the Italian and international *zeitgeist*.

It is possible to register some of the director's compelling steps towards new technologies. Two years after the release of *Il mistero*, he made his appearance in Wenders' *Chambre 666,* a project aimed at questioning the future of traditional cinema.[3] On that occasion, the Italian director departed

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[1] Antonioni, 'In conversation', p. 241.
[2] Tassone, *I film*, p. 44.
[3] *Chambre 666,* dir. by Wim Wenders (France, 1982). On the occasion of 1982 Cannes Film Festival, Wenders interviewed a series of directors (including Steven Spielberg, Paul Morrisey and Werner Herzog) about the future of cinematic language. The project, stemmed from his own preoccupations about the negative influence of television on people's viewing habits, aimed at questioning film as a pure medium and its ability to survive in a historical period characterised by a proliferation of video art, video installations and television formats. Symbolically set in room 666 of the Hotel Martinez in Cannes, Wenders positioned a statically framed interviewee (in the foreground) with a television turned on behind him/her showing nothing but static. Antonioni expressed the following statement: 'It is true, film is in grave danger. But we should not overlook other aspects of the problem. The effect of TV on people's viewing habits and expectations especially children is clear. On the other hand, we can not deny that part of the reason that the situation seems so grave to us is because we belong to an older generation. What we should do is try to adapt to the different visual technologies that are coming into being. New forms

from more pessimistic views assumed by other filmmakers and suggested that both symbolic and physical dimensions of cinema and television were inevitably going to be the same, with the consequent conjunction of the two viewing experiences. Then, in 1985, invited by Italian TV host Maurizio Costanzo in his show, Antonioni reiterated the same concept.[4] In his view, cinema would loose its materiality and, with the advent of electronic imaging, matter itself would progressively become an impalpable idea.[5] In the same year, in his interview with Tassone, he described as exciting this new experimental medium, which allowed him to work with a group of specialised technicians, and have total control over colour and a range of effects at his disposal.[6]

As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, both decades of the 1970s and 1980s have been significant for the introduction of a breed of new computer effects involving enhanced graphic design and electronically-generated text, animations and video editing, which started to be most used in TV advertisements, blockbusters and music videos. Within such variegated landscape, Antonioni was willing to embrace the technological advancements of a cultural and social landscape in transformation, in order to discover ways and forms that might cope best with the contemporary media world and viewer's experience. The short commercial pieces *Renault 9* and *Fotoromanza,* which are going to be analysed in this chapter (together with *Il mistero* in chapter 3), may be read as a step further in this direction. Antonioni is, by any means, an artist who focuses on the future.

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of reproduction such as magnetic tape will probably come to replace traditional film stock, which no longer meets our needs. [...] Of course, I am just as worried as anyone else about the future of the cinema as we know it. We are attached to it because it gave us so many ways of saying what we felt and though we had to say. [...] I have always been someone who tried to adapt to whatever forms of expression coped the best with the contemporary world. I have used video on one of my films; I have experimented with colours and I have painted reality. The technique was crude, but it represented some kinds of advance. I want to go on experimenting, because I believe the possibilities of videos will give us a different sense of ourselves.'

[4] Antonioni, interviewed by Maurizio Costanzo, *Omaggio a Michelangelo Antonioni,* RAI 2, 2007 (first broadcasted in *Maurizio Costanzo Show,* Rete 4, December 1985).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Antonioni, interviewed by Tassone, p. 241.

5.2 Surreal cityscape in Antonioni's *Renault 9*

Antonioni's advert, made for the new Renault 9, was a project of the French agency Publicis Conseil Groupe (Paris), and produced by C.E.P. (Rome). As cinematographer, Antonioni chose his old friend and collaborator Alfio Contini, who had already collaborated in *Zabriskie Point* and *Al di là*. In terms of soundtrack, he opted for the song "Pas de six", from the opera *Guillaume Tell*, composed by Gioachino Rossini and conducted by Lamberto Gardelli. As the director revealed, the whole budget for this commercial was of eight hundred million lire (approximately three hundred thousand sterling), compared to the one available for the music video *Fotoromanza* of only forty million lire (approximately fourteen thousand sterling).[7]

Despite the restricted budget, *Renault 9* offered him the chance of gaining further practical experience with the medium of video; dealing with a re-discovered language of advertising; and fostering the concept of a self-sufficient technology, independent from human support. The choice of shooting on video should not be underestimated, given the fact that most of advertising directors kept shooting on film, in order to add a certain allure of cinema and art to their work.[8] Videotape was still considered a commercial medium compared to film negative, and still offered extreme limitations in terms of latitude and light. Moreover, from the evidence currently available it may be argued that the director did not use any computer graphics or animation, but an actual soundstage. The perfection of the details and the fluid movements of the buildings provide enough evidence for his use of a miniature set.

As Figs. 53 and 54 show, colours are extremely saturated, clearly robot-like and artificial, especially when the video gets closer to the end.

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[7] Antonioni, 'In conversation', p. 241.
[8] Sergio Leone's advert *Il diesel si scatena,* commissioned by Publicis Conseil in 1981 for the new car model Renault 18 was shot in film.

Fig. 53: screen grab from *Renault 9*. End of the advert; the car leaves the city, running on the colourful rainbow.

Unlike other contemporary car adverts, which tended to prefer uncontaminated and vast natural landscapes such as the ones in *Bentley Mulsanne* (1981) and *Mercedes 6 Cylindres* (1982), Antonioni's displayed a colourful psychedelia. The city conveys a dreamlike atmosphere and suggests open references to the visual landscape of Surrealism, black and white documentaries of the 1920s and 1930s conveying a bright and optimistic view of the future, and films such as *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang (1926). The fantastic world of the advert is fully controlled by the director. He recreates a fictional space with the look-and-feel of a contemporary modern city, in which he can physically control objects, fluid movements, distribution and position of buildings, and create improbable and imaginary perspectives.

Fig. 54: screen grab from *Renault 9*. The car is passing through perpendicular roads and buildings are bending towards it.

The car, the city, the earth and the rainbow are all models, with the only exception of a few isolated shots of the life-size car that are extreme and medium close-ups of the actual car. In the 60 second commercial, the camera angles show the car running on the extremely curved surface of a fake, cartoon-like, earth and then reaching a deserted urban centre. The car leads the viewer across the metallic and geometric streets and skyscrapers of the city, whilst every unanimated object, as petrol pumps and buildings, pays their respect, and literally bows at its passage (Fig. 54). The lively representation and fluidity of such modernist buildings encompasses the idea of an unconventional and experimental research on the new synergies of the metropolitan environment. This work lies in the manipulation of space and in the representation of fictional, and more humanised, architecture, that he recreates in a soundstage.

A brief glance into the interior details of the car reveals the non-presence of the driver and suggests ideas of independence and humanisation of the car itself ("Personalised strategy"). The happy tune of *Pas de six* is still in the background, and the car eventually exits the city to continue its journey on a rainbow, towards the infinite sky. As the car exits frame to the right, Antonioni cuts to a billboard-like image of it, and a voiceover eventually states its name and model. Further notes need to be addressed on the choice of the music. As indicated earlier, "Pas de six" is a joyful composition from the Act 1 of *Guillaume Tell*, and encapsulates the cheerfulness of the peasants of a Swiss village for two happy events that introduce the story: a wedding and a game of crossbow, in which Guillaume Tell's son, Jemmy, is proclaimed as winner. To some extent, Antonioni's advert mirrors the idyllic mood of Rossini's first act, transplanted into a surreal metropolitan context. Like Jemmy, Renault 9 seems to enjoy and celebrate its triumphs, surrounded by respectful and enthusiastic architecture-spectators.

However, within the advert, a clash might be perceived between the fairy-tale ambience, suggested by rainbow, pastel colours of the earth and the happy tune, and a sense of anguish, entailed by the extreme metal brightness and coldness of the buildings, as well as by the absolute absence of human beings. In this regard, there are two aspects to considerate: first, this is a world of simulacra and repetition, in which each building has its double. Antonioni designs a city with perpendicular roads and an overall architectural symmetry, with an emphasis on reflections, layers and surfaces. This reality goes beyond modernist architecture, and hints at the idea of a post-human world, where intelligent machines will run by themselves, buildings will behave as humans and petrol pumps will physically wave their mechanic hands to passersby. Second, in playing with the viewer's perception, the director suggests clear references to utopian and Surrealist architecture. He replaces stillness with movements, goes beyond the rules of physics and entails a choreographed, ballet-like,

relationship with organic forms. The dreamlike atmosphere and the large use of glass seem to pay homage to André Breton's notable novel *Nadja* (1928), in which the writer describes his glass house as a light space made for dreaming, and being in contact with nature.

In his recent interdisciplinary publication on the intersections between cinema, video, architecture and visual arts, Giacomo Ravesi retraces the extensive relational history among these disciplines, and underlines the fact that the idea of *transparency* is one of the main features of the modern metropolis in both the XIX and XX centuries.[9] The car passage, which arouses interest and curiosity in the surrounding buildings (Fig. 54), translates into an imaginary visual language the true excitement of the modern city towards both the acts of seeing and being seen. Glass doors and windows, which allow transparency of surfaces and fluid movements between the inside and the outside, establish a new relationship between private and public spheres. The individual sees whilst being seen.

Turning to the question of philosophical implications, Ravesi argues that the act of seeing through a glass becomes, in the modern era, the symbol of a cultural, aesthetic and architectural renewal.[10] Given the many technological advancements and their impact on media and daily life, a drastic change in the relationships between individual and world, and nature and society, is inevitable. The *Renault 9* video reflects this specific idea, as the car's passage symbolically and physically connects three spaces: the city, the world and the sky. The colourful rainbow, in particular, expresses an idea of continuity that, beyond matching the promotional messages on the reliability of the car, is openly linked to a general optimism towards the possibilities offered by machines.

Within this fictional/surreal metropolis thus conceived, the final element to consider is the absolute lack of human presence. The absence of people, in both urban and natural landscapes, is a trademark in Antonioni's

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[9] Giacomo Ravesi, 'Il video: una finestra architettonica', in *La città delle immagini. Cinema, video, architettura e arti visive* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino Editore, 2011) pp. 69 85.
[10] Ibid.

representation of space. However, in this case, there may be a further reason behind this choice, and an allusion to a world in which cars are self-driving. On the contrary, the scenes portraying car trips in *Blow-Up, Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger* concentrate on the driver and his emotional status. The car and the surrounding space is somehow the reflection of the driver's emotional status. Among them and within the context of a parallelism with *Renault 9*, it is worth recalling a key scene from *Blow-Up*, as this film is internationally acknowledged as the most advertising-oriented, due of themes and subjects, vivid nuances and fast-paced editing.

Fig. 55 shows the lead character of the film, Thomas, coming back to his studio, after having visited an antique store in another part of the city of London.

Fig. 55: screen grab from *Blow-Up*. Thomas in his journey back towards his studio, driving in the streets of London.

Similar to what he does in the *Renault 9* advert, Antonioni opts for a few details/inserts and medium shots of the car interior from aside and behind it; however, in this case, he closes on the upper body of the trendy and busy photographer. In this sense, while in the advert, Renault 9 car may be

interpreted as self-sufficient object from any drivers, and is shown in the act of expressing to the world its own personality; in the film, the focus is still on the person who *owns* the car, which is the first's status symbol. Nonetheless, also in *Blow-Up,* Antonioni wants to show the signs of the contemporary city and the way Thomas' car dialogues with it during the journey. Like in *Renault 9,* the camera follows Thomas's car from behind, crossing a public park, running on the streets and finally arriving at destination. In truth, it may be argued that between these two realities, in two temporally distant times, there is more than one common thread. The vanishing points are clearly marked and both converge in the central focal point, as in a frontal perspective-like composition. Additionally, the modernist architecture deeply characterises both images, as visible in the overall geometric feel and in the single details. There are marked horizontal window lines, and the specular position of the buildings makes them line up on the sides of the main streets where Thomas and Renault 9 are passing.

On the basis of these considerations, the *Renault 9* advert may be read as another key step in Antonioni's attempt to go further with his creative and experimental path. Together with the choice of video as medium, the director experiments with miniatures, models and a soundstage to shoot his commercial. Moreover, in spite of the little appreciation by the public (i.e. 'a curious, off-kilter spot', by Jeffrey Wells, *Los Angeles Times,* 1993) and lack of academic literature, this video plays a relevant role in the director's career of the 1980s, albeit it still is secondary to documentaries and features of the same period. Notwithstanding this, *Renault 9* shows Antonioni's renewed ambition in working with different creative languages and fields apart from cinema. As one of the most prolific industries of that time, advertising had the financial possibilities to hire prestigious directors, and Renault's choice of Antonioni should not come as a surprise.

Finally, in terms of style, it has been discussed that Antonioni's trademarks are still alive. They include the exploration of reflective surfaces, along with glass-doors, optical effects and multi-visual perspectives; the use

of central perspective and a precise study of space. The ideal link with the car-trip scene in *Blow-Up* has indicated a possible visual and conceptual reference for the commercial, tracing a dialogue between the productions of pre- and post-1980. The urban space in *Renault 9* is the simulacrum of something else, stripped of any distinctive or personal sign, and a complex combination of physical and communicational bridges. In this sense, a city is made by highways, cars and bridges, as well as by radios and phones. It is a machine-oriented place, where unanimated objects act as intelligent beings, and there is neither trace of human presence, nor his support. Within this world, it has been argued that music has a significant role too, as its joyfulness carries the viewer in a warmer direction compared to the gelid and mechanic feel of the urban details.

5.3 *Fotoromanza:* a step further in music video

5.3.1 The 1980s: the years of music videos

The early 1980s were pivotal for music video too, in terms of cultural acknowledgement and proliferation." Both American and European MTV channels started to develop into major broadcasting services, mainly addressing young audiences and focusing on music-oriented programmes, such as the successful 90-minute music video show *Friday Night Videos*. Music videos became overwhelmingly trendy, fully part of the popular culture and a powerful instrument for record companies to promote both their performers (individual artists and bands) and labels. Since the end of the 1970s, Italy too started to take into consideration music video programmes, yet quite exclusively addressed to young generations. In particular, the first programme of this kind, *Mister Fantasy* (RAI 2, 1981 1984), helped the process of integration of such products in the national

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" Music videos appeared at the end of XIX century for the first time.

popular culture.[12] Additionally, in 1983, the Festival of Cinema in Salsomaggiore hosted the first Italian retrospective on the subject and started the first national competition of *Video-Musica*.

With the intention to define and distinguish this new creative form of communication, already in 1983 Arnold Wolfe established the first basic distinction between *performance video* and *concept video.* In the first case, the focus lies on the artist or on the band's performance, such as in The Buggles' *Video Killed the Radio Star,* directed by Russel Mulcahy in 1979; in the second case, the focus is on the story that has been told, such as in Bjork's *Bachelorette,* directed by Michel Gondry in 1991.[13] In Paolo Peverini's view, performance videos started to be associated with heavy metal and rock music environments, as their message aimed at evoking a sense of community among the audience. Likewise, country music videos pursued their own specific iconography, entailing family values, honesty and a sense of freedom; for this reason, they were dominated by a different imagery, including set design and costumes.[14]

Around the same time, in 1984, Joan D. Lynch fostered debate on this issue, and suggested a new classification under the categories of *performance* (focus on the performer), *narrative* (focus on the story) and *experimental* (influence from experimental and art films) videos.[15] In discussing purposes and structure of music video production, the main premise behind the critic's theory lies in the similarities between adverts and music videos. In her view, both are of short format inherently, they aim at establishing a direct and immediate relationship with the viewer, and their main purpose

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[12] Liggeri, 'Mister Fantasy', in *Musica per i nostri occhi,* pp. 360 375. Among the videos presented in the 1984 edition, the ones that have elements in common with Antonioni's *Fotoromanza* are Gianna Nannini's *Ballami* directed by Antonioni's wife Enrica Fico and Pino D'Angiò's *Una notte maledetta,* directed by Giandomenico Curi.

[13] Paolo Peverini, 'Il videoclip: un'analisi dei dispositive enunciativi', *Trailer, Spot, Clip, Siti e Banner,* ed. by Isabella Pezzini (Rome: Moltemi, 2002), pp. 67 110.

[14] Mark Fenster, 'Genre and Form: the Development of the Country Music', in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader,* ed. by Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 94 111.

[15] Joan D. Lynch, 'Music Videos: From Performance to Dada Surrealism', *Journal of Popular Culture,* 18.1 (Summer 1984), 53 57.

is to sell a product, beyond their artistic inspiration. However, already at that time, Wolfe had the intuition to look at music videos as something more than a promotional device, and firmly considered it an art form in itself, a unique 'microcosm' in the history of film.[16]

This was the time in which the fields of cinema and music video expanded their dialogue, in terms of visual and narrative solutions, as well as of technologies, directors and producers. The 14-minute long and narrative video of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (John Landis, 1983) was a landmark in this sense, and brought music video into a whole new world. Internationally considered as the most influential and best music video of all time, it benefited from current technological advancements including never-experimented before special effects.[17] It was shown in the US theatres for the whole month of November 1983, and only after that was it broadcast on television.[18] As in the case of Landis' *Thriller*, 'traditional' filmmakers started to be more and more interested in the music world for various reasons. For younger generations, music videos acted as a springboard for their career in cinema; internationally affirmed directors, such as Derek Jarman, Jonathan Kaplan and Luc Besson, reckoned them as a chance to express more creative freedom and to experiment with new audiovisual languages. Finally, music videos became also an instrument to promote the release of a new film, bringing cross-media marketing operations to another level, as in the case of Phil Collins' video *Take a look at me now* (1984), directed by Taylor Hackford, which incorporated scenes of the film *Against all Odds,* shot in the same-year by the same director.[19]

Moreover, music videos started to cover a key role in the construction and marketing of a singer's career and popularity. The case of Gianna Nannini's *Fotoromanza* is exemplary in this sense. Nannini officially started

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[16] Ibid.

[17] For further information on Michael Jackson's music video see Daniel Eagan, 'Thriller', in *America's Film Legacy. 2009-2010* (London: The Continuum Publishing Book, 2012), pp. 175 177.

[18] Liggeri, 'Videoclip Cinema A/R', pp. 238 275 (p. 244).

[19] Ibid, p. 247

her solo career in 1975 with her first album *Gianna Nannini,* and got her first international recognition in the rock culture and music in 1980, with the album *California.* After a series of successful songs, as "Vieni ragazzo" and "Come un treno" (previously discussed as part of the soundtrack of *Identificazione*), the singer released the new album *Puzzle* in 1984. As one of the most successful pieces of this album, "Fotoromanza" became nationally and internationally renown. The fast-paced song included electro-pop sounds, and very metaphorical lyrics constantly hinting to romance. Thanks also to the fortunate bond with Antonioni's work, the song "Fotoromanza" premiered at many music festivals and reached n.1 in the music charts of Italy, Austria and Switzerland. This success consecrated the singer as a new female music celebrity, and inaugurated new melodies and tones, further removed from her earlier rock contaminations and closer to more melodic and commercial genres.[20]

5.3.2 Image follows word

According to Antonioni, *Fotoromanza* required ten full days of shooting and ten days of editing. Of course he chose video over film, given the novelty and excitement towards it in the music environment. On the occasion of its release, journalist Maurizio Bizzicari from *L'Europeo* published an article with the evocative title 'Michelangelo Rock', reviewing Antonioni's work as the first 'auteur music video ever made'.[21] Similar to the way he had approached *Il mistero* four years earlier, Antonioni did not want to give emphasis to the quality of his work, since it considered only an amusing experience.[22] The director's main goal was far from competing with

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[20] Luca Baldi and Michele Camillò, 'Gianna Nannini. Una romanza da rock', *Ondarock* <http://www.ondarock.it/italia/giannanannini.htm> [accessed 6 October 2014].
[21] Bizzicari, 'Michelangelo Rock'.
[22] In the interview released to Bizzicari, Antonioni comments: 'perché tanto interesse per questo video musicale? Ho già premesso che non bisogna dargli troppo peso. [...] Un po' per divertirmi, un po' per approfondire la mia conoscenza con l'elettronica [...]'. Bizzicari, 'Michelangelo Rock, p. 459.

international directors of the field such as Mallet and Mulcahy, rather he wanted to extend his technical horizons and deal with a new creative environment. As he firmly stated in the interview to Bizzicari, he aimed at developing more familiarity with technical specifications of the new device, expanding his knowledge in colour and graphic correction, and image superimposition.[23]

In spite of the director's personal judgment on his work, *Fotoromanza* may be read as a step forward in Antonioni's appropriation of a new cinematic language, in which colours and music play a different role than before, and abstraction embraces hyperrealist spaces. With the only exception of a few brief moments, *Fotoromanza* shows a narrative structure, and focuses on the singer's emotions emerging from her words. Fade-ins and fade-outs, image superimpositions and foggy atmospheres perfectly represent the visual qualities of the song. These effects entail memories, feelings of solitude and pain, and give Antonioni the chance to play with perception and abstraction. As *Il mistero* was a hybrid work in itself, as *Fotoromanza* has a dual nature too, and it might be considered on the borderline between narrative and experimental video. The director finds his inspiration in the lyrics of the song, and the images/scenes follow the development of the events happening in the lyrics.

In this section, the analysis of *Fotoromanza* will be divided into three parts, corresponding to a narrative beginning, a development and a conclusion of the events. The first part is a dramatic start echoing many of Antonioni's traditional overtures: a medium shot, central and frontal perspective of an empty and unspecific space, potentially a dark room. The lyrics work as a literal guideline for the images. For instance, the viewer sees Nannini appearing seated on an armchair in front of the TV, and contemporary Gianna Nannini sings: 'se la sera non esci/ti prepare un panino/mentre guardi la TV.' She then stands up, there is a brief flashback of her having sex with a man ('ti addormenti con qualcuno/che alla luce del

[23] Ibid.

giorno non conosci più'), and finally she appears torn between calling or ignoring him ('ti telefono o no/mi telefoni o no'). There is an alternation between moments in which Nannini looks at camera and sings directly to her viewers/fans, and others in which Antonioni shows the woman as part of the story he illustrates. Nonetheless, the performer is both the protagonist of the events and the storyteller behind them. Antonioni concentrates on conveying a melancholic atmosphere, and on inserting electronic effects as those mentioned above.

The following two series of frames (Fig. 56 and 57) may work as example of this parallelism proceeding of word and image. In both of them, the colour range spans between greys, violets, blues, browns and saturated yellows. These may be acknowledged as the colours of Antonioni's late cinema. It is worth noticing that Antonioni opted for Luciano Tovoli as cinematographer, who had previously covered the same role in the production of *Il mistero*. This choice says something about the director's high tech expectations towards this video, and traces an important connection with his previous feature. Slow appearances and dissolves, as well as mannerist contrasts and 'granular' colours, such as acid greens, reds and violets, are largely used in *Il mistero* too and become leitmotifs in this video.

The second part of *Fotoromanza* refers to the song chorus. As the lyrics of the song become increasingly metaphorical and Nannini describes in detail her love and feelings towards an unreachable man, Antonioni does not choose abstraction, but rather goes for a word-by-word and concept-by-concept illustration, coherently with the spirit of many music videos of the 1980s. This moment is Nannini's highest 'cry of pain' and the emotional core of the song/video that make the viewer finally hear and see the colours of her love. The first series of frames in the following Fig. 56 corresponds to the beginning of the second act and displays the extensive use of this mentioned image/word direct correspondence, of fragmented editing and undefined spatial surfaces.
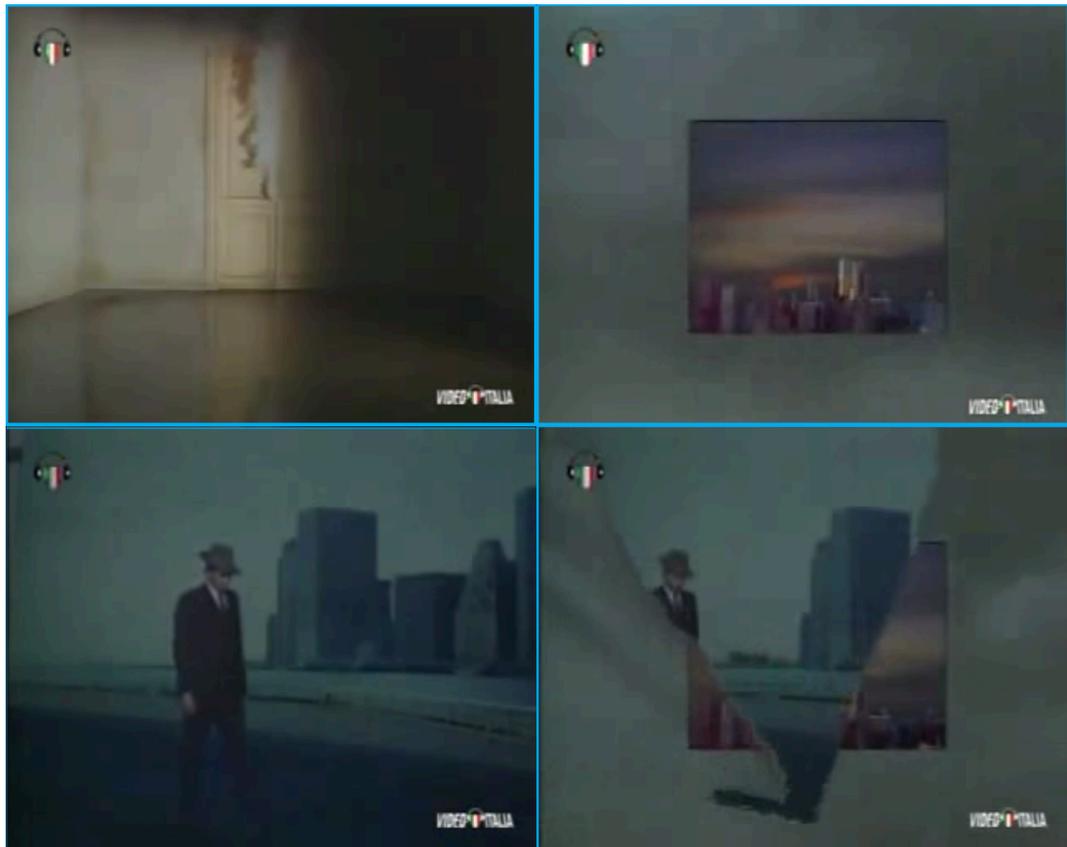
Fig. 56: screen grabs from *Fotoromanza*. A sequence of four shots (clockwise from top left): a room filled by gas, burning buildings, a blade cutting the frame and a man walking on the street alone.

The images, which are wide and medium shots, make use of frontal perspective and illustrate the concepts emerging from Nannini's own words. In the song, she compares her feelings to bitter and painful ideas, such as a gas chamber ('una camera a gas'); a building, burning in the city ('un palazzo che brucia in città'); a thin blade ('una lama sottile'); and a slow-motion scene ('una scena al rallentatore'). Antonioni keeps both the order of appearance of the subjects and the subjects themselves (Fig. 56).

Some of the director's visual trademarks are visible in Fig. 56: the gravity of the feelings, the incommunicability among the characters and the visual organisation of empty spaces and perspectives. The third and fourth frames clockwise, for instance, show a man walking alone and slowly in the outskirts of a generic city. For this melancholic urban shot, Antonioni builds up a familiar composition, including the character in foreground and

grey anonymous buildings in background that may recall many of his earlier modernist urban portraits, such as the beginning sequences of *La notte* and *L'avventura.* The second and third frames draw attention to the director's use of special effects. A postcard-sized video screen fades-in from a nebulous atmosphere and anticipates the forthcoming shot; after a few seconds, a laceration-effect, which literally tears the foreground and acts as a bizarre transition, reveals what is happening next in the story.

The second series of frames (Fig. 57, below) keeps on illustrating the love affair that Nannini is singing about and show, clockwise, the explosion of a bomb inside a hotel ('una bomba all'hotel'), a boxing match ('una finta sul ring'), a poisoned ice-cream ('un gelato al veleno') and a flame bursting in the sky ('una fiamma che esplode nel cielo'). In spite of the concrete connotation of these images, Antonioni opts for an abstract language.

Fig. 57: screen grabs from *Fotoromanza*. A sequence of four shots (clockwise from top left): a bomb, a boxing match, ice-cream and an explosion in the sky.

He prefers overexposing, and using details of objects, slow motions and freeze frames over descriptive images. As scholar/filmmaker Toni Verità states in his early publication *Il Cinema Elettronico,* 'il film è *sostanza fisica* che può essere scomposta, il video è *energia pura*' [italics added].[24] While film is based on the processes of cutting and editing in post-production, video is grounded in the mixing of images, music, sound and graphic elements.[25] For instance, the image of the white pastel portrait/drawing of Nannini in the second frame of Fig. 57 is shattered like a glass surface by one of the boxers' punches. The all frames in the analysed images function as pure explosions of colour, material and emotion, and are the result of the many years Antonioni has spent working in this direction. Also, the third and fourth frames seem to echo the materiality of the land and the sky seen in his early black and white documentaries, in *Il mistero* and even in the sci-fi ending of *Identificazione.*

Furthermore, the special effects achieved in *Fotoromanza* hint at Antonioni's familiarity with the latest trends in electronic imaging established by contemporary pop music videos, such as those by Frank Zappa, Michael Jackson and David Bowie. In particular, it may be possible to trace a parallelism with the landmark music video David Mallet and Bowie's *Ashes to Ashes* (1980), which, besides the considerable level of irony, sarcasm and playfulness, distinguished itself for special effects and graphic elements. According to Mallet himself, the video *Ashes to Ashes* had a great effect on both the English and the international pop scenes, as it was something never done in music videos before.[26] As in the case of *Fotoromanza,* it mostly worked as a consecration of the singer, Bowie, as a pop celebrity, particularly thanks to the display of one of his multiple incarnations.

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[24] Verità, 'Video Visioni', in *Il Cinema Elettronico*, pp. 7 16 (p. 13).
[25] Ibid.
[26] David Mallet, interview, *unknown* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diQ8iTT-HCA> [accessed 5 October 2014].

Ashes to Ashes was completed in just three days, and shows Bowie, most of the time dressed up as Pierrot, walking and singing in a lunar, illusory and dream-like landscape. Beyond Bowie, the video also features an array of elements taken from sci-fi films, including a spaceship and alien-like medical machines, as well as a group of odd figures entering the scene and walking in front of a bulldozer. Similarly to what Antonioni does in *Fotoromanza,* overall the images look soft-focus and rough-grained, at times overexposed and exaggerating in the 'video' look. In both cases, the directors use picture-in-picture or postcard-size video effects as a way to introduce the next scene. Unlike Antonioni's *Fotoromanza*, however, Bowie's video does not follow a true narrative, rather quite considers exclusively the artist's performance.

The third part of *Fotoromanza* begins with an interior scene and concludes the narrative arc of the song.

Fig. 58: screen grab from *Fotoromanza.* A man, a woman: drama.

In Fig. 58, the man in Nannini's dreams sits in silence, looking at the camera and smoking a cigarette in the foreground, while the singer approaches him, in a black dress. A very dramatic light invades the dark environment from frame-right, highlighting Nannini's apparition from the background. In the meantime, an electronically-generated red fence divides the space diagonally, and overtly underlines the distance between the two characters. This image, and specifically the red gate, is emblematic of the true core of the song. On the one hand, it represents and epitomize the message of *Fotoromanza*; on the other, it is a chance for Antonioni to explore, with a different medium, those existentialist themes that he has investigated all along his career. The singer's words 'Io vorrei toccarti, ma più mi avvicino più non so chi sei', may be associated with the director's words pronounced during an interview with Tomasulo in 1984: 'Film has always been for me, conflict. A man, a woman: drama'.[27] This particular passage reiterates the centrality in Antonioni's cinema of conflicts and incommunicability between a man and a woman, and precisely of the woman's drama in being refused by the man she loves.

In *Fotoromanza*, the male figure is inserted eight times, and fades-in and fades-out as a brief vision, almost as an immaterial ghost populating Nannini's memories. Whilst the singer's voice keeps referring to a generic 'you' ('*ti* telefono, *ti* vorrei, vorrei tocca*rti*'), a middle-aged man materialises on the screen. His eyes are at the camera; he avoids the woman and disappears; he eventually shows bold attitude, suggesting his arrogant personality. However, this should not be interpreted as a real drama. At a close reading of the text, the representation of characters and concepts used seem a little too clichéd to be taken seriously, and hint to the specific visual language of soap operas and many TV series. In this sense, the encounter displayed in the above Fig. 58 may be read as the high-level emotional and revelatory moment in the narration: the pathos and weakness of the female

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[27] Antonioni, 'Life is Inconclusive: A Conversation with Michelangelo Antonioni', interviewed by Frank P. Tomasulo, *On Film*, 13 (1984), 61–64 (62).

figure opposed to the strength of the male character. There are clichéd metaphors on love, described as a bomb, an explosion in the sky and a slow-motion scene. Together with all of this, male clothes, cigarettes, weapons and macho behaviors may be interpreted also as an ironic commentary on the current stereotyped male-female universe.

With regard to the meaning of the title, it has been argued that *Fotoromanza* (literally 'photoromance') is a neologism resulting from the union between two terms, *fotoromanzo* and *romanza*.[28] While *romanza* defines a romantic musical composition of the XVIII century, *fotoromanzo* is an early form of serialised narration extremely popular in Italy after WWII, heir to the French *feuilleton* and precursor of 1970s and 1980s soap operas.[29] Literally a 'photo story book', *fotoromanzo* used to showcase melodramatic and sentimental stories, love affairs and betrayals that nourished an entire generation of women. In its female transformation, the title *fotoromanza* entails references to a highly melodramatic narrative, and calls for the viewers' emotional participation through words, actions and intense gazes. For instance, Nannini looks at camera several times as if she was speaking directly to her public.

The finale of the video, lasting approximately twelve seconds, varies from the earlier set design and atmosphere, and becomes reminiscent of a more traditional rock/ensemble music video landscape: a frontal wide shot of the singer and the band (Fig. 59). A similar atmosphere, but in pink-and-black tones, occurs within one of the shots in *Ashes to Ashes*, showing an unnaturally white Bowie slowly drowning in water. In both cases, the choice of submerging the performers in water deeply affects the perceptual/emotional delivery of the image, as it fosters negative and hopeless emotions.

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[28] Giancarlo Lombardi, '*Tutti pazzi per amore:* Gen X, Italian Style', in *Generation X Goes Global,* ed. by Christine Henseler (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 233 248.
[29] Antonioni dedicated one of his early black and white shorts to this subject, *L'amorosa menzogna* (1949).

Fig. 59: screen grab from *Fotoromanza.* End of the music video; Nannini and her musician in a filthy landscape.

In the case of Bowie, this natural element is very graphic and of only one dark colour; in *Fotoromanza,* water displays shifting colours, such as violet, green, brown and yellow. Nannini gets off her long female black dress to wear male clothes, including stereotyped elements such as hat and braces. By standing and singing centre frame with her legs immersed calf-length into the water, she detaches herself from the image of a suffering woman to show her rock and rebel personality. The musicians around her are all bent on their own instruments, and visibly seem to be gasping, as if they were in a real gas chamber. With this ending, Antonioni metaphorically paints one of the most emblematic and famous lines of the song, 'questo amore è una camera a gas', and shifts the narration to a different level. From the illustration of a tormented love affair, to a gloomy and undefined environment in which sky and water are hardly distinguishable, and bitter colours mark the emotional status of the characters.

In light of these considerations, it may be argued that *Fotoromanza* is a central instrument in the consolidation of Nannini' stardom and the construction of her new identity. In the early 1980s, she started her involvement with more melodic tones, albeit keeping the rock soul of her music. In this sense, Antonioni's video embodies such changes, as it represents the singer's both romantic and rebel personalities. Grounding on the short format and in the dialogue with the international music-videoscape, *Fotoromanza* acts as an ideal tool to promote Nannini and allows Antonioni to keep experiment with the possibilities of magnetic tape and brevity. The main components of this work consist in the tight bond between word and image, the exploration of female emotions, and the heavy use of special effects such as electronic fade-ins, fade-outs, saturated colour/image superimpositions and graphic elements. The director's raison d'être for accomplishing this work lies, alongside his unique contribution to an emerging creative medium, in the chance to take a step further in his ongoing experimentation with video: the magnetic tape is another means to alter reality and to keep exploring the possibilities of the cinematic space.

Around the same period, Antonioni also directed *Ritorno* and *Roma* that will be analysed in the following chapter 6. These short pieces are the last works to be considered in this dissertation, and those that symbolically close the overall analysis of the decade of the 1980s. While *Ritorno* was shot before the stroke of the 1985, *Roma* was conceived from scratch and directed after that, in 1990. Nonetheless, the reason of looking at them together in the same chapter lies in the fact that they share many common aspects, beginning with the fact that after an intense period of experimentation with videotape, Antonioni comes back to shooting on film, yet working with the short format. Moreover, they both show the new elements that have been discussed in this dissertation for the other works of the decade (i.e., a greater abstract sensibility, a more invasive presence of the soundtrack, and a more visible camera) and themes that have been considered as topoi in Antonioni's cinema (i.e. art history, the return, the human body,

documentary sensibility). In this sense, by incorporating new and traditional elements, they complete the variegated range of works achieved by Antonioni in the 1980s.

CHAPTER 6
PORTRAITURE

6.1 Documentary sensibility?

Documentary is of considerable importance in Antonioni's cinema. Largely incorporated in his feature films, Antonioni uses documentary as a first step in showing what is invisible, understood as all the aspects of reality that tend to go unnoticed. Invisible elements may be brought to attention through a zoom-in on a street, or certain nuances of the smoke coming out of factory chimneys, or the smile of a girl. Antonioni's early cinema directly tackles documentary at its core, as form and as content, and constantly oscillates between truth and representation. An abstract montage is intended to evoke an emotional, rather than intellectual, response from the viewer. Images convey a message and appear as aesthetically appealing, but do so relying on emotion rather than on information. In other words, since his first engagement with documentary, Antonioni dealt with the concept of *feeling*. The establishment of an emotional bond between himself and the locations in his films is one of the starting point in his cinema, and functions as a key strategy in *Ritorno* and *Roma,* as well.

Together with his quest for the perfection of the image and his innovative approach to the subject matter, Antonioni's early works show many features of both conventional expository and observational documentary modes.[1] For example, *La villa dei mostri*, his documentary on the Villa Orsini in Bomarzo, gives the impression of objectivity and well-

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[1] The term 'expository documentary' indicates one of the first ways to do documentary since the beginning of the XX century and very popular during the 1930s. This mode usually addresses its audience directly, and includes an unseen narrator (voice-of-God) who interprets and explains the images. The expository model is still in use, especially connected to natural history and scientific subjects. On this subject see: John Izod and Richard Kilborn, 'The Documentary', in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies,* ed. by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 426–433.

substantiated knowledge.[2] The 'voice of God' narration describes and enriches the camerawork, offering a familiar narrative strategy: it follows, introduces and guides the viewer to the hidden and most peculiar areas of the villa grounds. Chatman, in his noteworthy study on Antonioni's early films, pinpoints conventional filming techniques used by the director, such as 'static setups, traditional pans and cutaways, [...] redundant voice-over'.[3] The same may be said of Antonioni's more complex short films made around the same time. *N.U.* (1948), *Superstizione* (1949) and *Sette canne, un vestito* (1949) are influenced by the director's first years in Rome, as well as his neorealist roots. Each of these works deals with invisible aspects of Italian society and provides a traditional narrative structure, including close scrutiny of reality and expository, male-voiced, commentary. Yet, they already demonstrate Antonioni's ability in building dazzling and self-sufficient images that convey dramatic and aesthetic tensions that need no support from the voice-over, anticipating his later career.

Ritorno and *Roma* can be seen as the result of the director's initial endeavours in nonfiction cinema and yet still represent (along with the Enel documentary [1992] and *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*) two of his peaks in abstract representation. *Ritorno* was made as a segment for the unaired television programme *Falsi ritorni: per un'archeologia del set,* curated by Enrico Ghezzi and Michele Mancini.[4] As the title suggests, the film aims at

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[2] *La villa dei mostri* is a short documentary in black and white on Bomarzo Villa, just outside Rome. Likewise the other Antonioni's documentaries of the 1940s, there is a male voiceover leading the viewer (and the camera) to the discovery of the hidden treasures of the architecture and garden; specifically, it is structured as a dialogue between the leading voice and an imaginary professor, to whom the voice explains, ask questions and comments on the history of the villa. The language is elegant and cultured, including literary references, yet informal, lively and entertaining.

[3] Chatman, 'Early films. Documentaries', in *Antonioni, or the surface*, pp. 5–11 (p. 8).

[4] *Falsi Ritorni–Per un'archeologia del set* should have been a three hours long TV programme, intended for RAI 3 and divided in three episodes about three different films each: Visconti's *La terra trema,* Antonioni's *L'avventura* and Bertolucci's *L'ultimo tango a Parigi.* Specifically, in Enrico Ghezzi's words, the episodes should have been dedicated to the set of the films, three places, as identified with Aci Trezza (*La terra trema*), Lisca Bianca (*L'avventura*) and Passy's apartment (*L'ultimo tango a Parigi*). See Enrico Ghezzi, 'Voglio sapere perché (l'avventura non è l'avventura)', in *Paura e Desiderio cose (mai) viste 1974-2001,* 4th edn (Milan: Bompiani, 2011), pp. 231–238.

recalling the rarified atmosphere of Anna's disappearance in *L'avventura* and captures the physical and symbolic return to the most iconic place of the film. There is, consequently, an alternation between past and present: while the characters' voices from *L'avventura* lead the viewer into a journey back to the 1960s, the camera reveals what is left now on the island. An aerial view of the Sicilian landscape surrounding Lisca Bianca accompanies Claudia's desperate scream at the conclusion of *Ritorno*. Like this film, *Roma* illustrates the director's journey within a contained place   in this case the city of Rome. Of about eight-minute long and part of the wider project *12 registi per 12 città*, *Roma* explores the art-historical landscape of the Italian capital by alternating between past and present, and by interchanging different planes, travelling from architecture to sculpture and painting.

How to describe *Ritorno* and *Roma* technically is the first issue to be addressed. As a fruitful synthesis of short documentary and abstract portraiture, these works are thus considered neither documentaries nor art films exclusively.[5] Before discussing the way in which the genre of portraiture may be applied to *Ritorno* and *Roma*, it is necessary to introduce the terms *documentary* and *abstraction* within this context. Firstly, the term documentary encompasses a vast range of modes and forms that may have influenced the architecture of these works. While *Ritorno* and *Roma* are characterised by a complete lack of expository, interactive and reflexive elements, the films engage with other documentary aspects. The physical absence of human beings in the Sicilian and Roman landscapes play a unique role in evoking surreal feelings, inviting the viewer into contemplation and reflection. In this sense, the director's insistence on the fragmentation of landscape and fascination in its hidden meanings link with a modernist documentary poetic mode, as well as with the works of more recent landscape filmmakers, like Terrence Malick and Werner Herzog.

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[5] These works have received little attention from the critical literature. *Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* is defined as a 'documentary' by Rascaroli (2012), Chatman and Duncan (2004), and Tassone (2002). *Rome* is defined as a 'short film' by Siegel (2012) and 'a contribution to an omnibus documentary' by Chatman and Duncan (2004).

Together with being an acclaimed exponent of modernist cinema, Antonioni was extremely knowledgeable about his contemporary cinema. In 1985 he stated that he was fascinated by many of the qualities of Herzog's films, including the inspirational characters and stories, and his ability in positioning his own image at the border between realism and surrealism.[6] As well, Antonioni employs a high degree of lyricism and abstraction in his films that can be discussed in terms of documentary poetic mode, of which Herzog's work is regarded as a key example.[7] Herzog uses shapes, colours and sounds offered by reality to create expressionistic reactions and, ultimately, to inspire, confound and surprise his viewer. Surreal imagery fills, for instance, his 1971 film *Fata Morgana*, in which long tracking and detail shots reveal lunar landscape, mirages and animal corpses of the Sahara desert.[8]

This category may be applied to *Ritorno* and *Roma*, as well, particularly with respect to the way the director's creative input and personality become part of the allure of the works themselves. These films evoke a personal and idiosyncratic atmosphere, and prefer original and natural sound (*Ritorno*) and musical accompaniment (*Roma*) over voice-over commentary. Along with showcasing the director's evolution in terms of light, sound and subject, they constitute an evident distinction from his early documentaries, given the absolute absence of commentary, their tight formal relation with some of the aspects of the director's narrative cinema, and a higher emotional charge. In both works, Antonioni is involved personally, as well as professionally, and positions himself in several roles. As a *spectator*, he rediscovers one of his earlier films and the wild beauty of the Sicilian

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[6] On Herzog's cinema see Brad Prager, *The Cinema of Werner Herzog. Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2011).

[7] Izod and Kilborn, 'The Documentary'. According to the landmark publication *Representing Reality* by Bill Nichols (1991), there are six principal modes of documentary representation (expository, observational, participatory, poetic, reflexive and performative); in his most recent and revised publication, in the case of poetic mode, Nichols argues that "The poetic mode began in tandem with modernism as a way of representing reality in terms of a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations." See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, second ed. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 165.

[8] Prager, 'Fata Morgana', in *The cinema of Werner*, pp. 174–183.

landscape (*Ritorno*), and he contemplates some of the most astonishing locations and artworks of Italy (*Roma*). As a *traveller*, he follows the voices of his fictional characters to explore nature according to their guidance (*Ritorno*), and he makes an artistic journey, wandering from fountains to piazzas, to churches, statues and frescoed interiors (*Roma*). Finally, as an *artist* and maker of both works and journeys, he offers the viewer not an objective truth, but rather his own vision of reality, filtered by a former cinematic experience (*Ritorno*) and his personal artistic sensibility (*Roma*).

Meanwhile, particularly with regard to *Roma,* it is possible to draw a subtle parallel with the observational documentary mode, as here the camera seems to observe the landscape without ever imposing on it. The relationship between images and subject matter suggests Antonioni's detachment from the latter, as well as his search for the 'objective' artistic truth of the city. The camera seems to linger almost at random on urban architecture, on details of Classical and Renaissance sculpture, and on frescoes and paintings. The film evolves as a series of audiovisual postcards in which the director's art-connoisseur personality is evident, and where the viewer is allowed to discover some of the most iconic areas of Rome in a fluctuating journey between exterior and interior.

Secondly, the editing of the films more clearly reveals Antonioni's abstract sensibility. On the one hand, in *Ritorno,* the relationship between audio (the music and the characters' voices) and image is at times alienating, because of temporal distance and the thematic correlation that occurs between these two elements. In truth, audio brings the viewer to 1960 and specifically to a past representation of the island, while the images refer to *Ritorno* and the current reality of Lisca Bianca. Additionally, in the film the director uses extreme close-ups of the natural environment, transforming the landscape into blurry compositions. On the other hand, *Roma* is lacking a conventional narrative, and its overall structure, primarily organised around a series of zooms and cuts, resembles a complex scheme of individual frescoes more than a documentary on the city itself.

6.2 Art interpretative frameworks to define Antonioni's cinema

The premises discussed in the previous section have posed questions on the definition of *Ritorno* and *Roma*. Rascaroli's essay 'The Self-portrait Film: Michelangelo's Last Gaze' may offer insights about this matter, as it outlines a critical operation analogous to what this chapter aims at articulating.[9] In its introduction to the subgenre of self-portraiture in film, the critic spans both painting and literature traditions to contextualise audiovisual self-portraiture (experimental, fictional and documentary), and addresses some of the most remarkable Western examples, such as Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926), Jerome Hill's *Film Portrait* (1972) and Jonas Mekas's *Self Portrait* (1980). Just as Rascaroli deems Antonioni's last film to be the definitive self-portrait film, this chapter will argue that *Ritorno* and *Roma* should be considered as the definitive landscape portrait films. This definition is devised to refer to *landscape* as the subject matter (the geography of Lisca Bianca and the history of art, respectively), and *portrait* as the aesthetic and overall style of the two works.

Firstly, the term landscape will be approached according to its many nuances and depending on the context in which it will be considered. Particularly, but not exclusively, in the case of *Ritorno,* landscape will indicate the geographical space explored by Antonioni's camera, consisting of the portion of earth including natural elements and artifacts. Moreover, in light of a parallelism with the history of art, the term will also be used in accordance with the genre of landscape painting, be the representation of a portion of inland or marine scenery. In *Roma,* landscape will reflect the multiple and variegated forms of art shown in the film. This body of

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[9] Rascaroli, 'The Self-Portrait Film: Michelangelo's Last Gaze', in *The Cinema of Me: Self and Subjectivity in First-Person Documentary Film,* ed. by Alisa Lebow, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Google Ebooks <http://books.google.it/books?id=uS7wAAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_s ummary_r&cad=o#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 3 November 2014]'.

architectural, sculptural and pictorial elements is the space in which the camera moves, the content and the ultimate reason of the shooting of the film.

Secondly, to paraphrase Rascaroli's statement on the relationship between a portrait film and a portrait painting, the film analysis will unavoidably borrow from the terminology of the painting tradition. The term portrait, coined and widely used in the figurative arts context whether it is through painting, drawing or photography, generally refers to the representation of a person, *the sitter*. The sitter's face and/or body, which is thus the focus of the painter, purposely dominates the canvas space. Art historian John Gere defines portrait as an image 'in which the artist is engaged with the personality of his sitter and is preoccupied with his/her characterisation as an individual'.[10] Gere's definition can refer only to true portraits of real people; by putting the emphasis on the sitter's personality and characterisation, the scholar seems to suggest that making a portrait conveys a realistic representation of an individual. Within the study of the history of art, the limitations of this argument have become clear, for instance, when considering images depicting idealised or symbolic beauty rather than individual, real people or models. In the absence of documentation, true portraits have been difficult to determine, and it is common that the physical traits of a real individual can recur in more than one painting, as in the case of female figures depicted by Botticelli and Ghirlandaio in the Renaissance era. The characterisation of *Venus* in Botticelli's painting *Venus and Mars* (1480-1490), for instance, sets the canon of beauty of the XV century, including perfect alabaster skin, golden hair, a thin mouth and a harmoniously proportioned body. The figure of Venus

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[10] John Gere, qtd. in 'Portraiture', *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. by Jane Turner, 34 vols (London: Mcmillan Publishers Limited, 1996), XXV (1996), 273 287 (275).

was not painted based on a real model, but represented the personification of beauty as the artist and his patrons perceived it.[11]

Many portraits are indeed not realistic, but rather exemplify the ideals of beauty from different eras, and respond to different needs, be they political, religious or social. Hence, it is widely agreed that most portraits can be analysed in accordance with the categories of individualisation, idealisation and characterisation of the subject.[12] Individualisation is the process by which the artist aims at representing the individual with all of his or her peculiarities and irregularities (with a particular focus on the head and hands) that distinguish him or her from other people (cf. *The Family of Carlos IV*, Goya, 1800). Idealisation, on the other hand, is the process by which an artist tends to include some ideals of beauty, which may follow personal tastes or styles of the time (cf. *Chapeau de paille,* Peter Paul Rubens, 1622). Finally, characterisation is the process by which the artist aims at accentuating the individual's positive or negative personality traits, which generally involve both the public and private spheres (cf. *Ritratto di un gentiluomo veneziano,* Tiziano, 1507).[13]

In light of the above evaluations, it may be suggested that the two films by Antonioni question the core of the portraiture genre, defined by the realistic or symbolic representation of a sitter. In this case, the sitter is not a human being, but is instead a natural landscape (in *Ritorno*) and a selection of Italian high Renaissance and Baroque art (in *Roma*). The films may be read in multiple ways. *Ritorno* can be seen as a tribute to the places of *L'avventura*; as an attempt to remake his 1960 film in colour; as a visual exploration of a mountain landscape; as the director's adventure alongside the path of his former characters; and as a further tribute to the Sicilian landscape. *Roma* may be interpreted as a reflection on the artistic value and

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[11] Paola Tinagli, 'Women and Portraiture' and 'Images of Ideal Beauty', in *Women in Italian Renaissance Art. Gender Representation Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 49–63 and pp. 73–83.
[12] 'Portraiture', *The Dictionary of Art*, 279.
[13] Ibid.

eternity of the city; as a homage to the great masters of Western art, including Michelangelo, Bernini and Piranesi; as an urban and spatial investigation; and, finally, as a meditation on the relationship between cinema and art.

Whilst being all of these, though, the films most importantly aim at giving a wide view of the two landscapes under investigation. In this sense, it may be argued that *Ritorno* and *Roma* are primarily film portraits of a landscape and lend themselves to be analysed in terms of Antonioni's process of *idealisation*, as they exemplify the imposition of the artist's vision on realistic representation. This assertion will be the main concept of the forthcoming analysis, including a reasoning of important themes, such as the return journey, iconic places, absence and engagement with the history of art.

6.3   Painting the island of Lisca Bianca

6.3.1   (Re-)interpretation of a film?

The relationship between *L'avventura* and *Ritorno* is undeniable, despite the two films being so different. *L'avventura* is a long feature film from the 1960s, while *Ritorno* is a short-format work made for television in the 1980s. In terms of content, the first film articulates the individual stories of a group of friends visiting the Aeolian Islands and a few towns in Sicily, while the second film is mainly concerned with Antonioni's return to Lisca Bianca and the emotions that this place has stirred in him. In particular, with the shift from black and white in *L'avventura* to colour in *Ritorno,* the use of colours takes on privileged importance.[14]

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[14] The version of *Ritorno,* which the following frames have been taken from, is a non-commercial version preserved in the Fondazione Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia Cineteca Nazionale in Rome. Because this copy shows evident damages, including burnt colours and scratches, the frames in Fig. 60, 61 and 62 are intended as reference only for the reader. Another digital copy of the film is preserved in the RAI Teche in Rome. The

Interviewed by Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana in 1982, Antonioni enthusiastically appraised his new adventure with videotape and expressed the willingness to colourise *L'avventura* with a new technology to which he referred as 'color enhancer'.[15] As this project was never accomplished, *Ritorno* may be regarded as the only manifestation of the director's desire to show the colours of the cliffs, sea and nature of Lisca Bianca. However, whilst the sequence at Lisca Bianca in *L'avventura* was shot during poor weather conditions, culminating in strong wind, rain and turbulent seas during the night, *Ritorno* was shot at the end of July, during more pleasant weather and featuring warmer colours. Discussing this particular point, Ghezzi notes Antonioni's choice to bleach the colours on the *Ritorno* print in post-production to get as close as possible to the cold, grey nuances of *L'avventura*.[16] The cold light in the opening sequence and the bleached white cliffs of the island evoke a winter day, and it is one of the effects of the director's accurate work on colours.

The film is also Antonioni's first short-format work in colour and this is a unique fact in itself. In spite of the director's excitement for videotape and electronics in the 1970s and 1980s, to shoot *Ritorno* he opted for a celluloid film camera, bringing a higher cinematic status to this project for television.[17] Contrary to the commercial short works *Fotoromanza* and *Renault 9* that were both shot on video, *Ritorno* was shot on 16mm film – the same film format of his early black and white documentaries – allowing it to be classified with Antonioni's art cinema. Also, unsurprisingly, the film credits Carlo di Palma as cinematographer, who worked on some of Antonioni's key feature films, such as *Il deserto rosso*, *Blow-Up* and

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colours of this version, broadcasted on the Italian national television in 2007, are arguably closer to those of the original film copy, as they correspond to the description made by the producer Ghezzi.

[15] Antonioni, 'My Method', p. 374.

[16] Ghezzi, p.236.

[17] From Ghezzi's description of the overall project of *Falsi Ritorni*, Antonioni's choice in shooting on 16mm does not seem to be contingent on anyone except himself. Bertolucci had planned to shot on video and the insert dedicated to *La Terra Trema* should have been made with the use of a soundstage. See Ghezzi, p. 234.

Identificazione, and who would come to collaborate with Antonioni again on *Roma.* The choice of this skilled cinematographer strengthens the artistic value of *Ritorno* and the regard Antonioni had for the project.

Overall, *Ritorno* reinterprets a part of the events occurring in *L'avventura,* starting from the characters' arrival on Lisca Bianca. As Ghezzi points out, the idea of repetition is a nodal element within the film from the very beginning and is not limited to the re-exploration of physical itineraries, emotions, camera movements and styles. Repetition involves the subject of the film as well: mountains. As if Antonioni were repeating Cezanne's method of painting the same mountain again and again, the director keeps exploring, in film after film, visible and invisible aspects of his natural surroundings. Further, the construction of the film itself implies a repetition of a cinematic experience, of travel, of a story, of a soundtrack, and above all, of a place. It is thus interesting that, among all of the possible opening lines from *L'avventura*, Antonioni opts for Raimondo and Giulia's short dialogue. To Giulia's naïve statement 'Una volta le isole Eolie erano tanti vulcani', Raimondo comments that 'Pensa che dodici anni fa, quando io e te siamo venuti qui, hai detto la stessa cosa'. This sentence is the first clue to signal the feeling of the reiteration of a past experience.

Behind the choice of this island, opposed to other possible locations that are shown in *L'avventura,* there are both creative and personal reasons. On the one hand, Lisca Bianca is a stunningly iconic place of the 1960 feature; it represents the emotional core of the film and the place where the feelings of mystery and disorientation fully come to possess the characters, since it is where Anna disappears, and where the adventure begins. On the other hand, in 1960, the director and part of the crew shared on Lisca Bianca experiences akin to those of the fictional characters in the film, as they felt entrapped by the island itself.[18] In this sense, the film conveys three temporal and spatial levels: the fictional space of *L'avventura,* as indicated by music and the characters' voices; Antonioni's own shooting experience in

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[18] Antonioni, 'Le Avventure of *L'Avventura*', in *The Architecture*, pp. 78–81 (p. 79).

1960, as told in his remembrances;[19] and his experience in 1983, as conveyed in this return journey.

From the opening sequence, the audio combines Fusco's music and the original dialogue from *L'avventura* that occurs on the yacht, including some of Claudia's joyful comments ('Basiluzzo! Sembra il nome di un pesce'). Most importantly, all of the elements correlated to Anna are incorporated here: Anna swimming close to the island, followed by her joke about the possible presence of a shark in the water; her disappearance; and, finally, the unsuccessful and desperate quest to find her. During a sequence of approximately two minutes, the camera frames the island (Fig. 60); it gets closer and closer to it, and then begins exploring it from the side, in corners and among the coves.

Fig. 60: screen grabs from *L'avventura* (left) and *Ritorno* (right). Both pictures are frontal shots of the arrival at the rock of Lisca Bianca.[20]

A building narrative rhythm is palpable from these very first moments, and the relationship between the shakiness of the images and the audio excerpts from *L'avventura* contributes to intensify the filmic tension.

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[19] Ibid.

[20] As explained in footnote 15, the colours of the images of *Ritorno* shown in this chapter has incorporated the written 'no commercial use' and do not correspond to those of the original version, a copy of which is digitally preserved in the RAI Teche. In this cited copy, light is cooler and contrasts are emphasised; the colours of rocks, objects, and various materials are bleached out and tend toward extreme whites and greys. Vegetation is dark green and brown, instead of a vivid and summery green, and in some of the final shots the sky is a gleaming light blue.

Beyond positioning the spectator gradually closer to the island, the power of this opening scene lies in its ability to embody both the physical and metaphorical return of the director to a place of unfinished business. It may be argued that, for Antonioni, returning full-circle to this island is a stronger motivation than giving homage to one of his cult films. Cinematically speaking, other than the sampled dialogue and the noises from the yacht engine, the correspondence between the two films is not literal. Considering the title of the overall television project *Falsi ritorni - Per un'archeologia del set,* it is suggested that this comeback is as a *false* return.

In this film, the characters' bodies are absent, but their voices are present. The focus has changed: the location of an old story has become the protagonist of a new one. The right-hand frame in Fig.61 represents the first, and most canonical, revelation of *Ritorno* as landscape portrait film; Antonioni captures the full likeness of the island, frontally and realistically, as if he were a painter beholding a sitter.

Fig. 61: screen grabs from *L'avventura* (left) and *Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* (right). Claudia's desperate search for Anna, on the left, is suggested only by the sound of the character's voice in *Ritorno,* on the right.[21]

Anna's body, shown prominently in the left-hand frame of Fig. 61, is no longer present, allowing the director to visually confront the ground of Lisca Bianca without any obstacle. Figs. 60 and 61 reflect the typical behaviour and position of the camera in each film respectively: in

[21] See footnote no. 21.

L'avventura the camera stays mainly with the characters and their emotional interactions with the place, whereas in *Ritorno* it focuses exclusively on the natural landscape. In previous chapters, I have suggested that locations are Antonioni's first cause: in this case, *space* the island has fully taken the place of the *human being* the characters. It is thus evident that the island is the true film subject, or rather, the *sitter* of the portrait, as the director's main goal is to portray its shape and characteristics. *Ritorno* bears resemblance, as well, to the final sequence of *L'eclisse,* which has been discussed earlier in this dissertation. In *Ritorno* Antonioni explores another lunar landscape, this time in search of the invisible traces left behind by his characters and himself as the director of *L'avventura*. Thus, the camera seems to be repeating a past experience and rediscovering the desperate feelings marking the scene in *L'avventura*, without the bodies of the original characters.

6.3.2   Pictorial exploration of a landscape

A substantial part of *Ritorno* is dedicated to the exploration of details and hidden spots of Lisca Bianca, with the characters' voices in the background screaming Anna's name from somewhere far away (Fig. 62). Towards the end of the film, as if the camera were feeding off its own fascination with the landscape, these movements do not appear to be narratively or linearly motivated and instead follow the director's abstract sensibility. The landscape is explored with a wide range and contrast of angles and camera movements, including panoramic and aerial shots, details and inserts of the rocky surface, jump cuts and zooms. The camera takes different rhythms and patterns without an apparent reason, and at times 'gets distracted' and stops on a single detail of the scene (Fig. 62).

Fig. 62: screen grabs from *Ritorno*. Details of rocks and found objects.[22]

The four stills hint at a profound, intimate connection between Antonioni and Nature, as the director slowly rests his gaze on the details of rocks, flowers and found objects discovered across the island. The viewer is able to hear Antonioni's steps on the ground distinctly, and consequently to feel the presence of the artist behind the artwork. In this sense, the level of subjectivity of the film is not defined by the director's vocal commentary, but instead by the allusion to his own presence *within* (or just outside) the frame.

Furthermore, visually speaking, it may be argued that Antonioni is metaphorically painting a rocky landscape, but on film. Painting has been discussed as one of the director's main long-term activities; as a *divertissement,* it was part of his personal sphere, occurring only in periods of absence from filmmaking.[23] However, Antonioni was also a fine connoisseur who integrated his art knowledge within the visual apparatus of his films. In

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[22] See footnote no. 21.

[23] See chapters 1 and 2.

this sense, the frames in Fig. 62 may invoke many cornerstones of the history of art, spanning from the traditions of still life, *objet trouvé* (found objects) and landscape painting. Because the editing style of *Ritorno* engenders a sense of fragmentation, the frames in Fig. 62 also can be seen to reflect an inward focalisation of the space, without giving the viewer any illusion of being part of something prolonged in time.

Firstly, taken individually, these images may be compared to a series of still life paintings, meant as representation of silent, motionless life. They may call to mind the Dutch works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when still lives emerged as an independent genre within the tradition of painting.[24] The representation of Nature abandoned its historical place secondary to the representation of human figures, and such elements as skulls, flowers, fruit, musical instruments, pottery and books became the preferred subjects of an entire class of paintings. Along similar lines, in Antonioni's images nature comes to the foreground and is presented to the viewer as the centrepiece. For instance, the third frame clockwise in Fig. 62 focuses on one object. It shows a metal basket visibly ruined by the weather, left on the ground, and then found on the island and shot by Antonioni. Contrary to traditional still-life compositions, the object is not theatrically staged (as on a table, for instance), does not convey any moral values and is not meant to address any concerns regarding truth in the artistic medium in which it is depicted. However, this basket encompasses the same idea of decay that can be found in still-life paintings as well as the artist's willing examination of his object closely and with scientific rigour. Similarly to still lifes, this basket is inserted into the history of art, not as an object in the composition, but as the subject of it.

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[24] For a deeper discussion on the core elements of still life, see Norman Bryson, 'Abundance', in *Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1990), pp. 96 135; Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective. Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth Dutch Still-Life Painting* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2005).

Secondly, the reference to the *objet trouvé* and the *readymade* offers additional insight. The first term refers to manufactured or natural objects with non-art functions that are integrated into works of art, predominately within an assemblage. Instead, the concept of the readymade entails that objects are presented to the viewer without any manipulations or filters and are usually mass-produced products.[25] The essence of both these practices is present in Antonioni's frames, as it rests on the artist's recognition of the found object as a chance for aesthetic exploration and art value, and its consequent elevation from common object to object of art. The objects chosen by Antonioni as subjects of his compositions are closer to the sensibility of found objects than of the readymade, as they are selected by the artist because of their uniqueness and are not intended as mass-produced multiples.

In the Surrealists' view, a found object contains more symbolic meaning than a readymade, as its selection plays a significant, almost mystical, role in the construction of their assemblages and sculptures.[26] In Antonioni's films, a found object does not connote any magical meanings, but it may offer a new range of interpretations for the overall story. A found object is related to something unseen. For instance, Chatman discusses the found objects in *L'eclisse* in light of their function to suggest unwritten details of the plot. They show what is there, proving the 'thereness of the real world', he comments.[27] The real world shown in *Ritorno,* exemplified by pieces of rocks and metal, wooden bars and a basket in Fig. 62, may be read thus as a selection of found objects. By selecting these elements, Antonioni unveils the real surface of the island and what has been left from his last visit.

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[25] Ian Wallace, 'The History of the Found Object in Art', *ArtSpace* (20 April 2014) <http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/the-history-of-the-found-object-in-art> [accessed 3 January 2015]; Ian Chilvers, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Art* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2004), 507.

[26] M.E. Warlick, 'Magic, Alchemy and Surrealist Objects', in *Magical Objects. Things and Beyond,* ed. by Elmar Schenkel and Stefan Welz (Berlin: Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2007), pp. 1 32.

[27] Chatman, 'Objets Trouvés', in *Antonioni, or, the surface',* pp. 99 101.

Thirdly, *Ritorno* may be discussed in light of Antonioni's long-term engagement with the practice of landscape painting and with his cinematic work of spatial investigation. In this sense, the graphic series *Le montagne incantate,* exhibited in Venice the same year of the release of *Ritorno*, is an example of the director's fascination for dynamism in landscape.[28] The proximity in terms of both subject and date of these projects may suggest a potential coincidence in the preparation phase. For instance, in the case of Fig. 63, Antonioni breaks the two-dimensional boundaries and enters the three-dimensional space through the use of assemblage, including a sense of violence and dynamism within the image.

Fig. 63: *Le montagne, no.132,* 1979-1983, Tempera and mixed media on paper, 21 x 28 cm. Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara. Courtesy of and © Archivio Michelangelo Antonioni, Ferrara.

Greys, blues and whites are the dominant colours, evoking primarily the natural elements of water, snow and ice. Water is the quintessential element

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[28] See chapter 2 for an extended discussion on the series.

of the island of Lisca Bianca, and the colours chosen for the details of waves in the RAI Teche version of *Ritorno* mirror the same palette of Fig. 63. Looking at Fig. 64, it may be understood that tones and feelings of the landscape in *Ritorno* have worked as one of the most powerful references for the series of *Le montagne,* and vice versa.

Fig. 64: screen grab from *Ritorno*. Details of water crashing against the rocks.[29]

Despite the inaccuracy of the colours of the image above, it is still possible to understand the overall visual intent of the artist and the intensity of the water against the rocks. Both of these images encompass thus a high degree of personal involvement that is different, to a certain extent, than that implied in Antonioni's feature films. Fig. 63 from *Le montagne* is part of the director's private activity, when far from filmmaking; Fig. 64 links to a personal adventure besides a professional one.

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[29] See footnote no. 21.

6.3.3   A private matter

The chaotic movement of the sea in Fig. 64 may be representative of things experienced or noticed by Antonioni during his time spent on the island. This presumption sheds light on *Ritorno,* as well as on *Le montagne incantate,* as a private matter between the space and the director. Antonioni's determination in conveying the same meteorological conditions of *L'avventura* contributes to the overall mise-en-scène and shows his attraction to water and a sense of mystery and danger. According to Antonioni's notes on the production of *L'avventura*, every morning they travelled by boat from Panarea to Lisca Bianca, on a persistently stormy sea.[30] Because of the extremely poor weather conditions, they were once forced to camp on the latter, and two men of the crew, swept away by a wave, actually disappeared at sea to be rescued a few days later.[31] The director remembers that, as happened to Claudia and Sandro in *L'avventura*, he suffered from insomnia that night and was kept awake by the noise of waves crashing against the rocks.

Moreover, in 1983, Antonioni commented to Luigi Vaccari about the shooting of *Ritorno*:

> Two young men were doing a TV programme on *L'avventura,* and they asked me to return to Lisca Bianca   the small island where I shot most of the film, and to shoot some footage there. That's what I did in the middle of July and I must admit that the impact was very strong because ... *that island rejected me.* Actually, I was the one who *felt* rejected; it wasn't the island. Obviously, the island wasn't doing anything; so I was the one *who felt* that what I was doing there at that time was totally useless and rather unbearable. I no longer *wanted* to be there. [Italics added][32]

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[30] Antonioni, 'Le avventure'.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Antonioni, 'Profession against', interviewed by Luigi Vaccari, in *The Architecture*, pp. 217 225 (p. 222).

Antonioni's insistence on the verb *to feel* betrays his emotions and their consequent transposition in the physical dimension of the island. In the quote above Antonioni acknowledges feeling 'rejected' by the island. Of course, such a statement needs to be read metaphorically. However, it confirms Antonioni's personal engagement with this cinematic adventure and his decision to close this chapter of his career.

The analysis of *Ritorno* has thus revealed elements outside of the initial comparison with and response to *L'avventura*. The film encapsulates the idea of the director travelling in time and returning to face former locations, feelings and cinema experiences. However, it has been argued that the true focus of the director's camera is the treatment of landscape and the relationship of film to other art forms, painting above all. The film that results is a portrait of Lisca Bianca, whose body is painted in every detail by Antonioni, exploring every side and angle. The characters of *L'avventura* are indeed physically absent, because *there is no necessity* to make them visible anymore; their voices represent the evocative memories of a past and finished story, as well as of a phase in the director's career.

Consequently, *Ritorno* may be interpreted according to the maker's emotions and process of idealisation, as the images are inevitably filtered by Antonioni's unpleasant personal memories of Lisca Bianca. The painter (here Antonioni) does not impose his ideals of beauty on the subject of the portrait, as happened in the Renaissance era. Rather, he invests on the island his current feelings of finding himself again in that place, and his determination to close a chapter of his life and career. Because of this detachment from the past, *Ritorno* emerges as something independent and distinctive from any other Antonioni's films. It is a landscape portrait film whose origins have roots in the director's cinematic interests in colour, sound and space at the beginning of the 1980s, as well as in his visual art series, *Le montagne*.

6.4   Antonioni's gaze on Rome

Like the other episodes in *12 Registi per 12 Città*, *Roma* was meant to enhance the beauty and the essence of one Italian city for touristic purposes. The choice of Rome appears to have been somewhat natural and expected for Antonioni. In addition to its unquestioned status as the symbolic heart of Italian art, the city has been the setting of many of Antonioni's earlier films, and he made it his permanent residence in the 1980s. On this project, Antonioni's wife participated as assistant director, long-time collaborator Carlo di Palma as cinematographer; art historians Argan and Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco were asked to collaborate as artistic consultants because of their international reputation as Baroque art experts. Composer Roman Vlad executed a sophisticated musical arrangement, including four differently paced pieces to punctuate the four main spatial transactions in the film. Although the city of Rome is the apparent subject of investigation, the underlying focus is Antonioni's vision of the city as seen through the lens of art. The following analysis will consider the visual details, intentions and gestures by which Antonioni paints his idealised portrait of the city. This discussion will be articulated around three interlocking subjects: the return journey, human emotions and the history of art.

6.4.1 The return journey

The return journey anchors *Roma* with a conceptual meaning. For this film, Antonioni comes back to working in the city after his 1985 stroke, but he does not walk along the paths of previous films. According to Siegel, *Roma* lacks two distinctive topoi of Antonioni's cinema: the dialogue between space and the individual, and the director's modernist architectural vision.[33]

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[33] Siegel, 'From Identificazione to Investigazione: Looking at Late Antonioni', in *International Conference: Antonioni 1912-2012*, Casa Italiana Zerelli-Marimò, New York University (30 March 2012), *Vimeo* < http://vimeo.com/40172731> [accessed 10 November 2014].

The reason for these omissions lies in the subject and the year of the film itself, as this is not a portrait of the urbanisation of Rome, and it does not aim, as his previous films did, at exploring contemporary social dynamics. Moreover, the narration excludes the urban places of Rome that became iconic through his earlier cinema as, for instance, the elegant suburbs of *L'avventura*, the EUR neighbourhood in *L'eclisse*, and the trendy central areas of the city in *Identificazione di una donna*. As it will be explained, this new journey expresses the director's personal vision and feelings towards Rome and in the selection of locations, Antonioni seems to be revealing his inner self. The emotional soundtrack is given a prominent role, and sweeping crane shots, jump cuts, dolly shots and aerial views endow the film with grace and energy. All of these elements characterise this 1989 film and the director's later short film productions of the 1990s and 2000s.

Roma marks the director's return to another open-air museum, since the mentioned *La villa dei mostri*. These two films share themes and intentions, despite their differences in colour, style and commentary. However, *Roma* also establishes a tight connection with Antonioni's narrative cinema, also where this is not intended as a tribute to a specific place or artist. In *Roma,* the viewer is immersed in a deep and material pictorial space, in which she/he finds herself/ himself guided by a contemplating directorial gaze. The camera discovers a detail of architecture or a sculpture or a fresco, and lingers on it for a few seconds as the time of the narration stops in front of it. For a similar approach the close detail of the Roman *veduta* in Niccolò's house in *Identificazione*, the camerawork in the sequence at Casa Pedrera in Barcelona in *Professione: Reporter*, and the sequence at the antique shop in London in *Blow-Up* may be considered.

Antonioni travels through the very centre of Rome, marking both well-known and less cliché historical landmarks, as well as undertaking a journey across history and the history of art of the Italian capital. The film opens and ends with two iconic images: a frontally oriented wide shot of the twin churches in Piazza del Popolo (Santa Maria in Montesanto, 1662-79 and

Santa Maria dei Miracoli, 1675-81, by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Carlo Fontana) and a detail of the fresco *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel (Michelangelo, 1508-12). After Piazza del Popolo, the camera's attention moves to two Baroque fountains, *Fontana del Tritone* in Piazza Barberini, made by Gian Lorenzo Bernini during 1642-43, and *Fontana della Barcaccia* in Piazza di Spagna, completed by Gian Lorenzo and Pietro Bernini in 1629. These locations, which prominently feature Baroque architecture, indicate Antonioni's selective process and hint at the role that the two experts Argan and Fagiolo dell'Arco may have played in the project.

The camera moves to both exterior and interior views of the Casina Pio IV in the Vatican (Pirro Ligorio, 1561), followed by the X century church of Santa Maria del Priorato, which was rebuilt in the 1550s and further renovated by Giovanni Battista Piranesi from 1764 through 1766. In this first interior sequence, Antonioni devotes considerable attention to the sculptural altarpiece showing Saint Basil's contemplation. He films the altarpiece frontally and from behind, cuts to a few details of the white *alto rilievo,* and finally uses an arc shot around the large sphere supporting the sculpture of Saint Basil. Similar camerawork will be central in Antonioni's last film *Lo sguardo,* focusing on the statue of *Moses,* part of the tomb of Pope Julius II in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli (Michelangelo, 1505-45). As will be discussed, the relationship between these two short-format films sheds new light on *Roma* as a prelude to the last encounter between Antonioni and Art.

Changing location, the camera cuts to a two-faced sculptural head on the loggia of Palazzo Falconieri (inserted by Francesco Borromini in 1646-49) and then continues with views and zooms into details of the palace. This palace sequence concludes the first part of the film, dedicated as it is to the Baroque layer of the city, and specifically to the dramatic lines and curves of the featured architecture. A conceptual bridge is made to connect two places, represented literally by the Milvian Bridge (206 BC). Located further north on the river Tiber, the bridge is the last example of exterior

architecture examined in *Roma*. Both the aesthetic and historic values of this bridge are indisputable: the structure was a strategic landmark on the Tiber during the Roman Empire and it became notorious for its role in the battle between Constantine and Maxentius in the year 312. Nonetheless, it may be possible to hypothesise a deeper reason for its inclusion that goes beyond its historical significance, especially since it is geographically far from the other locations in the film, and the only monument from the classical Rome that is shown.

Fig. 65: screen grabs from *Roma*. View of the Milvian Bridge on the left, and details of the fresco *The Battle at the Milvian Bridge* on the right.

The answer to this question needs to be looked for in the next frame of *Rome*, showing Giulio Romano and Gianfrancesco Penni's *Battle at the Milvian Bridge* (1520-24), on the South Wall of the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican. In making this fresco, the young artists followed the preparatory drawing and cartoons of their recently deceased master Raphael, who presumably designed the decoration plan of the entire Sala under commission of Leo X in 1519.[34]

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[34] For further information see the detailed study on the program of the Sala: Rolf Quednau, *Die Sala di Costantino im Vatikanishen Palast: Zur Dekoration der deiden Medici-Papste Leo X. und Clemens VII, Studien zur Kunstgeschichte, Band 13* (Hildesheim and New York, 1979); Jan L. de Jong, 'Universals and Particulars. History paintings in the "Sala di Costantino" in the Vatican Palace', in *Recreating Ancient History,* ed. by Karl A. Enenkel, Jan L. de Jong and Jeanine de Landtsheer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 27 56; Marcia B. Hall, 'The Sala di Costantino (1519-1525)', in *Rome* (University of Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp.146 147.

Of this fresco Antonioni first highlights the portion showing the Milvian Bridge (Fig. 65, right).[35] Because of this subject, the choice of this particular bridge ushers the viewer into a fluid transition between first and second acts of the film. As the two images juxtaposed in Fig. 65 suggest, the second part of the film shifts to privileging painting and frescoes over exterior architecture, leaving the tangibility of three-dimensional space to enter the illusory dimension of surface. The viewer moves from exterior to interior and from real space to pictorial space, represented by the iconic Sistine Chapel. Above all, the succession of the two frames in Fig. 65 allows Antonioni to play with the viewer's perception of space and time, to establish a dialogue between history (the battle) and the history of art (the representation of the battle), and to connect the present (the time of the film shooting) with the past (the time of the fresco was made). The camera movement emphasises the virtuosity of this spatial transaction; the director approaches the architectural bridge in a symmetrical, frontally oriented wide shot, zooms in and cuts to the detail of the bridge in the fresco. Then he slowly zooms out and pans left to reveal a more significant portion of the overall representation.

6.4.2   Human emotions

Showing a strong interest in the fresco of *The Battle,* Antonioni's camera lingers on this work for about one minute, moving between different groups of human figures and discovering violent and emotional moments of the episode (Fig. 66, below). In his critical essay on *Le montagne,* Argan discusses Antonioni's propensity for still images, comparing him to a musician who focuses on silent pauses rather than notes.[36] To paraphrase

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[35] The battle took place on 28 October 312, and ushered the Roman Empire to the end of the Tetrarchy; Constantine won the battle and proclaimed himself solo emperor of the Roman Empire. For historical details and reference see, H.A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[36] Argan, 'Untitled', in *Le montagne*.

Argan, *Roma* expands Antonioni's use of pictorial *pauses*, as opposed to narrative *notes*, and presents the viewer with a motionless musical composition.

Fig. 66: screen grab from *Roma*. Detail of the fresco *The Battle at the Milvian Bridge.*

As Fig. 66 exemplifies, Antonioni's details of the frescoes are fixed frames enclosing a world that exists by itself and for itself, capturing the viewer's gaze in a centripetal way. Using a long sequence of close details in the Sala di Costantino, as well as those he highlights in Raphael's Loggia and the Sistine Chapel, Antonioni seems to give homage to the intention of the original artists. His insistence on showing a multitude of details allows the viewer to enter the individual pictorial stories at close range and appreciate their particulars. The director chooses his favourite scenes among those depicted on the ceilings and walls of the Vatican and then makes them part of his film.

Horror vacui — the filling of the entire plane of the artwork with detail — is one of the main characteristics of the representation of the climax of battle in Giulio Romano and Gianfrancesco Penni's fresco.

Just as in ancient reliefs, there is no view through some areas of the fresco, as bodies are overlapped without leaving any empty space. Similarly to the other four scenes of the story of Constantine in the Sala, *The Battle* shows a great variety of historical details, such as the clothing and arms borne by the soldiers. Additionally, at close inspection, it is possible to see various emotional moments, like the soldier frenetically swimming in the river in the bottom right corner of the composition and the old father clasping the body of his deceased son in the bottom left corner (Fig. 66).[37]

The overall *Battle* proceeds with a pictorial movement from left to right, in which the bodies are sculpturally painted echoing both ancient Greek reliefs and Michelangelo's unique style in the nearby Sistine Chapel. Antonioni's camera does not follow this movement; rather it moves from a detail on the right to one on the left, and vice versa, without a linear direction.

The detail in Fig. 66 is among those selected by the director and shows a whirling movement of soldiers on the battlefield; the colours span greys, whites, acid pinks and browns, and the main feeling is one of general despair and suffering. Giulio Romano and Gianfrancesco Penni painted these bodies with accurate precision and realism, with their muscles, vertebrae and bones shown prominently. As art scholar Marcia B. Hall notes, there is an equal emphasis on small details, like the patterns of the clothing, and more significant elements, such as the figure of Constantine himself in the middle of the battle.[38] It is possible that attention to the details of the human body and the relationship between space and character are the aspects of this work that attract Antonioni. As it has been discussed in previous chapters, the director has similarly played with perspectives and

[37] De Jong, 'Universals and Particulars.', p. 32.
[38] Hall, 'The Sala di Costantino (1519-1525)', p. 146.

distances, immersing his characters in the landscape and constraining them with lines, shapes, objects and architecture.[39]

With the camera entering Raphael's Loggia (1517-19), the music becomes more *andante* and introduces the change of location. An establishing shot of the space is followed by a slow, low-angle tracking shot across the whole ceiling and a series of details of lunettes and individual pictorial scenes, including *The Expulsion from Paradise of Adam and Eve* (Raphael and School, II vault; Fig. 67), trompe l'oeils, *Isaac and Rebecca Spied upon by Abimelech* (Giulio Romano, V vault) and the initial four scenes from *The Creation Stories* (Raphael and School, I vault). Following a gradual, emotional passage through other *stanze* decorated with rich *grottesche*, the camera finally enters the Sistine Chapel (Michelangelo, 1508-12; 1535-41), lingering on numerous details before zooming out and revealing a wide portion of the ceiling. It is useful to point out that at the time of Antonioni's film, the Chapel was closed to the public because it was undergoing cleaning (1980-94). Restoration brought to light Michelangelo's mannerist palette, *cangiante* colours and chiaroscuro techniques, as well as additional details, which are not possible to see clearly in Antonioni's images.

Besides the last brief wide shot of the ceiling, the camera is far from objectively reporting the grandeur of Michelangelo's overall *opera*. Rather, it focuses only on a few images, almost relocating their original position within the pictorial scheme of the Chapel. Marginal elements, like the *Ignudi* painted at the corners of the nine central panels, seem to attract his interest and become one of the sites of his visual investigation. Similar to the approach he pursued in the Sala di Costantino, Antonioni acts as if he were a painter of bodies and emotions, and, indeed, his gaze is attracted by movements of the individual bodies and their contortions and facial expressions inside each frame. The viewer is transported into the frame and urged to stay within it, to examine its imperfections and tones and the details of every figure until the camera moves on again. The director's

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[39] See chapter 1.

primary fascination with specific detail lies in its power to encompass the highest grade of human emotion.

In light of this, the portion in Fig. 67 showing the misery and humiliation in Adam and Eve's faces and bodies, functions as a synecdoche of the famous composition; their legs have been left out of frame, as well as the figure of the Angel above them.[40]

Fig. 67: screen grab from *Roma*. Detail of the fresco *Adam and Eve's Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1509-10.

With Michelangelo's frescoes depicting a vast spectrum of human behaviours and forms, Antonioni lets only some of their emotions emerge, and opts for displaying despair and betrayal (Fig. 67), reflection and wisdom (Prophet Jeremiah, Fig. 68), and pain (Fig. 68). Taking a step back to Siegel's argument about the two missing topoi, it has been said that human

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[40] The detail of *Adam and Eve's Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* is from a panel of the second section of the ceiling, which also includes the scene of *The Fall of Man* on the right of the composition.

beings and their emotions are the first element that is noticeably absent in *Roma*. Antonioni does not use any actors like Lina Wertmuller does in her film from the series, *Bari*; instead, he seems exclusively to focus on architecture and painting. However, the soldiers in the Sala di Costantino *Battle,* Adam and Eve, *Ignudi*, the Prophets and God are the fictional characters that animate *Roma*.
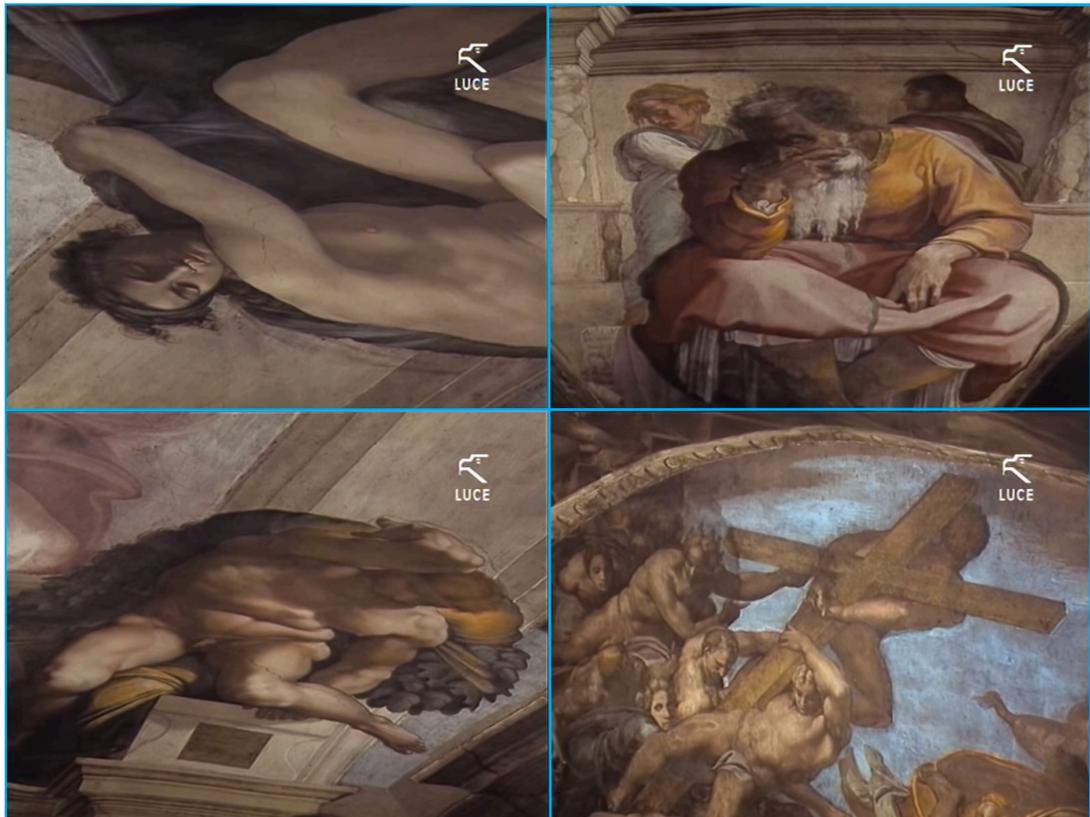
Fig. 68: screen grabs from *Roma*. A sequence of four shots (clockwise from top left): details of the frescoes *Ignudo*, 1511; the *Prophet Jeremiah*, 1511; *Ignudo*, 1511; and *The Last Judgement*, 1536-37.

In this sense Antonioni's work on emotions in his cinema is deeply present also in this film, only in this case it is filtered by the brush of high Renaissance artists, such as Giulio Romano and Michelangelo. The same assumption may be applied to bodies. As Rascaroli has reiterated in her discussion on *Lo sguardo,* 'Antonioni's films bring the bodies to fore in multiple ways'.[41] In *Roma* bodies become artworks to contemplate closely; a

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[41] Rascaroli, 'The Self-Portrait Film'.

theatre of experiences and historical and mythological events; a means of studying Michelangelo's anatomical exaggerations; and, as discussed, an examination of fragility, suffering and imperfection.

6.4.3 The two Michelangelos

Although the director's body is absent from *Roma*, his personality seems to be evinced through his gaze, particularly in the last part of the film. His camera moves as if it were dancing across the images, following the rhythm of the music and silently transitioning from one detail to another. Quiet movements and remarkable close-ups of the nudes denote the presence of a subjective camera and a palpable sentiment of fascination towards these images and their maker. Antonioni establishes a dialogue with Michelangelo himself, to whom he approaches as both individual and artist. According to Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo represents the peak of Renaissance Italian art, and the encounter between the two artists in *Roma* anticipates that in *Lo sguardo* at the tomb of Julius II. A recent interview with the sound designer of the film, Mirco Mencacci, offers a deeper insight on its concept. Mencacci explains that the choice of each sound element responds to the need of suggesting a sense of intimacy that eventually emerges from the meeting of Antonioni with Michelangelo's statue:

> E ho scelto il silenzio. Era una scelta difficile: il silenzio costringe a pensare, è una dimensione particolare, spesso scomoda, e mantenerla per 16 minuti può essere complicato, si rischia di infastidire chi guarda il film. […] Abbiamo fatto vivere la chiesa con i suoi rumori: con lo scricchiolio di una porta, quello di una panca, o ancora dei passi composti. Il silenzio nel cinema è tutto fuorché assenza di rumore: in alcuni momenti del film avevo quasi sessanta tracce di suoni diversi. Ma chi le ascolta deve percepire il silenzio.[42]

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[42] Mirco Mencacci, 'Il Poeta dei Suoni', in *I ciechi non sognano il buio. Vivere con successo la cecità*, ed. by Mauro Marcantoni (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2008), pp. 179-183.

Furthermore, in her article on this last film, Rascaroli points out the exceptional presence in the frame of the director's body, which is usually absent from his cinema. The viewer sees Antonioni's digitally fashioned body (he was in wheelchair at the time) entering the church and approaching the statue of Moses to contemplate its overall shape and details, to touch it and feel the coldness of the stone.

As *Lo sguardo* is regarded as Antonioni's ultimate farewell and self-portrait film, Rascaroli explores the evocative feelings of death stirring from the images and the ambivalent meaning of the title of the film drawing parallels between the two Michelangelos   Buonarotti and Antonioni.[43] Indeed she argues that the film evokes the feeling of death in many ways. Elements such as the doorway of the church, the marked dichotomies shade/light and outside/inside, Antonioni's age at the time of shooting and his final exit from the space, recall 'not only the eschatological/supernatural dimension, but also of course the (im)materiality itself of cinema   the ray of light rearing the darkness of the auditorium.'[44] In *Roma* there is nothing of this. Although encompassing high religious values and being made during a relative late time of Antonioni and Buonarotti's careers, these images show a wide range of feelings and emotions besides death. Antonioni is not yet at the end of his life and his camera does not dialogue with Michelangelo exclusively, but rather with a number of architects, sculptors and painters. Rascaroli denies any attempts by Antonioni to compare himself in *Lo sguardo* with the Renaissance artist, proved by the director's extensive use of low-angle shots, which make his figure 'visually towered' by the sculpture of Moses.[45]

Rather, she argues that the director positions himself in front of the statue not as a filmmaker and a fellow artist, but as a spectator and admirer of Michelangelo's late masterpiece. In light of this critical view, it may be concluded that Antonioni shows a similar approach in front of the frescoes

[43] Rascaroli, 'The Self-Portrait Film'.
[44] Ibid. Page not indicated.
[45] Mencacci, 'Il Poeta'.

of the Sistine Chapel, with the exception that his body is not visible. Having spent his career studying and employing art within his cinema, the director seems to turn to one of his favourite high Renaissance artists in his late period. Antonioni admires and closely examines Michelangelo's pictorial and architectural work in *Roma* to conclude then his personal journey in front of one of Michelangelo's most iconic sculptural works in *Lo sguardo.*

A significant component of both these films, which bears repeating, is the reference to the high Renaissance, Mannerism and Baroque periods, spanning from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the second half of the seventeenth century. By discussing the historical landmarks visited by the director in *Roma,* this chapter has shed light on a precise angle of observation pursued by Antonioni. Owing to a selection of sculptural and architectonic elements in the first part of the film, and of pictorial artworks in the second part, the director has consistently brought forward his journey across human emotions, bodily expression and the history of art. Specifically, in the second part of the film, sixteenth-century painted bodies and objects take the place of live people, and they now play the role that has previously been that of actors, landscapes and cityscapes.

Antonioni's choice of Mannerism seems of great personal significance. Mannerism originally referred to the unconventional and excessively artificial style of some painters of the beginning of the sixteenth century, such as late-career Raphael and Michelangelo, as well as Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino and Giulio Romano, and is also indicative of a shift in the Italian culture of that period. Moving away from the feelings of harmony and pure beauty of the Renaissance period, artworks started to become a theatre of body contortions and haphazard colour juxtapositions, as well as vehicle of the feelings of fragility and instability. A similar shift may also be read in late Antonioni. As discussed in the previous chapters of this dissertation, his late works may be indicated as *mannerist* because of the repetition of previous themes and preoccupations interlocked with a hyperbolic style. It has also been argued that the 1980s indicate a change in Antonioni's life,

both in terms of professional and personal events. At this stage of his life, he aims at beginning a new chapter in his career, bringing to his films themes of turbulence, violence and fragility as indicated by the scripts of his unfinished project *La ciurma*. Known for his fascination with drama and conflicts, Antonioni has extensively tackled these feelings, albeit often in a subtle way, in his earlier production. It thus seems natural his turning to Mannerist figures when it is time to make his last films purposely and fully dedicated to art.

CONCLUSION

È giusto parlare […] del cinema di Antonioni e della sua pittura in unità[1]

The central aim of this study has been to redefine Antonioni as a multimedia artist, by tracing new perspectives on the evolution of his career starting with the production of *Le montagne*. Indeed, the original contribution of this dissertation has been its focus on 1980s corpus of works, including primary and secondary pieces, as a multifaceted prism and a period of the director's own critical reflection, embodying both the visual and thematic achievements reached in a long-standing career, and the germs of new creative and experimental directions. As I have demonstrated, the Italian auteur initiated a journey to redefine his cinema, intersecting his practice with the landscapes of painting, music, advertising and video, whilst also expanding many earlier stylistic and thematic preoccupations. Painting, photography, videotape, long and short films themselves became objects of reflection, in which the director's attention shifted towards the possibilities that the image could offer.

For each case study, from *Le montagne* to *Roma,* I examined the innovations introduced by the director and established its intellectual and aesthetic validity, while acknowledging the interconnection with previous and subsequent creative experiences. Both interdisciplinary and thematic readings proved to be appropriate tools in dealing with such variegated and multimedia works. Moreover, continuous referencing to artworks, terminology, visual artists and different cultural languages validated my thesis and served to enlighten unknown aspects regarding the goals, origins and forms of each single project. Thus, each art piece   whether watercolour, print, long film, short film or video   has been addressed

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[1] Calvesi, 'Untitled', in A*ntonioni. Le montagne,* p. 11.

according to the potential relations with other visual artists' works and those made by Antonioni around the same time, before and after.

Chapter 1 established the key roles that the intertwining elements of colour and space played in Antonioni's comprehensive oeuvre and personal life. In the first part of the chapter, a long excursus on the director's acquaintance with contemporary painters, as well as with the general history of art and painting, portrayed Antonioni as both art connoisseur and art practitioner. The multiple references to visual artists of different historical eras demonstrated the extent to which his cinema, and way of framing in particular, drew on such visual sources since the beginning of his career. I discussed the high degree of emotion that he invested in the use of colour, which became a tool for expressing feelings rather than for conveying a realistic portrait of reality.

Among the many artists who might have influenced Antonioni's perception of colour, Rothko was a significant contributor; through the analysis of some scenes from *Il deserto rosso,* for instance, I articulated both the common abstract sensibility of the two artists and their similar endeavour in encompassing an idea of pureness in colour, free of any figurative form. Expanding this fruitful comparison with Rothko's visual theories, in the second part of the chapter, I addressed some scenes from *L'eclisse*, *Il deserto rosso, Blow-Up* and *Zabriskie Pont* in order to outline the director's treatment of space and establish the coordinates for a spatial investigation of the 1980s works. From such study, the issue of space was found to be central in his cinema and always approached according to a constant fragmentation and a geometrical and abstract gaze. In the close analysis of the images, I described space as material, alienated, but illusory and charged with emotional significance and social meanings.

In chapter 2, the critical reading of *Le montagne* revealed it as exemplary of Antonioni's investigation of colour and space. A careful inspection of themes, forms and colours proved the interconnections with both other artists' works, such as those of Mondrian and Cezanne, and with

the director's own works, including *Il mistero, Professione: reporter, Ritorno* and late videos *Vulcano* and *Stromboli.* Further, the analysis of the methodological process behind *Le montagne* demonstrated an important connection between two phases of Antonioni's career. Like a painter who makes a sketch before painting on his canvas, during the making of *Il deserto rosso,* Antonioni put his colours on paper in order to visualise gradations and potential solutions; similarly, during the making of *Il mistero,* the director explored the colouring and the shape of the mountain landscape in different formats and on different surfaces. Just as the colour experimentations on paper of the 1960s reflected the combinations of colours in *Il deserto rosso,* as *Le montagne* mirrored the colour transfigurations of *Il mistero.*

Chapter 3 offered a fresh critical approach to *Il mistero* according to multiple points of view. The analysis of the overall project made visible both trademarks and innovations introduced by the director, as well as its affinities with the series of *Le montagne* and the Italian movement of Transavanguardia. With respect to a technical point of view, I established the significance for the director of experimenting with a new form, such as the video, in order to investigate the potential visual solutions that this medium might add to his research. Focused on these new technological solutions, Antonioni looked at the possibility of adapting an already existing text as an opportunity to free his cinema from the limits of story and devote himself on colour alteration only. However, the film also openly demonstrated his long-term endeavour of incorporating the contradictions, insights and changes of his era, including contemporary visual trends, pop culture, new technology and social issues. For instance, alongside a few allusions to Italian anarchy movements, in *Il mistero* I identified fluorescent colours and surprising effects, all identifiable with the *zeitgeist* of the 1980s. In this respect, a thematic and methodological parallel with artists of the Transavanguardia – considered one of the most daring art movements of contemporary Italy demonstrated Antonioni's awareness of contemporary

Italian painting and participation in the visual art scene of the 1980s. Together with similarities in thematic issues, application of colour and abstract and figurative representation, both the artists of Transavanguardia and Antonioni addressed as primary the question of the medium and its symbolic value within their cultural landscape.

Chapter 4 focused on *Identificazione*, regarded as the last Antoniennui feature before his 1985 stroke, and suggested an oscillating movement between both abstract and figurative gazes in the director's representation of reality. From the study of themes, camera movements, soundscape and framing, Antonioni advanced his work in describing the feelings of contemporary reality, encapsulating facts, impressions and trends, yet with an abstract and poetic view. Specifically, after a comparative analysis with the original novel from which *Identificazione* was adapted, the focus of the discussion shifted to social issues, visual solutions and soundscape. The film endowed an extension of the director's visual preoccupations, incorporating some of the elements that made his style so distinctive. However, I proved that the film partially distanced itself from Antonioni's traditional cinema, and ushered in a new phase of it, including the late films *Al di là* and *Il filo*. Male figures appeared disoriented and powerless compared to their female counterparts; there was a more explicit use of naked female bodies, mirroring a contemporary change in Italian social customs and norms; and finally, music started to be used differently than in previous films, over-scoring the images and occupying a more predominant role in the overall cinematic space.

In chapter 5, the study of the short pieces *Renault 9* and *Fotoromanza* described Antonioni's project in experimenting with new video solutions, as well as his participation in two of the most exciting creative industries of that time, namely music video and advertising. The first part of the chapter provided a concise introduction to the history and language of the advertising industry during the 1980s and contextualised Antonioni's *Renault 9* according to this perspective. Alongside a few references to

Surrealism and futuristic scenarios, the close reading of this advert established a link with the urban landscape of the car-trip scene in *Blow-Up* in terms of construction of the frame and aesthetic trademarks, including reflective surfaces, optical effects, alternating zooms and modernist architecture.

In the same chapter, *Fotoromanza* was discussed in light of its potential dialogue with the other current experiences in video music (Bowie's *Ashes to Ashes,* in particular), and colouring and special effects in *Il mistero.* Indeed, in light of its relation with *Il mistero,* this music video emerged as a further decisive step in Antonioni's appropriation of a new medium and cinematic language, in which colours and music play a different role than before, and abstraction embraces hyperrealist spaces. As in *Il deserto rosso* on film and in *Il mistero* on videotape, colours were used not simply as a device for describing characters and places, but as a revolutionary tool for surprising the viewer and guiding his/her viewing experience. Other common aspects with Antonioni's previous works also highlighted included urban scenarios, the materiality of some of the images and the themes related to the narrated story.

Finally, chapter 6 focused on the last short works of the end of the 1980s, *Ritorno* and *Roma,* discussing both of them as landscape portrait films. In the first part of the chapter, I considered *Ritorno* as a unique case in the director's overall career. On the one hand, Antonioni openly referred to *L'avventura* in the title of the film and reinterpreted both the events and the places in this film. On the other hand, the focus of the director changed, as the original characters were absent and the camera fixated on the natural landscape, calling for deeper levels of interpretation of the film. Building on these premises, my analysis interpreted *Ritorno* as a self-sufficient landscape portrait film according to two interlocking perspectives. First, Antonioni's long-term engagement with landscape and still life paintings was supported by a conceptual comparison with *Le montagne* and, thus, by the significance of his painting practice (quite exclusively dedicated to natural landscapes).

Second, his palpable emotional charge was evident in film. Specifically, following the theme of the comeback journey, I underlined the director's presence by pointing out the sound of his footsteps on the island and his unpleasant personal memories of Lisca Bianca, which might have had an influential role in filming such places for the second time.

Like *Ritorno, Roma* was formalised as a landscape portrait film, defined by Antonioni's interpretation and selection of some of the most iconic monuments, architecture and frescoes of Rome. The discussion addressed the visual details, intentions and gestures with which Antonioni painted his idealised portrait of the city and was articulated around three main themes: the return journey, human emotions and the history of art. Moreover, a subjective camera, slow pace and pictorial pauses showed a conceptual connection with the late film *Lo sguardo,* where Antonioni's body is seen paying a visit to the tomb of Julius II in Rome. Specifically, I discussed the personal involvement of the director in both films and the way in which *Roma* anticipated the last encounter between Antonioni and Michelangelo in *Lo sguardo*.

Overall, the analyses in this dissertation and the organic structure of the chapters revisit the significance of Antonioni's work in light of his professional and multimedia creations during an underestimated phase of his career. This dissertation discussed such phases through two prismatic perspectives: on the one hand, it examined the question of the medium and the director's technical research; on the other hand, it addressed style and themes. First, Antonioni has proved to be an artist leaning towards the future, not afraid of questioning himself and eager to experiment with new surfaces, forms and visual solutions. These peculiarities comprised the springboard of his works of the 1980s. The appropriation of multiple mediums should be intended as the sign of a radical and reflective personality, which have guided him all along his career and even further towards the end of his life. Second, the various close readings of the works of the 1980s revealed Antonioni's deeper and harmonious investigation of

specific themes and issues. These are, for instance, the mountain landscape, conveying a sense of instability, furore and passion (*Le montagne* and *Il mistero*); sci-fi scenarios (*Identificazione*); feelings of violence and turbulence, as evoked by a certain use of both light and colour (*Il mistero, Identificazione, Fotoromanza, Ritorno, Roma*). Finally, a major portion of the analysis was dedicated to the deserted landscape, intended as both the incapability of the characters in expressing their true emotions (*Identificazione, Fotoromanza*), and the vacancy of human beings in the frame (*Le montagne, Renault 9*).

Antonioni's extension of his work on abstraction was an additionally significant aspect highlighted by this dissertation. Specifically, it has been discussed the director's insistence on form and colour rather on articulated narration and dialogue in his films (*Identificazione* and *Ritorno*); further exploration of the relation between colour and emotion (*Le montagne, Il mistero* and *Fotoromanza*); the use of art images (*Roma*); and contribution to the contemporary cultural and pop scene (*Ritorno, Renault 9* and *Fotoromanza*). Furthermore, it has also been suggested a higher degree of personal involvement compared to that of previous films. For instance, *Le montagne* was indicated as part of Antonioni's private and intimate sphere; in *Identificazione,* Niccolò and the director revealed affinities in terms of emotional status, interest in science and astronomy; *Ritorno* has been read in light of Antonioni's personal comeback journey to the island of Lisca Bianca.

Above all, the investigations performed throughout the chapters have led us to look at Antonioni's output of the 1980s with a different critical gaze and, potentially, has revealed insights to reconsider the following body of works of the 1990s and 2000s. During the final years of his life, despite physical difficulties and many professional obstacles, Antonioni kept on fighting to make new projects and painting a new series of works. During those years, in addiction to *Al di là* and *Il filo*, he directed the short documentary *Noto, mandorli, Vulcano, Stromboli, carnevale* and an advert for the Sicilian region, *Sicilia. Isola di mare e di luce,* starring Maria Grazia

Cucinotta; finally, he co-directed *Lo sguardo* and had his solo exhibition at the Hadrian Temple gallery in Rome, under the title *Il silenzio a colori: Michelangelo Antonioni.*[2]

Future research may uncover the extension of the visual, stylistic and thematic directions assumed by the director in the 1980s and pinpoint the presence of a similar avant-garde sensibility towards his practice in the following decades. In 1999, the director aimed at adapting *Destinazione Verna,* a sci-fi novel by Jack Finney. As the title suggests, the film should have evolved around the theme of utopic travels towards the out-there, optimistically imagined as a universe better than earth. In *Destinazione Verna* the female lead-character is fascinated by the idea of escaping from her own reality and reaching far realms of the universe. Antonioni's incredible fascination with science and new technology is indeed an aspect worth developing in further study on the director, especially in connection with abstract representation. The two visual languages, namely sci-fi and abstraction, seem to always run in parallel with the director's sensibility.

The astonishing and violent images in the 1990s short videos *Stromboli* and *Vulcano* may be read along this mentioned line. Deeper research may develop the significance of such videos, which usher in a new decade for the director, and mark Antonioni's return to a deserted landscape and rocky environment after *Ritorno*. The primordial and lunar atmosphere that they encompass, the striking chiaroscuro, the multiple close-up shots and the overpowering presence of diegetic sounds hint at something beyond a naturalistic representation of two iconic places of the Sicilian landscape. With respect to what has been discussed in terms of treatment of colour and escalation of feelings of turbulence and violence in the works of the 1980s, *Stromboli* and *Vulcano* may be found as additional milestones in this sense.

However, despite the validity of the critical approach of pinpointing the main themes and issues addressed by Antonioni in his cinema, future analyses might shed light on what these themes and issues stand for. The

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[2] See Appendix 2.

director's whole oeuvre may be read from the perspective of an eager artistic journey towards the discovery and consequent appropriation of new tools for creative expression, a constant reflection on art and its principles, and a struggle in advancing his own vision ahead. In this regard, when asked about Antonioni's paintings of the very last years of his life, Fico stated the following:

> In questi lavori c'è un uso del colore scatenato, senza nessun pudore, in quanto non aveva niente da perdere. Negli ultimi anni, quando dipingeva era felicissimo, in quanto stava in questa dimensione astratta, come nel deserto, forma e colore, finalmente senza attori, senza parole, il silenzio.[3]

The core of Antonioni's overall visual investigation is encapsulated here, in Fico's description of her husband. Painting, abstraction, desert, form, colour, absence of the human figure and silence are mainstays in Antonioni's art practice since *Gente del Po.* In his first documentary, figurative representation was already questioned, as well as the political function of the image. Thanks to the extensive use of detail shots, the texture of the image is material and granular, pure colour and light. These are also aspects that inspired each major professional step he took. For instance, the image of Niccolò closing his eyes and beginning an imaginary journey in the final scene of *Identificazione* is extremely evocative. In a way, that 1982 finale already incorporated the beginning of a potential new and concrete direction of his cinema, leading towards the abstraction of the image, the pureness of colour, bold use of light and the immersion in a deserted landscape.

In *Il filo,* abstraction   intended as the dissociation from any realistic representation   focuses on dialogue. In the film, there is an abundance of short and incisive conversations among the characters and of observations on the 'true' meaning of life. The characters' perpetual movements among

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[3] Fico, 'Congiunzione di sguardi'.

unspecified locations mirror the irregular flow of their words. Indeed, these seem to have lost their significance and to proceed according to a 'mannered' style: like religious figures represented in Pontormo's paintings, words are intriguing and elegant, yet deprived of any significant meaning. The language has a regular pace and is extremely virtuosic, far from any attempt of historical contextualisation. Similarly, characters wander across natural and unspecified locations, without a clear path to follow. They get lost on countryside roads, in forests and on beaches, like they were entrapped in a sequence of deserted landscapes; their accidental encounters — even sexual acts — do not fulfil their emotional needs. In this sense, distraction becomes the only peculiarity of these characters, described in a state of solitude and reflection, and stripped of any meaningful purpose in society.

Shifting the focus of investigation in *Il filo* may help us better interpret the film. More than ever in Antonioni's cinema, characters here are functional in the director's radicalised work on the colour and composition of the image; they transform themselves into ideas and emotions, and fully become the extension of the surrounding space. Under this light, they *need* to get lost, in order to enter that 'abstract dimension', which Fico referred to in the interview. While in films such as *Blow-Up* and *Identificazione* the overall space is socially structured, physically connoted and historically embedded into the contemporary reality, in *Il filo* the camera extends its look mostly to natural and timeless locations denuded of any temporal and spatial coordinates. Cloe's liberating dance on the beach channels the whole feeling of the film and the director's overall vision. Like a young girl on the beach (*L'avventura*), Thomas in the park (*Blow-Up*), Locke in the African desert (*Professione: reporter*), and Niccolò at the window (*Identificazione*), Cloe's body dances alone in an abstract and natural environment. Ultimately, isn't getting lost in the desert, in this absence of landscape, the foundation of Antonioni's longstanding journey towards abstraction?

PRIMARY SOURCES

Long features and documentaries dir. by Antonioni

Cronaca di un amore/Story of a Love Affair (Franco Villani and Stefano Caretta, Fincine, 1950)

I vinti/The Vanquished (Film Costellazione Produzione and Societé de Gen. de Cinema, 1952)

La signora senza camelie/The Lady without Camelias (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1953)

Le amiche/Girlfriends (Trionfalcine, 1955)

Il grido/The Cry (SPA Cinematografica and Robert Alexander Productions, 1957)

L'avventura/The Adventure (Cino del Duca, 1960)

La notte/The Night (Nepi Film, Sofitedip and Silver Films, 1961)

L'eclisse/The Eclipse (Robert and Raimond Hakim, Iteropa Film, Cineriz di Angelo Rizzoli and Paris Film Production, 1962)

Il deserto rosso/Red Desert (Film Duemila and Francoriz, 1964)

Blow-Up (MGM, 1966)

Zabriskie Point (MGM, Inc., 1970)

Chung Kuo – Cina/China (RAI, Sacis 1972)

Professione: reporter/The Passenger (Comp Cin. Champion, 1975)

Il mistero di Oberwald/The Mistery of Oberwald (RAI and Polytel International, 1980)

Identificazione di una donna/Identification of a Woman (Iter Film, Société Nouvelle des Établissements Gaumont and Raidue, 1982)

Al di là delle nuvole/Beyonds the Clouds (Cecchi Gori Group Tiger Cinematografica, Sunshine, Cine B., France 3 Cinema, Road Movies Zweite Produktionen, Canal Plus, Degeto Film and ADR, 1995)

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APPENDIX 1

Congiunzione di sguardi. In conversation with Enrica Fico Antonioni

I: Iniziamo con *Cina*. È il vostro primo grande lavoro insieme, se non sbaglio?

E: Questo era il primo viaggio in assoluto che facessi così lontano. Per me era tutto nuovo, anche se il viaggio è la mia condizione ideale, in quanto esci da te, dalle tue abitudini fino all'estraniamento completo. Il mio sguardo era lo sguardo di una ragazza che vedeva per la prima volta tutte le cose, incluso Michelangelo. Ero anche obbligata a fare un lavoro, come quello dell'aiuto regista, che non sapevo fare; dall'altra parte quel ruolo era abbastanza complicato considerando le milioni di comparse cinesi. Soprattutto ero molto vicina alla sua regia.

I: Mi parli del vostro sguardo.

E: Lui aveva uno sguardo unico: io non guarderei mai le cose che guardava Michelangelo, neanche oggi. Ad esempio, lui si fermava a guardare le coppie che litigavano in strada. Lui adorava le coppie che litigavano, ed infatti ne inserisce una in *Professione: reporter*. Inoltre, io non avrei mai pensato di guardare il sorriso delle ragazze cinesi e invece lui andava sempre più a fondo, fino dentro alla pelle, bianco e rosa. Era affascinatissimo dai colori dei vestiti maoisti, questi blu consumati e lavati, dove lui andava sempre più dentro a cogliere i colori raffinati e impolverati. Gli piaceva la polvere, la luce diffusa e soffusa; gli occhi delle ragazze. Io non coglievo questi particolari: avevo un'emozione diversa, di massa. Io però mangiavo per strada, mentre lui non lo faceva, aveva paura di mangiare per strada. Io invece avevo 19 anni, e potevo mangiare qualsiasi cosa, ovunque e la quantità che volessi: la sfida sul cibo è stata il mio modo di colloquiare anche con il popolo cinese.

I: Traspare una grande dolcezza nell'approccio di Michelangelo a questo popolo.

E: Certo c'era molto rispetto. Rispetto e timore di essere invadente, perché era difficile capire la cultura e lo stato maoista. Michelangelo doveva prima capire cosa fare. Infatti quando la Cina gli chiese che cosa avesse intenzione di fare, lui rispose che avrebbe voluto girare l'uomo comunista dal deserto dei Gobi a nord, fino alle isole tropicali a sud. Voleva vedere come un pescatore comunista, maoista, dovesse fare il suo lavoro, o come un uomo, che viveva nel deserto sotto Mao Tze Tung si dovesse comportare. Lui voleva questo, per poi andare molto più a fondo e vedere come erano un matrimonio, un funerale, un parto, tutte le organizzazioni sociali delle città, le case, le fabbriche. Soprattutto, gli sarebbe piaciuto vedere l'uomo nel deserto e l'uomo pescatore. Cosa che i cinesi non gli hanno permesso di fare, con la scusa di non avere infrastrutture sufficienti al passaggio di una troupe: infatti, abbiamo discusso quattro giorni a Pechino prima di lavorare, non ci facevano nemmeno uscire dall'albergo, e Michelangelo era diventato una tigre. Poi hanno deciso di scendere ad un compromesso: Michelangelo ha accettato di andare nelle città e luoghi principali che gli sono stati suggeriti, ma ha chiesto di andare in un luogo dove nessuno occidentale era mai stato prima. Lui era molto competitivo, era un giocatore di tennis di prima categoria. Allora hanno deciso di portarlo al centro della Cina, nel Longnan, dove si trova un canale idrico scolpito nella roccia. Non era esattamente quello che voleva, ma siamo andati comunque. Pensa, ad esempio, a quella sequenza di contadini, poveri con gli ombrelli sotto la pioggia: pur essendo tipica di Michelangelo, è stata criticata molto dal governo cinese.

I: Parliamo degli anni Ottanta. Come si poneva Michelangelo nei confronti di *Il mistero*?

E: Prima di tutto, devo dire che si tratta forse dell'unico film che Michelangelo non amava riguardare. Generalmente a lui piaceva andare in proiezione con il pubblico; guardava i suoi film con molto interesse, come se li avesse fatti un'altra persona, come un estraneo insomma. In un certo senso metteva da parte la sua macchina da presa, e assumeva il ruolo del testimone. Questa era la posizione ideale: macchina alta, completamente scevra dalla passione Antonioniana, pura intuizione al di fuori del sentimento. *Il mistero* era un'altra cosa, in quanto presentava dei limiti: il testo di Cocteau, che non era un testo facile, troppo ridondante, e non una di quelle storie moderne che Michelangelo amava; secondo limite era l'attrice che era stata una donna ben diversa in tutti i suoi film, una donna moderna, una donna di oggi, nevrotica, e invece qui era una regina; e la terza cosa, le telecamere. Michelangelo ha lavorato con il colore come se fosse un pittore, ha trasformato le immagini con il colore. Questa è la ragione per cui ha accettato di fare quel film, e si è divertito moltissimo, anche se sempre nel limite. Lui è riuscito a creare degli effetti che neanche ti accorgi come spettatrice: ad esempio, quando la damigella cammina nel corridoio e si specchia nello specchio ovale, Michelangelo include un *insert*. Questo vuol dire che ha girato l'immagine della damigella e poi l'ha messa dentro.

I: Queste sono tra le cose che non ti accorgi.

E: Confermo, come ad esempio nel primissimo piano sequenza di Michelangelo in *Cronaca di un amore,* di circa 9 minuti. Sono 9 minuti in cui lui non stacca mai l'inquadratura e gli attori devono fare anche delle cose acrobatiche. In quel caso, Lucia Bosè ha dovuto camminare sopra il carrello della macchina da presa; camminare, girarsi e rigirarsi mentre la macchina da presa ti gira attorno. È un movimento di macchina difficilissimo e sofisticatissimo, di cui tu, spettatore, non ti accorgi la prima volta che guardi il film, anche se hai un senso di assoluta meraviglia, perché in quel piano

sequenza ci sono tutti i sentimenti di lei, di lui, c'è tutto il film e tutta la carriera di Antonioni, oserei dire.

I: Tornando agli anni '80, come vi ha accolto la scena italiana dopo le esperienze americane ed europee?
E: Alla fine Michelangelo era contento. Avrebbe preferito lavorare sempre all'estero, perché oramai si era abituato e gli mancava lavorare con quegli attori che purtroppo non sono in Italia. Infatti, ha fatto molta fatica a trovare degli attori alla stessa altezza di quelli esteri in Italia: prendi la scelta di Tomas Milian, ad esempio. Pur essendo strana, Tomas era l'unico attore, Italiano (o quasi), della giusta età, e disponibile, a fare il film. Girare *Identificazione* non è stato il massimo per Michelangelo, ma a lui interessava raccontare quella storia, dal momento in cui vi era dentro fino al collo. C'è molta autobiografia in quel film, anche se lui nega. Ci sono molte cose sue, personali, che lui teneva segrete anche con me. Era un periodo in cui io ero molto assente da Rome perché studiavo molto e facevo dei corsi all'estero. Avevo bisogno di approfondire la mia esperienza. In *Identificazione* ero presentissima, ma prima di *Identificazione* c'è stato un grande vuoto nella vita di Michelangelo. Ha fatto tutto un periodo in solitudine che poi ha tradotto in film: era la solitudine del regista, che poi era la sua solitudine.

I: Il vuoto è uno dei temi centrali di *Identificazione*. Un vuoto in ogni caso diverso rispetto a quello dell'*L'eclisse.*
E: Sì, *Identificazione* è un film disperato. Nel film, Michelangelo ha messo in scena la sua disperazione come uomo difronte ad un bivio, nel momento di prendere la scelta se mollare tutto o prendere un destino diverso. Comunque, alla fine, il destino ti porta sempre sulla tua strada: là doveva arrivare, e ha vissuto altri 22 anni nel silenzio, tantissimo, una vita eterna. Comunque, confermo che nel film è molto presente un vuoto sentimentale molto forte.

I: In una delle sue interviste, lei ha affermato che Michelangelo è un regista sentimentale.

E: Païni ha detto che Michelangelo è un regista sentimentale. Finalmente, io ho detto, si stabilisce che Michelangelo sia un regista sentimentale. Perché tutto il tema Antonioniano è questo: il non riconoscere il sentimento. Cosa che a lui premeva, ed io lo posso confermare, come sua moglie. Il problema personale di Michelangelo era di essere talmente occupato a raccontare storie, a fare cinema, e contemporaneamente quello di essere un uomo sanguigno, ma anche molto aristocratico, ferrarese, elegantissimo, quasi inglese. Aveva deciso di essere molto distaccato e freddo, ma poi si scontrava con questa impossibilità di riconoscere il sentimento, e i suoi film sono su questo. Prendi ad esempio i versetti di *L'avventura*: l'uomo preferiva la prostituta alla donna che sicuramente amava ma non riconosceva. In questo senso, si può dire che Michelangelo ha sempre riconcorso il sentimento, pur avendone paura. Ad esempio, io non ho mai saputo della sua gelosia nei miei confronti, fino a pochi anni prima della sua morte. Ho scoperto infine la sua gelosia feroce, nonostante non ne avesse alcun motivo. Lui aveva veramente una tal violenza che gli serviva per non fare compromessi né nella vita né sul set, fino ad arrivare certe volte ad essere crudele, per ottenere ciò che desiderava.

I: Riguardo alle dinamiche sul set, negli ultimi anni la sua presenza professionale è stata fondamentale nel lavoro di Michelangelo. Come hanno convissuto le vostre personalità?

E: Posso cominciare da *Al di là delle nuvole*. Quando Michelangelo si è ammalato   parliamo dell' '85   lui aveva 72 anni. Sono già tanti per recuperare una vita, già un'età molto avanzata. Con i medici abbiamo iniziato una terapia, per la quale ci sono voluti almeno 3 anni per recuperare le funzioni base: lui non ha mai recuperato il linguaggio. Nonostante questo, dopo tre anni, ha voluto andare a Cannes per presentare degli inediti   4 inediti per la precisione, ed è stato una cosa fantastica. Tra questi c'era il

suo *Kumbha Mela*, girato in India nel 1977, dove io volevo assolutamente andare; Michelangelo girò solamente per un giorno su pellicola invertibile, quindi non di grande qualità, ma in quel lavoro c'era la sua mano. Quindi nell'89 abbiamo riguardato il materiale, montato, messo della musica e lo abbiamo presentato a Cannes con *La funivia del Falora*, *Ritorno a Lisca Bianca* e *La villa dei mostri*. In quel momento, dato che Michelangelo era tornato a vivere, amici gli hanno proposto di lavorare, e la prima cosa sono stati i documentari per l'Enel del 1993.

I: A tale proposito, perché la Sicilia?
E: La Sicilia è da sempre un luogo di grande affermazione artistica per Michelangelo, il luogo di *L'avventura*, e dove noi ogni anno ritornavamo (in particolare per il Festival di Taormina). Un po' per la luce, un po' per la storia del cinema di Michelangelo, è stato un luogo che sentiva molto vicino a lui. Siamo andati a fare i sopralluoghi, lui ha scelto locations e argomenti, e ha girato i suoi lavori. Non c'è niente che non piaccia a Michelangelo della Sicilia, perché Michelangelo è l'uomo del deserto e nel deserto. È sempre stato legato al deserto, e la Sicilia è un po' il deserto rispetto all'Italia: quest'assenza di paesaggio in Sicilia è il deserto.

I: Mi hanno molto colpita la scelta di Vulcano e Stromboli
E: Lui era affascinato dal vulcano, dalla forza della terra. I luoghi dei suoi film sono caratterizzati da questa terra molto forte, con un'energia speciale, come ad esempio le montagne di Zabriskie, il Po, ma anche le città scelte sono dei paesaggi molto forti, piene di contrasti.

I: Mi parli delle scelte di questi luoghi.
E: Nel cinema si fa tutto insieme: non sono stata solo io ad influire sulle sue scelte, anche perché per avvalersi su Michelangelo c'è bisogno di persone molto autorevoli. Ero di grande ispirazione per Michelangelo, lui aveva una grande ammirazione per il mio lavoro, il mio occhio, la mia follia, il mio

mondo privato, che va a prescindere da lui. In un certo senso, lui subiva il mio fascino, anche perché altrimenti non saremmo stati insieme trentasei anni. Insieme a me c'erano tantissime altre persone: prima di tutto Tonino Guerra, e poi scenografi, direttori della fotografia, pittori, amici. Michelangelo era un comandante, e un comandante prima di agire, deve sentire, assaporire, conoscere, leggere, e quindi non è una decisione mia o sua, ma un lavoro comune di un gruppo di persone molto importante.

I: Come ultima domanda, vorrei concludere con la pittura.
E: La pittura è stata fondamentale ed è la cosa che ci ha sempre unito. Io vengo dagli studi di Brera, e quegli anni sono stati fondamentali per tenere testa a Michelangelo. Quando l'ho incontrato ero molto ferrata in pittura ed ero una pittrice, e la prima volta che ho messo piede in questa casa ho trovato una collezione fatta di De Chirico, Morandi, Bacon. Lui stesso ha sempre dipinto, in quanto tra un film ed un altro aveva bisogno di lavorare, di avere una soddisfazione creativa. Lui ha ridipinto dal 2001 al 2007 e l'ultimo quadro lo ha fatto 15 giorni prima di morire. Negli ultimi anni, quando dipingeva era felicissimo, in quanto stava in questa dimensione astratta, come nel deserto, forma e colore, finalmente senza attori, senza parole, il silenzio. Forma e colore lo rendevano felice. In questi lavori c'è un uso del colore scatenato, senza nessun pudore, in quanto non aveva niente da perdere. La pittura gli ha sempre tenuto molto compagnia: infatti, invidiava gli amici pittori, la loro solitudine e beatanza nel dipingere, mentre lui si sentiva in guerra.

Rome, March 2013

APPENDIX 2

Critical account of Antonioni's final works: *Al di là delle nuvole*, *Il filo pericoloso delle cose, Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* and later paintings

Antonioni received much recognition to his established career in the very late part of his life. He was awarded the Life Achievement Award from the European Film Academy in 1993, from the American Academy for Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences in 1995, and he received the Golden Lion for Outstanding Career in the 1997 edition of the Venice Film Festival. Finally, *Al di là* won the International Critics' Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1995 and Premio Donatello for the best cinematography in 1997.

A great expectation surrounded the release of *Al di là*; for instance, in Wagstaff and Chris Darke's words, '*Beyond the clouds* arrives with the air of a prestige art-cinema-event'.[1] Co-directed with Wenders and written in collaboration with Fico and Tonino Guerra, *Al di là* has an international cast and production (French, Italian and German), and consists by four episodes all based on novels from Antonioni's *Quel bowling sul Tevere,* specifically *Cronaca di un amore mai esistito, La ragazza, il delitto, Non mi cercare* and *Questo corpo di fango.* The official DVD of the film includes two other para-texts. First, Fico's documentary *Per me fare un film é come vivere,* shot in Super 8 and video, and emotionally reporting the production phase of the film itself; second, the two-hour documentary *Caro Antonioni* by Gianni Massironi, which aims at portraying Antonioni's as a true and comprehensive visual artist, in accordance to Roland Barthes's argument.[2] The film intermixes sequences taken from Antonioni's cinema with interviews of collaborators, actors, intellectuals and other critics involved in

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[1] Darke and Wagstaff, 'Beyond words'.
[2] In his famous letter, Roland Barthes addresses Antonioni as an artist and finds in his cinema what he thinks are the three cardinal virtues of an artist: wisdom, vigilance and fragility. Roland Barthes, 'Cher Antonioni', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 311 (1980), 9–11.

his projects.

At the time of the shooting, Antonioni was severely aphasic and physically weak. As the production insisted for the presence of a second director as backup for insurance purposes, Antonioni specifically requested for Wenders, who accepted the job.[3] From the beginning, their relationship and roles on the set were clear. The two filmmakers shot separately for months, and met in Rome in the summer of 1995 to view Wenders' footage; contrary to the expectations, his footage was drastically cut and left only the sequences relative to prologue, intermezzo and epilogue. Although this drastic choice made Wenders' remaining material almost incomprehensible and re-affirmed Antonioni's only ownership of the film, the German filmmaker never complained, but showed support, great respect and generosity towards the other, whom he always considered like a model. In his related publication *My time with Antonioni* (the third 'para-text' of *Al di là*), Wenders recalls Antonioni's unique approach to space and time which makes this film truly Antoniennui, in his view. Moreover, he emphasises the role of Antonioni's wife in the film, her moral and technical support to the director.[4]

With regard to this subject, Wagstaff and Darke look at the film as the representation of Antonioni's way of seeing, and points out his request to the viewer 'to feel' the natural and urban landscape as well as the emotional upheavals of the characters.'[5] Moreover, these critics stress a comparison with Hollywood cinema. While this latter one sets up questions that are eventually solved by the films themselves, Antonioni's cinema makes the

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[3] Extracts from the French producer Stéphan Tchalgadjieff's interview about this matter are reported in Bernard Weinraub, 'Antonioni, Silenced, Finds his Eloquence', *The New York Times,* 23 October 1995 < http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/23/movies/antonioni-silenced-finds-his-eloquence.html> [accessed 15 June 2014].

[4] 'Much of the credit for the fact that the film is really going ahead surely belongs with Enrica. For ten years, through all kinds of ups and downs, she believed in it and fought for it. Meanwhile she was acting as interpreter for Michelangelo and trying to make her own documentary on the film.' In Wenders, *My time with Antonioni* (London: Faber Limited, 2000), p.4.

[5] Wagstaff and Darke, 'Beyond words'.

viewer live a different experience.[6] As happened in the case of Anna's disappearance in *L'avventura,* in *Al di là* Antonioni does not explain the reasons why Silvano and Carmen cannot live their love relationship. Both the moment of their first meeting and their presence signify for the director more than the search for a closed conclusion. Furthermore, Jacobowitz and Lippe restate the contemplative and intimate feelings of Antonioni's cinema, arguing that this last feature (along with *Identificazione*) centers on the idea of the creative personal search tackled by the artist.[7] Also, they remark the evolution of Antonioni's treatment of the female world featuring a stronger emphasis on body details and more invasive subjective camera, until the point of making the viewer uncomfortable during the scenes of sexual encounters.

After the Italian premiere, many journalists and critics, including Kezich, Adriano Aprà and Silvia Tarquini, underlined the extraordinariness of the operation, the lyricism of the images, and creativity and artistic freshness of the director, despite his health condition and age.[8] A few years later, Peter Hogue offered an extreme positive review of the film, calling the viewer's intense experience with the four episodes together and regarding *Al di là* as 'an example of inspired contemporary film art […] and one of the major films of the decade. That this is a late work of the man who made *L'avventura, Red Desert, Blow Up, The Passenger,* and many more is enough by itself to make the film worthy of serious and widespread interest[…]'.[9] French critics extensively appraised the film. For instance, Jean-Marc Lalanne, in a *Cahiers du Cinéma* special issue, dedicated to the Venice Film Festival, underlines the sense of intimacy, which emerges in some of the

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Jacobowitz and Lippe.

[8] See Kezich, 'Antonioni non si discute, si ama', *Sette del Corriere della Sera,* 19 October 1995; Silvia Tarquini, 'Raccontare Antonioni', *Bianco e Nero,* 1 2 (1996), 109 110; Adriano Aprà, 'L'unione impossibile tra imagine e realtà', *Reset,* 23 (1995), 52 53.

[9] Peter Hogue, 'A review of Beyond the Clouds', *Film Comment,* 33.3 (1997), 5 52 (p.52).

episodes.[10] In his 1995 article, Lalanne writes: *Al di là* 'c'est une œuvre délicate, parfois malaisante, qui il s'appelle d'avantage à la réflexion qu'au panégyrique'.[11] Novelist Jean-Philippe Domecq, in discussing the representation of the contemporary woman and the meditative travel of the artist in the film, also perceives the same feeling of reflection and meditation noted by Lalanne. In his words, 'il y a les femmes, les villes   et l'art. [...] Rien qui interrompt le plaisir et la réflexion dans cette régulière mise en abyme de la réflexion sur l'art dans l'œuvre d'art.'[12]

   Al di là is also reviewed as the director's final statement on visual principles, and as a consolidation of the themes and of the characters that Antonioni explored during his career. For instance, Lillian Pizzichini writes that the director 'has completed *Beyond the Clouds,* a kind of final reckoning, in which the veteran director, though wheelchair-bound and unable to speak since his stroke in 1985, addresses the chilling *ennui* of his earlier work   and moves beyond it.'[13] Jacobowitz and Lippe observe the re-proposal of the theme of meditation on filmmaking practice, as well as the evocative and surreal atmosphere of some of the episodes, tracing a link to Antonioni's use of abstraction in his cinema.[14] Besides including the summary of Antonioni's principles, according to the *New Yorker* contributor Anthony Lane, *Al di là* communicates a sense of nostalgia towards European art film and positions itself as an 'elegy for the art movie.'[15] He explains that '[the film] even contains a brief, inconsequential skit that serves no purpose other than to provide cameos for Jeanne Moreau and Marcello Mastroianni king and queen of the art house.'[16]

   In terms of negative reviews to the film, Wagstaff and Darke describe

[10] Jean-Marc Lalanne, 'Venise, par-delà les nuages', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 495 (1995), 71 73 (p.73).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Jean-Philippe Domecq, 'Par-delà les nueges', *Positif,* 420 (1995), 6 7 (p. 7).

[13] Lillian Pizzichini, 'Fulfilled by the Folly of the City," *Times Literary Supplement,* 4.894, 17 January 1997, p.15.

[14] Jacobowitz and Lippe.

[15] Anthony Lane, 'Still hazy after all these years', *New Yorker*, 72.29, 30 September 1996, pp. 88 90.

[16] Ibid. p.90.

Antonioni's approach as 'full of arrogance' and criticises his detachment from the viewer.[17] In this critics' view, *Al di là* appears in a way too hermetic and scattered, by embodying a disaffiliation of elements from the intrinsic 'Italianity' of Antonioni, the topoi of his cinema and the dynamics of contemporary society. Stephen Holden from the *New York Times* laments a 'palpable sadness' in the film, and adds negative comments on the conventionality of both story and language: 'The dialogue is spare, and what there is often sounds stiff and pretentious.'[18] Along similar lines, Chatman and Duncan consider the first two episodes of *Al di là* not at the same level of satisfaction of Antonioni's films of the 1960s.[19] Overall, they applaud the elegance and greatness of the images, but consider the narrative structure of the whole episodes superficial and not deeply articulated.

On final evaluations it is worth recalling that the filmography section in Cardullo's *Michelangelo Antonioni: Interviews* indicates that in 1999 Antonioni started directing a new film with the working title *Tanto per stare insieme*, based on his 1973 short story *Due Telegrammi*. The film should have starred a famous American cast (including Robin Penn Wright, Johnny Depp and Winona Ryder), but it was never produced. In the same year, Antonioni attempted to direct the mentioned *Destinazione Verna,* starring actors/actresses such as Sophia Loren, Naomi Campbell and Anthony Hopkins, and melodic singer Pino Daniele for the soundtrack, but also this production was interrupted.[20] Finally, in 2004 Antonioni was able to direct the episode *Il filo*, part of a trio of shorts *Eros*; the other two pieces are *The Hand,* by Wong Kar-Wai, and *Equilibrium,* by Steven Soderbergh. The story was adapted with the collaboration of Guerra from Antonioni's book *Quel*

[17] Wagstaff and Darke, 'Beyond words', p. 13.
[18] Stephen Holden, 'Transformed by Obsession, Heart, Mind and Soul: Beyond the Clouds', *The New York Times,* 28 September 1996, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2010)* <http://search.proquest.com/news/docview/109546796/A64005B5B2ED4DBBPQ/1?accountid =11455> [accessed 1 May 2013].
[19] Chatman and Duncan, p. 85.
[20] F.V., 'Pino Daniele: "La mia musica per il film di Antonioni e Loren"', *Il Mattino,* 27 March 1999; article preserved in Rome, Biblioteca Luigi Chiarini, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Fondo Luigi Freddi Antonioni.

bowling sopra il fiume Tevere, and aims at addressing sexuality in Western culture, including partial and full frontal nudity (particularly in the finale of the episode). The film did not get many positive reviews at the time of its release, and it is still not deeply analysed by Antonioni's critics, with the exception of Pomerance and Tassone who respectively dedicate a whole section of their publications to it.

Reviews in both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* dismiss *Il filo* as a mannerist and vulgar operation, and unable to compare with earlier Antonioni's films. Critic A.O. Scott from the *New York Times* finds it as a parody of Antonioni's trilogy of the 1960s, and regards it as somewhat 'between a Mad magazine satire and a Maxime photo spread.'[21] Philip Kemp from the BFI publication *Sight and Sound* reviews it as a 'geriatric fantasy, in which all females are large-breasted and shed their clothes without hesitation.'[22] However, Pomerance offers more artistic validation to *Il filo.* He describes scene by scene, and moment by moment; he points out potential hidden meanings of dialogues and objects, and analyses the characters' personalities and behaviors; specifically, the critic debates and deepens the role of bodies, sexuality and language as shown in the film.[23] Tassone summarises the events happening in *Il filo* and discusses it thematically; additionally, he gives specific details on the production phase of the film, including a few extracts from his interview with the producer Tchal Gadjieff. Overall, his review stresses positive chords, and specifically verges on the finale, that he finds: 'metaforico-onirico, di un erotismo squisito.'[24]

Antonioni's next and last film, *Lo sguardo* stars himself and his body as lead character, for the first time. Almost at the end of his life, Antonioni wrote and directed this last short in video and film with his wife, and set it

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[21] A.O. Scott, 'Sex, Sex, Sex Seen Through Experienced Cinematic Eyes', *The New York Times,* 8 April 2005, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2010)* < http://search.proquest.com/docview/92884687?accountid=11455> [accessed 1 May 2014].
[22] Philip Kemp, 'Eros', *Sight and Sound,* 10.56 (2006), 58.
[23] Pomerance, 'The Dangerous Thread of Things', pp. 111–130.
[24] Tassone, *I film di Michelangelo,* pp. 54–56 (p.55).

in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome. In the film, the viewer sees the digitally altered figure of Antonioni standing and walking into the church, and then approaching Buonarroti's statue of *Moses*. Presented at the Cannes Film Festival 2004, the film was admired and reviewed by many critics. Jonathan Rosenbaum defined it as expression of a 'very intricate (and beautifully intricate) simplicity, in terms of framing as well as editing';[25] Giacci regarded it as 'an evocative fresco of art and poetry';[26] novelist/journalist Roberto Crotoneo identified the core of the film in the dialogue between the two artists, rather then on the representation of the statue itself, saying that *Lo sguardo* links to: 'un gioco di corrispondenze. Un grande maestro del cinema si pone di fronte a una grande opera, a una delle più grandi.'[27]

In spite of the relevance of this work within Antonioni's cinema, the critical accounts of *Lo sguardo* show many limitations, as it has not been extensively analysed yet. However, in her recent essay in the collection *The Cinema of Me,* Rascaroli articulates a detailed reading of *Lo sguardo,* regarding it primarily as Antonioni's final self-portrait.[28] In her words:

> The short can be read in many ways: as the documentation and the exploration of the results of the restoration; as a tribute to Michelangelo; as a study of the *Moses*; as a reflection on the relationship between film and the fine arts; as an exploration of digital technologies and their marriage with traditional filmmaking; as a meditation on the relationship between art and life, permanence and transience; and as a contemplation of death.[29]

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[25] Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'The Gaze of Antonioni', *Rouge* <http://www.rouge.com.au/4/antonioni.html> [accessed 10 November 2012].

[26] Giacomo Martini, 'La rivoluzione di Michelangelo Antonioni', in *Una regione piena di cinema: Michelangelo Antonioni,* ed. by Giacomo Martini (Alessandria, Italy: Falsopiano edizioni, 2007), pp. 11 17 (p. 15).

[27] Roberto Crotoneo, 'Lo sguardo del Mosè che guarda Michelangelo. Con la proiezione del cortometraggio di Antonioni dedicato alla celebre statua si inaugura il Festival di Palazzo Venezia dedicato al cinema d'arte', *L'Unità,* 26 May 2004 <http://cerca.unita.it/ARCHIVE/xml/125000/121883.xml?key=Roberto+Cotroneo&first=571&orderby=0&f=fir> [accessed 4 January 2015].

[28] Rascaroli, 'The Self-Portrait Film'.

[29] Ibid. Page not indicated.

In her opinion, Antonioni's 'gaze' refers to the director's gaze on Art and Cinema, but also to the act of contemplating the statue of *Moses* and vice versa. Specifically, as discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation, Rascaroli states that Antonioni embraces a position of reverence towards Michelangelo, setting himself as viewer, rather than as a fellow artist.

Finally, the act of painting accompanies Antonioni from the beginning to the end of his career. Thus, his late paintings and consequent critical corpus with a reference to his solo exhibition, *Il silenzio a colori: Michelangelo Antonioni,* are extremely relevant within this context.

Fig. 69: installation view of *Il silenzio a colori,* 2006. Hadrian Temple gallery, Rome. Photo by Luigi Filetici.[30]

The show, curated by Fico, set in Rome in 2006 (Fig. 69) and largely covered by the national press. Set up at the Temple of Hadrian, it occurred on the occasion of Antonioni's 94th birthday, concurrently to the first edition of the event *Cinema. Festa Internazionale di Roma*.

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[30] Antonioni, *Il silenzio a colori,* 2006 <http://www.archello.com/en/project/il-silenzio-colori-exhibition-rome-italy-2006> [accessed 13 September 2015].

According to the press release, Italian architect Renzo Piano designed the visual setting, with the collaboration of Fico, Antonioni, designers Massimo Alvisi and Junko Kirimoto, The exhibition *Il silenzio a colori* included 80 paintings and 30 small sculptures, made of different coloured cardboards, some of them now preserved in the archive of the Antonioni Museum in Ferrara. As Fig. 69 shows, these paintings are extremely different from the series of *Le montagne* in terms of subject, colour and style. There is no space for blurring and foggy effects, but they encompass an explosion of colours and lines, recalling the chromatic fantasies of Matisse and Miró.

As mentioned in an article from *La Repubblica,* these paintings were initially conceived in the summer of 2002, and then lately developed with the help of two assistants, Alessandra Giacinti and Monica Dabicco, who actually painted on the canvas following Antonioni's strict directions. In Dabicco's words, for Antonioni 'she was only a brush, a tool for painting'.[31] Further details on this late production come from critic Lorenzo Codelli, who published a brief article in *Positif* in 2007.[32] Codelli compares the paintings to a 'jeu d'enfant', characterised by an extreme vivacity of colour, pure and intense; he also notes some visual correspondences between the titles of the artworks and the represented forms. For instance, in his view, *Fondo marino* evokes an algae on a blue sea bottom; *Musica,* a pentagram and a violin; *Zingari,* a polychrome caravan of gypsies.

However, alongside Codelli's potential interpretations of the paintings, the significance of Antonioni's overall work whether painting or film should be searched not in the form of the subject, rather in the emotional function of colour. In the critic's opinion, Antonioni does not ask to the viewer to identify the subject. He asks to the viewer to immerse himself/herself in the object of colour, in order to project his/her own

[31] Beppe Sebaste, 'Michelangelo Antonioni Silenzio a Colori, dai film ai quadri', *La Repubblica*, 27 August 2006
<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2006/08/27/michelangelo-antonioniil-silenzio-colori-dai-film-ai.html> [accessed 7 June 2013].
[32] Lorenzo Codelli, 'Les silences en couleurs d'Antonioni', *Positif,* 556 (2007), 71.

emotions on canvas. As Fico clarified to the press during the opening night, the exhibition had been a jump in the very coloured silence of Michelangelo: 'è stato complicato mettere in scena il vuoto, come lo era per i suoi film.'[33] With these artworks, Antonioni fully embraces the space of abstract representation, by painting in extreme freedom and using vibrant colours. Red, pink, blue and green: these are ellipses and curves, solids and voids, jagged lines and curls, without following any order or discipline.

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[33] Fico, qtd. in 'Pittore dello Schermo', *Equilibriarte* (2007) <http://www.equilibriarte.net/www.stefanorollero/blog&offset=76> [7 June 2013].