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The Politics of Aesthetics in the Work of Michelangelo Antonioni: An Analysis Following Jacques Rancière

1. The Work of Antonioni in the Context of Aesthetic Discussions

The work of Michelangelo Antonioni is considered as trailblazing and paradigmatic expression of modernism in cinema. Even today it has an impact on film style and holds a key place in the history of film art.¹ This reputation was established by *L'avventura* with its powerful and commanding visuality which when first shown in Cannes in 1960 was seen as scandalous. In this visuality, space, body and the surfaces of the world were portrayed in an innovative and complex way. The film critic, Michael Althen wrote in his obituary of the director that we “have to thank him for everything which we consider modern.”² His films, which are consistently self-reflective and aesthetically complex, break and dissolve the naturalness of “classical cinema”³ by frustrating the practiced expectations of narrative films and by making the film itself the subject alongside the protagonists.⁴ Classical film does not refer to itself as a narrative medium, instead it would rather present a believable world through its narration. The characters’ actions are therefore marked by causality, comprehensibility and transparency. They are always motivated. Characters act in order to affect change. In contrast, the tendency to “transform the actions into optical and sound descriptions” as determined by Gilles Deleuze has appeared in Anton-

¹ Cf. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *L'avventura*, London: BFI, 1997; Irmbert Schenk, “Antonionis radikaler ästhetischer Aufbruch. Zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne,” in *Das goldene Zeitalter des italienischen Films. Die 1960er Jahre*, eds. Thomas Koebner and Irmbert Schenk, Munich: Fink: text und kritik, 2008, 67-89; Jörn Glassenapp, “Ein Modernist bis zum Schluss,” in *Michelangelo Antonioni—Wege in die filmische Moderne*, ed. Jörn Glassenapp, Munich: Fink, 2012, 7-12.

² Michael Althen, “Die zärtliche Gleichgültigkeit der Welt,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (1 August 2007), 31.

³ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

⁴ Oliver Fahle, *Bilder der Zweiten Moderne*, Weimar: Bauhaus Verlag, 2005.

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ioni's films since *Crònaca di un amore* (1950).⁵ Deleuze also states that Antonioni's work starting with *L'eclisse* (1962) is characterized by a "treatment of limit-situations which pushes them to the point of dehumanized landscapes, of emptied spaces that might be seen as having absorbed characters and actions, retaining only a geophysical description, an abstract inventory of them."⁶ He continues that Antonioni is a "critical objectivist" who seeks abstraction in his films.⁷ According to Deleuze, he strives with cool and passionless distance to record vigilantly, precisely and insightfully the world which seems to have neither meaning nor purpose in his pictures. To that end, Antonioni creates open, decentred, elliptical narrative structures which remove the drama from the plot. Often the description of circumstances and states stands in place of actions. Characters often become low action observers. The action-image which follows the stimulus response pattern and is typical of "classical cinema" is suspended. The protagonists' observations do not lead to actions but rather they themselves become the object of reflection. Actions are no longer clearly causally motivated, they appear deliberately accidental. The subject of the film is the visual. "The fundamental concern is not the narrative development of meaning, but rather the focus is the visual production of meaning."⁸ Images exploit spaces by producing and exploiting surfaces. Therefore, above all it is the images and their flow in his films which remain impressively memorable.

The representation of a narrative-created world is no longer the focus but rather the phenomenological investigation of optical and visual spaces of modernity which are not created causally by actions nor lead to actions. The context of the narrated story moves into the background. People who would like to achieve something through their actions are only of passing interest to Antonioni. For him, landscapes, situations, objects, roads or buildings become important, sometimes more significant than people. For Kiefer (2008: 36) this displacement is an expression of the central difficulty in Antonioni's creation: "[...] the experi-

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ Cornelia Bohn, "Volatilität des Geldes, der Bilder und der Gefühle. Michelangelos Antonionis *Eclisse*," in *Was ist ein Bild? Antworten in Bildern*, ed. Sebastian Egenhofer, Inge Hinterwaldner and Christian Spies, Munich: Fink, 321-23.

ence of decentralization, of the placelessness of people and also the attempt to redefine, to resituate in an opaque, contingent and fragmentary reality."⁹

The viewer tries to understand what he can see. Because in the films the narration loses its structuring power, the viewer is forced to turn his attention to the possibilities of the images.¹⁰ While in "classical cinema", an image reveals a window which remains invisible to a narrated world, here images emerge which link reality, dream, imagination and memory with each other. The fluctuation between real and virtual leads to "crystal images."¹¹

Closely linked to this is the fact that interpretations of his films are ambivalent, ambiguous and vague and in the end undecidable. His pictorial world is characterized by ambiguity which presents the visible "surfaces of the world,"¹² its meaning however remains unclear and ambiguous. Thus there can be no exhaustive and definitive interpretations. The films embody "open artworks" in the sense of Umberto Eco.¹³ In this way, the process of interpretation itself becomes a problem and also becomes the subject of the films. Roland Barthes describes this characteristic of Antonioni's films as "the fluctuation of meaning."¹⁴ Meaning is not set or imposed but rather is subtly held in limbo. Thus, meaning cannot be appropriated by the powerful who would like to set, define and appropriate it. Antonioni's political modernism is shown in this battle against this "fanaticism of meaning". While "classical cinema" constantly produces relatively definitive and coherent meanings, the cinema of Antonioni rejects this constraint which harks back to the fascist tendency of language which forces us "to speak" as Barthes has shown in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France.¹⁵

⁹ Bernd Kiefer, "Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007)," in *Filmregisseure*, ed. Thomas Koebner, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2008, 36-43.

¹⁰ Schenk, 71.

¹¹ Deleuze, 95ff.

¹² Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni or, the Surface of the World*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1985; Bernhard Kock, *Michelangelo Antonionis Bilderwelt*, Munich: Fink, 1994.

¹³ Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk*, Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1973.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, "Weisheit des Künstlers," in *Michelangelo Antonioni, Rehe Film 31*, Munich: Hanser, 1984, 65-70.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Leçon/Lektion*, Antrittsvorlesung am Collège de France, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980.

In what follows I would like to discuss and enlarge upon these interpretations of his work in the context of the political character of his aesthetics. Into this discussion I intend to include social criticism that is linked for example with the blunt presentation of the decadent, inconsequential and blasé members of the Italian bourgeoisie in the 1960s. The political in his films, my thesis suggests, is found in the aesthetic experience which becomes possible by means of his films. As Jacques Rancière has shown, aesthetic experience is closely linked to a democratic experience. Both problematize the theory that the dominant framework of meaning and the meanings of a social and cultural order are set in stone and could not be otherwise. They create an appreciation for contingency and possible changes. Furthermore, Rancière assumes the equality of all things which must only be brought about by collective action. Art and politics would like to remove hierarchies and problematize as well as change the existing identities. In this way, a new breakdown of the sensible should be achieved.

For Siegfried Kracauer the central characteristic of film is to present the physical reality and by these means, to make it visible. He records and reveals things of the world in their materiality, surfaces and details.¹⁶ This expressive function is a central feature of cinema according to Rancière.¹⁷ The determining power of narrative and ideology is subverted and overdetermined as a world of objects and people is presented whose meaning must first be determined by the viewer. Without a doubt, Antonioni's films express this characteristic. Furthermore, they embody beauty in the sense of the aesthetic regime of art, which does not appear in the representation or mimesis. Thus, they can neither be consumed easily nor exhaustingly defined conceptually. As Jacques Rancière (2008) shows, with reference to Deleuze, beauty is "resistant" and art is itself political. It is therefore not merely a commentary on or an extension of politics but rather "art is politics."¹⁸ In the aesthetic experience, which is not limited to the experience of art, common ground can be found which can (perhaps) lead to a new community. Therefore the "resistance" of art contains the "promise of a new people."¹⁹

¹⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theorie des Films. Die Errettung der äußeren Wirklichkeit*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985, 71ff.

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, ed. Emiliano Battista, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Ist Kunst widerständig?* Berlin: Merve, 2008, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

From this background, I will define the resistance of Antonioni's art in the context of cinema more closely. To consolidate this further, I will turn then to the work of the Chinese film director Wong Kar-wei in whose work the aesthetics of the surface also plays an important role. I will show how he connects with Antonioni and updates this visual aesthetics for the present day. In the conclusion the results in the context of the conception of the "emancipated spectator"²⁰ will be discussed.

2. The Resistance of the Art of Antonioni

Antonioni's films were very often interpreted in the context of the existentialist "structure of feeling."²¹ They portray fears, alienation, loneliness and the isolation of modern humanity, as well as the "existentialist experience,"²² and the challenge to find a meaning to life in a meaningless world which no longer has frameworks of interpretation which impart coherence. In this way, *Il Grido* (1957) is an accusation of the coldness of the modern world. The proletarian Aldo, who is the main character is said to find no foothold in the world, nowhere does he feel at home. His journey ends in death and it remains unclear whether it was an accident or a suicide. The mortal end of his roaming reveals the absurdity of modern existence.²³ In this way, Antonioni's films express the negativity of modernity.²⁴ Critics also talk of an "Antonioni ennui,"²⁵ a condition of lethargy, disorientation and emptiness which would characterize, for example, the protagonists in *L'avventura* (1960).

Antonioni himself states in a now famous interview that Eros is sick,²⁶ and that, in a world in which traditional codes of morality no longer have any value, people are driven and obsessed with their sexuality because they are disoriented

²⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Der emanzipierte Zuschauer*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2009.

²¹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 188ff.

²² Martin Schaub, "Sisyphus," in *Michelangelo Antonioni: Rehe Film 31*, 18ff.

²³ Schenk, 84.

²⁴ Kiefer, 36.

²⁵ Seymour Chatman and Paul Duncan, *Michelangelo Antonioni—Sämtliche Filme*, Cologne: Taschen, 2004, 62.

²⁶ Michelangelo Antonioni, "A talk with Michelangelo Antonioni on his work in *Film Culture*" (1962), in *Michelangelo Antonioni Interviews*, ed. Bert Cardullo, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008, 32ff.

and unhappy.²⁷ Thus, for example, Sandro in *L'avventura* has abandoned his artistic ambition as an architect in order to take on a more financially rewarding job as an assessor. Because of this he is frustrated and, according to criticism, this leads to a more obsessive and impulsive sexuality. Regarding this, Antonioni thinks that "The tragedy in *L'avventura* stems directly from an erotic impulse of this type—unhappy, miserable, futile."²⁸ Sandro is bored, unsatisfied, but incapable of changing anything because he cannot successfully develop and follow ethical rules in his behaviour. "Thus moral man who has no fear of the scientific unknown is today afraid of the moral unknown."²⁹ According to criticism, *Il deserto rosso* (1963/64) shows alienation in capitalistically and technologically changed surroundings. Criticism suggests that a strong contrast between the characters' feelings and their surroundings is produced.³⁰ Consequently, the life of the bourgeoisie in prosperous post-war Italy takes place in an "emotional and moral vacuum."³¹ (Kiefer 2008: 38) In his obituary, Richard Phillips writes in the *World Socialist Website* that Antonioni has through the course of his creation, lost his ability "to find images for the inner emotional complexity of modern life and to express a certain protest". He even speaks about "an artistic decline." According to Phillips, Antonioni has fallen in line with the "political and social status quo."³² All later interpretations of his work show how his aesthetic is disregarded or misunderstood, when the primary focus is on the contents and themes of his films. In this way, *Blow up* (1966) or *Identificazione di una donna* (1982) have no obvious political message that would point to social change. It cannot be denied however that Antonioni has also created images in these films which present "Being in the World" shaped by modern life with its complexity and its difficulties. He is a master of precise and attentive observation. In this way, his films can be read and understood as a commentary reflecting on problems. At other times they can be understood as allegorical representations which portray and critically diagnose the developments of their time.³³ In this

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²⁷ Chatman and Duncan, 63.

²⁸ Antonioni, 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Chatman and Duncan, 95.

³¹ Kiefer, 38.

³² Richard Phillips, "Michelangelo Antonioni – Kein makelloes Vermächtnis," *World Socialist Website*, 11.8.2007, <http://www.wsws.org/de/articles/2007/08/antoa11.html>, accessed 8.7.2013.

³³ Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars. Hollywood Film in the Bush-Cheney Era*, Oxford: Wiley/Blackwell, 2010.

sense, they articulate the condition and controversies of their age without, however, coming to final interpretation. An interpretation of the films in their social complexity can therefore give an insight into the existential problems and into the related *condition humaine*.

However, the resistance of the art which is articulated in Antonioni's work and which is not linked to the age in which it arose cannot be appreciated like this. Therefore, the critic of the *World Socialist Website*, for example, who complains of the alleged political inconsequentiality of Antonioni's films since *Blow up* (1966) misses the inherent political character of its aesthetics in which the content has become the form. This cannot therefore be defined by an analysis of content but only when his cinematic opus is viewed in the context of the aesthetic regime of art which in Rancière's work replaces the periodising concepts of modernity and post-modernity.

Jacques Rancière distinguishes in the Western tradition between three different forms of defining what art is.³⁴ In each regime, art is defined as the relationship within an epoch between human expression and the world. Each regime is defined not only by constitutive rules but also by inconsistencies which can arise from them. For Rancière, the crucial issue concerns the visibility of aesthetic practices, the place they occupy and the breakdown of the sensible which they produce.³⁵ Amongst these, he recognizes a system of sensible evidence which produces common threads but which also rules out certain elements. He differentiates between the ethical, the representative and the aesthetic regimes of images. While the first two both embody the classical, the latter stands for the modern.

The ethical regime of images is concerned on the one hand with the consequences of artistic practices and artefacts for individuals and society. On the other hand, it is defined by problems that Plato described in his reflections on art. How can artistic artefacts fairly represent ideas or ideal models? In contrast, the representative regime of art concerns mimesis and artistic artefacts are not defined by the law of conformity. "It is not artistic technique but rather a visible regime of the arts."³⁶ The representative regime is organized hierarchi-

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³⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen. Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien*, Berlin: b-books, 2006, 38ff.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

cally. "This hierarchy defines the representative primacy of the action over the characters just as that of the narrative over the description."³⁷ Even the chosen form of representation (genre and language) must conform to the position of the presented theme in the social hierarchy. Therefore, for example, tragedies deal with nobility and comedies with the ordinary people.³⁸

The aesthetic regime, which arose 200 years ago, dissolves the link between subject and its portrayal. The emergence of "literature" at the beginning of the nineteenth century led to an ascendance of language and expression.³⁹ The power of language consists in its ability to address and to explain what is distant (in space or time) or what is not openly available such as the inner motives of characters. Art is thus freed of any specific rule or hierarchy of the subjects.⁴⁰ There exists an equality among the represented subjects: "The aesthetic condition is a pure suspension of the moment, in which form as such is perceived. It is the moment in which a special humanity is formed."⁴¹ In the novel, Balzac, and more so Flaubert, destroyed hierarchical representation, and hence, for example, the primacy of narration over description.⁴² A work of art becomes an object of sensual experience, a part of the world which is changed by art's existence. The aesthetic system, which arose in the context of political revolutions, is shaped by the principal of equality. It attacks hierarchical structures in the field of art and therefore produces artistic modernity. As in the political world however, the hierarchies don't disappear. Even in the aesthetic regime, despite the new possibilities, representative logic still plays a role. Cinema is a good example of this. Classical, representative narrative logics continue to dominate in many film productions, such as in "classical cinema." For Rancière, the cinema is the art form which can poignantly express the conflict between these two poetics because it continually combines them.

Since its beginnings avant-garde in the world of cinema has striven for a realization of aesthetic principles. In the impressionist tradition of French film

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Die stumme Sprache. Essay über die Widersprüche der Literatur*, Zürich: Diaphanes, 2010.

⁴⁰ Rancière, *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen*, 37.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40ff.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

criticism, Louis Delluc formed the idea of *photogénie* in the 1920s. By this, he understood the poetic aspect of things and people which only the language of the film can capture and convey. "From this game of light and shadow, from the movement and the rhythm, from the stylizing of objects the images in the film's power of suggestion should grow—from blatant visual signs we thus sense the flow of images in their rhythm as a particular type of 'music'. However, it is not the rhythmic layout of the materials alone which is deemed temporarily to be the main aim but rather the hints of what cannot be said, the evocation of moods, thoughts and feelings on the other side of what can be narrated."⁴³

For Rancière's argument *Bonjour Cinéma* (1921) by Jean Epstein, part of the Delluc's circle of directors and critics, possesses particular significance. This is of course the purist view: "Cinema is truth. The story is a lie."⁴⁴ Epstein saw a close link between modern literature and cinema because they both turned away from theatre. According to him, cinema does not narrate, rather it points towards something. "I wish for films in which nothing or almost nothing happens [...], in which a modest detail indicates the tone of a hidden drama."⁴⁵ Epstein developed the vision that cinema is a script of light or movement which does not depict but rather captures the "vibrations of sensual matter."⁴⁶ He felt that when it turned away from telling of stories, which are characteristic of the representative regime, cinema became art. In this, plots are organized causally and follow the rules of probability. A mimetic rationality is at the basis of fiction. According to Epstein, however, cinema should capture the texture of the world and chart things "as they come into being, in a state of waves and vibrations, before they can be qualified as intelligible objects, people, or events due to their descriptive and narrative properties."⁴⁷ In his vision, cinema becomes the apotheosis of the aesthetic regime of art. Rancière refers, however, to the fact that cinema has developed primarily in another direction and continually restores the representative order which literature and painting have left behind.

⁴³ Ulrich Gregor and Enno Patalas, *Geschichte des Films*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1962, 80.

⁴⁴ Epstein, quoted by Jacques Rancière in *Spielräume des Kinos*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2012, 22.

⁴⁵ Epstein, quoted by Gregor and Patalas, 82.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Rancière, *Film Fables*, 2.

From this background, Rancière criticizes above all the “consensual cinema”, whose fictions legitimize reality by reproducing it. Instead of this, he makes the case for a “dissensual cinema” in which reality becomes a stranger to itself and consensus is revealed as fiction. Thus it becomes clear to him that there are other possibilities for experience. In this way, he sees that aesthetic fiction can be freed from rational imitation. “Fiction as a contrived world is not accountable to reality but rather uses it to define a sphere of common references and experiences.”⁴⁸ Fiction should not validate reality; rather, in the process of mimesis reality should become different from itself and a common ground should be created. Its contingency should become visible.

The political significance of Antonioni’s aesthetics can now be defined more closely. The open narrative structure, the autonomization of the camera, the playing with *temps mort*, the visual development of spaces or the gradual emptying of the image field are characteristics of his style and undermine the representative regime which was even more important in his early films because these followed more closely the rules of genres and their causal logic. It is doubtless that Antonioni’s work is indebted to the aesthetic regime. He often compares his work with that of a poet. We must also assume that he was familiar with the work of Delluc and Epstein because he admired French film greatly and similarities can be found between Antonioni’s self-statements and the writings of the French impressionists.⁴⁹ Thus, for example, he speaks of *photogénie* of the wind. It is invisible but can be imagined by the viewer through the objects which it affects. Kock describes in detail: “These sequences, where the wind which is strictly speaking invisible, suddenly becomes visible and audible, are then in many of Antonioni’s films part of the most visually powerful and contemplative moments in his works: the wind which secretly animates the parkland in “Blow Up”, the cedars and cacti in the closing sequence of *Zabriskie Point*, that sway gracefully back and forth, the wind in the closing sequence of *L'avventura*, which makes the leaves ruffle, the leaves of the avenue in *Leclisse* which come to life because of a gust of wind or the flag staffs which, because of the wind moving their ropes, give rise to a secretive far off music.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Und das Kino geht weiter. Schriften zum Film*, eds. Sulgi Lie and Julian Radlmaier, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2012, 21.

⁴⁹ Kock, 323ff.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 325.

The withdrawal of narration and the carefully shaping of images challenge the viewer to decipher the complexity of the images, the details of the appearances, in order to discover what is happening, what moves the protagonists and motivates their actions. As in the novels of Gustave Flaubert or Virginia Woolf, the viewer must learn to interpret differently the facial expressions or movements in order to be able to develop an understanding of the motivations of the characters and events.

Antonioni’s visual technique associates people, buildings or objects with each other and even uses objects to refer to other objects. This, according to my thesis, is due to the principle of equality. Even the important and the unimportant are brought together in a single image. Associations between images are produced which allow similarities to be discovered. His aesthetic focuses on the superficial structure of images which become more important than dialogue or action. Thus the existing hierarchies are deconstructed and an equality in the image and between images is produced. Antonioni also dismantles existing hierarchies between art forms. He is both writer and painter which is why his films are closely shaped by literature and painting. In *Blow Up* (1996) photography, painting, fashion, architecture, jazz and pop music are used equally to suggest meaning.

Starting points for Antonioni’s film work are “visual epiphanies”, revealing impressions of the world around him.⁵¹ These cannot be revealed or summarized in words. If they become visual motives, in Antonioni, they preserve an individual meaning towards action. They become important elements of his image aesthetics. After the image detail of a setup is determined, Antonioni meticulously and comprehensively adapts the image surface. Thus there are visual motives like windows, bars, waters or fog which appear again and again and whose multi-variant process is an important basis for Antonioni’s style.⁵²

A further stylistic characteristic is the emptying of spaces. Protagonists disappear bit by bit or suddenly and unexpectedly. Sometimes the camera itself moves away. Characters seem left in the vastness of the space. Antonioni uses different possibilities in order to produce emptiness and strangeness. As in de Chirico, in Antonioni too images are found which are immobile and timeless. Their stillness makes

⁵¹ Chatman, 99.

⁵² Kock, Chapter 5.

them enigmatic and secretive. Even the “temps-mort” images which are a cinematic component of Antonioni’s pictorial language can convey a sense of emptiness and isolation. If the characters at the end of a scene are no longer present in their setting, the movement comes to a standstill. There is a loss of drama. At the beginning and ending of many scenes, we also only see elements of a landscape.

Besides, the set, which is designed so carefully, comments on events. As Seymour Chatman has emphatically shown in *Antonioni or the Surface of the World*, the set conveys meaning in metonymic ways not defined by the characters. The surface structure of images does not stipulate meanings, however. Director and audience have equal right to comment on and to interpret these images. “Antonioni’s films create meaning, even if they often change this meaning again or at least take it back, they also carry however the characteristics of open artwork [...] they review values and certainties and invite the viewer to share with the author different configurations and interpretations of the images as a wide field of possibilities.”⁵³ Furthermore the setting of a film is often marked by paintings and other *objets trouvés* that Antonioni has brought together.⁵⁴ They comment upon the action as well as indicate a real world. The viewer can or should speculate on their significance which in the end remains unclear. If a (temporary) interpretation is not successful, they remain aesthetic objects which divert from the action and lead to false associations. Not only individual images can lead to associations in Antonioni, he also intensively uses the montage technique of image association. Image associations can facilitate our understanding of the characters; they can however also develop their own meanings. In *Leclisse*, for example, we see a mushroom-shaped water tower which reminds us of a cloud after a nuclear explosion. It corresponds to a headline “Nuclear War” in a newspaper which is shown in the film. However, these (latent) interpretations remain on a preconscious level as a rule and they can only be submitted to a deeper analysis upon repeated viewing. Otherwise, they (might) generate feelings of disconcertment and unease. Even with this technique, Antonioni aims at thwarting definitive allocation of meaning and to encourage free association.

The architecture which is depicted also comments upon the action, for example in *La notte* (1961) and in *Leclisse* (1962). In these, we have the feeling—as in

⁵³ Kock, 247.

⁵⁴ Chatman, 99ff.

de Chirico’s paintings—that architecture is the real protagonist. Like the landscapes in Antonioni’s films, architecture creates a visual framework in which characters move as on a chessboard. Even this is used to comment upon their inner life. We should also mention in this context the visual autonomy of the camera, which reaches its climax in *The Passenger* (1975). Often the camera wanders away objectively, giving us the impression that the narrator of fiction is distracted.⁵⁵ This leads to spatial disorientation of the viewer, in particular, in the desert scenes. Cinematography is constantly aimed at undermining the view, that Locke’s “point of view” is central.⁵⁶

The characteristics in Antonioni’s film art which I have mentioned here reveal that his films are indebted to the aesthetic regime of art, as described by Rancière, and also to Epstein’s purist vision. By different stylistic means, he infiltrates the representative regime, leaves it standing in the background and robs it of its structuring power. Through the ambiguity of his images, he questions consensual fiction which is marked both by the representative regime as well as by reality. Antonioni has created a dissensual cinema in which can be found the aesthetic truth of cinema, the ambiguity of dumb and ephemeral things, the texture of the world as it is. Thus visual surroundings are emancipated in their signs. His cinema carries out the transition from the representative fiction of the plot to the aesthetic fiction of the signs. Wong Kar-wai has followed him in this.

3. The Aesthetic Surfaces in the Work of Wong Kar-wai

In an interview with Peter Brunette,⁵⁷ Wong Kar-wai refers to the fact that Antonioni had an important influence on him. He made it clear that the central protagonist in a film is not the actor but rather the background as Antonioni portrays it in *Leclisse*. In addition Brunette adds: “But it is the formal, the idea that abstract lines, and forms, and shapes, and colours can give emotional meaning and expression as much as narrative lines, dialogues, characters.”⁵⁸ In this way meanings are conveyed via the worlds of the protagonist which remain abstract and vague and therefore cannot ever be precisely defined. Thus, for example, in

⁵⁵ Chatman, 196ff.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁵⁷ Kar-wai Wong, “Interview with Peter Brunette,” in Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2005, 119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Chungking Express (1994) Faye is repeatedly reflected in a metal wall until finally the whole screen is filled with it. In this way her inner state is suggested. She seems to be confused and uncertain. In his films, Wong often uses visually expressive techniques in order to describe inner experiences. As with Antonioni, the viewer is left to decide how he precisely interprets the scene. Even in *Il grido*, for example, the landscape of Po valley conveys suggestively insights into the inner life of Aldo.

In Wong's cinema, narrative structure also loses its central power and remains fragmentary. He assembles loosely linked plots and locations. Thus in *Chungking Express* not much dramatic happens. The film has an open ending and many problems remain unsolved. The characters are lonely, isolated as in the director's previous films. They believe they have missed their one chance to fall in love because of fate. Wong tells two stories which have similar plots and characters and which refer to one another. Thus a juxtaposition of different interpretations arises which have however an equal right to exist. The stories do not seem to happen back to back but at the same time. The narrative changes into actions which are scattered in space and time. Because of this, it is difficult to reliably get your bearings in the film world and this leads to the focus on visual sensations, sensual impressions and the perspectives of experiences. Even in his later films Wong remains true to an elliptical fragmentary form of storytelling.

In Wong's films, even more than in Antonioni's, characters appear lonely, incapable of forming relationships and isolated. Objects like cans of pineapple in *Chungking Express* help them to deal with feelings of loneliness, desolation and loss. They try to overcome their condition, to establish a stable, common relationship. This seems impossible for any length of time in the dynamic metropolis of Hong Kong. Even the construction of space in Wong's films reflects the isolation of the characters. For Wong, the point is not to use Hong Kong architecture as a framework for his films. Rather he defamiliarises the things we encounter in order to express the characters' subjective perception and their feelings. He does not show the Hong Kong skyline or important tourist sites. Instead, from the start, the viewer is confronted with a Hong Kong which causes alienation and fragmentation. Inevitably, it is difficult to find the way in this heterogeneity of places and visual impressions. Even by sterilising space, Wong tries to give hints to the inner mental life of his characters.

Wong Kar-wai also adopts the Antonioni concept of the vacated space. In *Days of Being Wild* (1991) the frustrated and embittered Yuddy leaves his stepmother. The camera lingers briefly on the empty space, in which he has just lingered. Therefore, the melancholic feeling of an experience of loss is conveyed. Furthermore, the final sequence of the films is in a dialogue with the end of *L'eclisse* (1962). The camera shows at the end the places where the lonely Su Li-Zhen and the policeman Tide tenderly converged, before they separated from one another. Now the places are abandoned, emptied of their presence. The viewer remembers however. The vacated space arbitrates between presence and absence.⁵⁹ It is no longer closed in on itself but rather marked by fluidity, openness and transitoriness. Seen as a whole, Wong creates with his construction of space the impression of places where identity becomes fleeting, fragmentary and problematic.

Following Frederic Jameson,⁶⁰ we could understand this as a (postmodern) identity crisis. The distance and the displacement between people which is shown in *Chungking Express* remind us of his diagnosis of individual and cultural schizophrenia. The people in late capitalist world are separated from one another, they are narcissistic, unconnected, focussed on their subjectivity and often have more than one identity. Furthermore, the central characters in the film are often disguised. No one seems to know who they really are and how they should behave. They change languages and even identities. This state of confusion is expressed by the frequent deployment of reflected images in mirrors and windows.

The characteristics which are presented here as examples show that there are intertextual relationships between Wong's films and the work of Antonioni. Both turn away from the representative regime of art and look for the aesthetic truth of cinema in its visuals and allegories. They design sensual landscapes of the surface of the world which have broken the straight line between cause and effect and are defined by aesthetic affect according to Rancière.⁶¹ Wong has continued the cinema of Antonioni. The interpersonal conditions seem to have

⁵⁹ Wolf Lindner, "Impressionen von einem unstillen Ort. Zur Raumkonstruktion bei Wong Kar-wai," in *Wong Kar-wai. Film-Konzepte 12*, ed. Roman Maurer, Munich: Text und Kritik, 2008, 71.

⁶⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 16ff.

⁶¹ Rancière, *Ist Kunst widerständig?*, 57.

worsened. Communication fails, relationships seem impossible. Eros is also sick in the world of Wong.

4. Conclusion

I have tried to show that the political character of Antonioni's (and also Wong's) work cannot be extrapolated through an analysis which is focused on content. Consistently and without compromise, Antonioni liberates the image. He is no longer dependent on plot, instead he strives for *photogénie* and seeks to poetise images. The impression of an image should capture the moment. The finding of the moment and its capture on film define his artistic creation. In the visual strength and complexity of the image develops the "Eigensinn" (self will) of the aesthetics which opens spaces for opportunities because it unveils the ruling consensus as a fiction.

Antonioni addresses an "emancipated spectator"⁶² who takes up the role of an active interpreter. His images encourage association. Elsewhere, I have spoken of a "productive spectator."⁶³ In the interaction with media texts this spectator productively and creatively creates interpretations in the context of his own educational and life history. Rancière sees in this very ability for association and also for dissociation the emancipation of the spectator. "Every spectator is already an actor in his story."⁶⁴ Therefore he must produce an individual interpretation of the work of Antonioni in order to turn films into his own story. This work is a "demonstration of equality"⁶⁵ Narrators and translators produce an emancipated community which shares the experience of the aesthetic. The timelessness of Antonioni's work shows that this is still possible today in interaction with his films.

Translated by Andrew Terrington

⁶² Jacques Rancière, *Der emanzipierte Zuschauer*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2009, 33.

⁶³ Rainer Winter, *Der produktive Zuschauer. Medienaneignung als kultureller und ästhetischer Prozess*, Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag, 2010 (second enlarged edition).

⁶⁴ Rancière, *Der emanzipierte Zuschauer*, 28.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

Ernst van Alphen*

On the Possibility and Impossibility of Modernist Cinema: Peter Forgács Own Death

Whereas modernism is a productive notion in literary studies and art history for the understanding of twentieth-century cultural practices, in cinema studies it is hardly viable. Cinema and modernism are an unlikely couple, for, as Peter Verstraten has argued, film scholars are adamant to contradict a history of film that would parallel the histories of older, established art forms.¹ One tries to create a unique position for cinema by keeping cinema outside the scope of modernism.

The unique position of cinema is not only caused by a different history, but also by its medium specificity. And since American art critic Clement Greenberg published his essay "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940) medium specificity has become an important issue in the understanding of modernism.² Greenberg considers modernism as a self-reflexive, formal focus of a medium on its own specificity. In the course of history, especially in the nineteenth-century the different art media have become hybrid in their imitation of other media. It is the "task" of twentieth-century modernism to purify media of everything that is not specific to the medium. The visual arts in general should prevent being perverted by words. And the medium of painting should get rid of the illusion of three-dimensionality, because in pursuing that illusion it rivals with the three-dimensional medium of sculpture. For Greenberg, music offers a valuable model for the other media, because as an art of immediate sensation and pure form it is less seduced by the pursuit of qualities belonging to other media than most of the other art media. Music is antithetical to literature, which focuses on subject matter.

The Greenbergian notion of modernism implies a major problem for the new medium of cinema. Whereas other art media are supposed to have specific qual-

¹ Peter Verstraten, "A Modernist 'Attempt at Cinema': The 'Impurity' of *Pierrot le Fou*," in *Modernism Today*, eds. J. Baetens, S. Houppermans, O. Boele, P. Liebrechts, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013, 220.

² Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," *Partisan Review* 7 (July-August 1940): 296-310.

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