**Identification of an Oeuvre: the Making of an Exhibition**

Following its purchase of the filmmaker’s archives, the Italian town of Ferrara will host an exhibition on Michelangelo Antonioni from March 9, 2013. This acquisition of great cultural value will also allow the creation of a permanent museum dedicated to Antonioni, who was born and bred in the town.

During the 2000s I curated several shows for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. After seeing some of these shows, which were devoted to filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Cocteau, and Jean-Luc Godard, the people in charge of the Palazzo dei Diamanti selected me as their curator of choice for the exhibition they and the municipality of Ferrara had begun organising.

This exhibition will be divided into twelve ‘fixed’ rooms, located inside a classical palace from the Renaissance. The main difficulty of curating shows on filmmakers is that these are artists who shape time in order to show us movement: film is a twentieth-century art form that moulds the temporal into a narrative sculpture.

The obvious challenge this creates concerns the walls of the Palazzo dei Diamanti, where the exhibition will take place. Its walls cannot be moved, meaning that the configuration of the various exhibition rooms cannot be altered. Unlike contemporary museums such as the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Palazzo is not a space that can be redesigned according to each of its shows.

This implies that Antonioni’s oeuvre will have to be divided into a somewhat rigid series, which will not be in sync with the chronology set by his filmography but with the spatial constraints imposed by the site.

My choice in dealing with this challenge has been to identify — or rather to fashion somewhat artificially — twelve moments in Antonioni’s career. The difficulties specific to this exhibition are far more acute than those typically present in this type of show, where fixed images are brought face to face with moving ones. The possibility of *designing* the various rooms in which they are shown usually solves the problem of managing different kinds of visual productions. In Ferrara, however, coping with fixed and moving images, but also with lit images and images that are made of light, is not an easy task. The main impediment I have had to deal with concerns the interior design of the Palazzo. But this limitation has actually proved to have heuristic consequences: creating and imposing a specific order for the works has also thrown them into relief.

Antonioni’s body of work is somewhat slim, and in the beginning of his career the filmmaker had not yet adopted a specific style, except perhaps for *Cronaca di un amore*, where he borrows the aesthetic of American *films noirs*. It is this particular influence that makes *Cronaca di un amore* such a successful film. The end of his career is characterised by a diminishing ability to communicate and, at the risk of alienating some, it could be said that his oeuvre is made up of only nine major films, released in the course of about fifty years: *Cronaca di un amore*, the trilogy, *Red Desert, Blow-up, Zabriskie Point, The Passenger* and *Identification of a Woman*.

Faced with these contradictions, I decided to structure the exhibition around two principles, one thematic, the other chronological, and to highlight the contrasts between the different parts of the show and between the various rooms that host them.

The first room is devoted to Antonioni’s childhood and youth spent in Ferrara. It insists on the importance of the region’s climate the Pô Valley’s cold, humid and decidedly foggy weather. The second room jumps forward in time, to the 1970s, to focus on Antonioni’s desert exile and on the scorching sun, dust and drought bright perspectives and spaces that can be seen in *Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger*. The elements here are in clear opposition to those shown in the first room. The first two rooms therefore develop a dual viewpoint, both chronological and thematic: Antonioni’s home town versus the new horizons of later years.

In the rooms that follow I have adopted a chronological and documentary perspective, by looking at Antonioni’s early ‘neo-realist’ career and by pointing out two major influential figures: Luchino Visconti and Robert Bresson.

Following my decision to focus both on contrasts and physical perspectives, I have decided to dedicate two rooms to two different women. Fortunate circumstances have conspired to produce an elegant opposition, with the force almost of a theoretical principle, between Lucia Bosè, the brunette who played in Antonioni’s first two films (*Cronaca di un amore* and *La signora senza camelie*), and Monica Vitti, the blonde who came to embody his later modernist period.

Blonde and brunette; black and white. I rely on these oppositions to highlight Antonioni’s enigmatic and implicit resistance to colour -- a resistance that does not interfere with the relentless longing for colour his films have expressed or with the fact that he is arguably one of the modern masters of colour film. I nonetheless believe that, just as von Sternberg resisted the call for visual sharpness and Chaplin persisted in silence even after the rise of sound film, and just as Godard fought against the idea of classical narration, Antonioni craftily toyed with the refusal of colour. *Red Desert* is a colour, or rather monochrome, film where a limited number of hues are superimposed on the natural tones of the filmed landscape. *Blow-up* is a film in green shades (the greenery typical of English parks) and in black and white — the colours both of the clothes worn by the protagonist and of the photographs he is taking. *Zabriskie Point*, for its part,bears the constant ochre pigmentation of desert dust and sand.

Antonioni’s works seem characterised by a kind of peacefulness, yet they are affected by a relative process of destruction, of which the notion of ‘dramatic event’ is the main victim. There even appears to be a sort of fixation on the motif of disappearance in his films. One of the exhibition rooms will have the word ‘disappearance’ in its title, as it will revolve around that theme, focusing specifically on Antonioni’s legendary trilogy (*L’Avventura*, *La Notte*, *L’Eclisse*) where the dramatic aim amounts to the dissolution of all devices on which drama normally relies.

Following the departure from neo-realism, a large room lends its full weight to the trilogy and its innovations in narrative. One of the trilogy’s characteristics is the filmmaker’s desire to erase his characters’ psychological and geographical bearings where urban reality is concerned, and, by doing so, blur narration and disorient his viewers. Specific scenes come to mind in which Monica Vitti and Jeanne Moreau can be seen wandering aimlessly in the E.U.R, the district in Rome created under Mussolini’s rule, as well as in the Milan of the 1960s, a time when the city’s rebuilding was in full swing.

Both the narrative dissolution and the cloud of uncertainty shrouding the characters and their destinies are supported by Antonioni’s references to metaphysical forms of architecture, as evidenced in the ghost towns in *L’Avventura*, and to the melancholic architecture of the Renaissance, also visible in *L’Avventura*. Giò Ponti’s great Pirelli building in *La Notte*, and the water towers like atomic mushroom clouds and the residential areas of the E.U.R. in *L’Eclisse*, all contribute to an atmosphere of urban anxiety.

The trilogy’s infinite range of greys is resolved in the colour of *Red Desert*. This contrast between black and white and a monochrome use of colour is underlined by the exhibition, which will also concentrate on Antonioni’s flight from Italy, a country that disappointed him and which, as the title *Red Desert* suggests, he regarded as a land sullied by social conflict and the development of chemical and industrial mass-production.

Another room, another contrast: the lost Italy Antonioni left behind gives way to *Blow-up*’s Swinging London in the next room. The film’s protagonist, the boyish Thomas, was inspired by David Bailey, the era’s ‘with it’ photographer, and by the music of the Yardbirds. Along with Italy it is a very specific vision of Italian masculinity that Antonioni does away with here: one that actors such as Massimo Girotti, Gabriele Ferzetti and Marcello Mastroianni embodied, and which is relinquished in favour of *Blow-up*’s young and sprightly figure of the photographer, dressed head to toe in black and white.

According to chronology, what comes next in Antonioni’s filmography is the desert theme. As it has already been explored in the second room of the show, the hope is that such an approach will create a sense of closure for the viewer, as well as the awareness of an exhibition tracing a circle. Another idea I want to communicate is how, to some extent, both Antonioni’s life and work ultimately reached an impasse. The room devoted to his London period is followed by one dedicated to a series of his pictorial works on paper. These all employ the same motif: a minuscule watercolour that has been *blown up*, photographed and later magnified.

Two final rooms come back to the filmmaker’s desperate quest for new horizons. The first looks at his treatment of India and China in documentary films, whilst the last is centred on his final return to Italy with *Identification of a Woman*. The exhibition will show how the search to identify a woman coincides with the identification of a nation and a culture.

Antonioni’s final experiments with film all bear very appropriate titles: *Beyond the Clouds*, which is indeed where the filmmaker is headed on his way back to his native Ferrara, *Ritorno a Lisca Bianca*, and *Lo Sguardo di Michelangelo* (*Michelangelo eye to eye*), his last short, where he focuses on the sculpture of Moses by his homonym, Michelangelo. Yes, this exhibition is definitely one that comes full circle.

*Translated by Léa Vuong.*