



“Sick Eros”: The Sexual Politics of Antonioni’s Trilogy

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Abstract: Although the extant scholarly literature on the cinema of the late Michelangelo Antonioni has often valorized his use of images and *mise-en-scène* to explore themes and reflections on humanism and alienation, few have examined the means by which the director conveyed ideas on psychology and sexuality in modern life and Italian culture. This article considers Antonioni’s “trilogy”—*L’avventura* (The Adventure, 1959), *La notte* (Night, 1960), and *L’eclisse* (Eclipse, 1962)—in light of the modernist project, especially with regard to the conjuncture of psychology and sexuality within the historical context of the 1960s and the sexio-psychological discourses of that period. Finally, Antonioni’s worldview is investigated, particularly as it pertains to his stated concept of *malattia dei sentimenti*, or “Sick Eros.”

Keywords: Erik Erikson, Herbert Marcuse, Italian culture, Michelangelo Antonioni, psychology, sexuality

With the July 2007 death of Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, many scholars, critics, and filmmakers have attempted to assess and contextualize his groundbreaking oeuvre.¹ Most of these post-mortem commentators have referred to the exquisite beauty of the director’s cinematic images and *mise-en-scène*; his unusual, “inconclusive” narrative structures; the languorous pacing and editing; his dialectical focus on natural landscape and manmade architecture; the silences that surround his characters; and his subtle use of the soundtrack. In the voluminous literature on Antonioni, such aesthetic observations and judgments have often vied with an analysis of his major themes and reflections on the human condition, usually featuring the words “alienation,” “ambiguity,” “anomie,” or “ennui.”

However, very few scholars or journalists have examined the specific means by which the director conveyed the psychology of his people or the depiction of contemporary sexual mores evinced in his work. Those who have commented on this facet of the filmmaker’s themes have often expressed contradictory (or *ambiguous*) views. For example, while Claude Mauriac referred to Antonioni as “the filmmaker of the inner life,” Seymour Chatman avowed that

“we have no direct access to their minds” (Mauriac 1961 and Chatman 1985: 133). In fact, both extremes may be true as Antonioni’s portrayals of modern men and women are part of artistic modernism’s general reevaluation of the self.² This article investigates the conjuncture of psychology and sexuality in Antonioni’s “trilogy”—*L’avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1959), *La notte* (*Night*, 1960), and *L’eclisse* (*Eclipse*, 1962)—within the historical context of the 1960s and the sexio-psychological discourses of that epoch. In addition, the auteur’s worldview is investigated, particularly as it pertains to his stated concept of *malattia dei sentimenti*, or “Sick Eros,” as it is sometimes translated.

The Libido and Its Discontents: A Contextual Overview

In a famous passage from *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx linked the changing relations of production of his epoch to the libidinal impulse. He diagnosed the modern age as follows: “There followed on the birth of mechanization and modern industry . . . a violent encroachment like that of an avalanche in its intensity and its extent. All bounds of morality and nature, of age and sex, of day and night, were broken down. *Capital celebrated its orgies*” (Marx 1936: 304–5; emphasis added).

Authors and commentators from Matthew Arnold to D. H. Lawrence and Sigmund Freud also noted the state of the locked-up modern (male) ego. In fact, in *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence noted that contemporary people merely function, “degrading the one mystery left to them, sex” (Lawrence 1995: 92). And Freud once wrote that, “*The great majority of severe neuroses in women have their origin in the marital bed*” (Freud and Breuer 2004: 246).

In 1962, Erik Erikson, whose psychoanalytic books were partly responsible for the 1960s (and the 1990s “Me Generation”) vogue of “identity,” noted that “the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under sexual inhibitions which prevented him from [attaining his identity]” (Erikson 1963: 279). By contrast, the contemporary patient is constrained not by sexual repression but, according to Christopher Lasch, by narcissism. Overtly charming and successful, he is socially and sexually promiscuous as a way of avoiding close involvements (Lasch 1979). As a result, compulsive copulation becomes both perfunctory and sterile: no longer a blissful pleasure shared by two (or more) people, but, rather, sex is now a self-indulgence for solitary monads. According to Lasch, “one of the gravest indictments of our society is precisely that it has made deep and lasting . . . love affairs and marriages so difficult to achieve.” Within the competitiveness of the contemporary social order, even random amorous relations evince elements of domination and selfish sexual gratification that “take on the character of combat” (Lasch 1976: 10). Similarly, Norman O. Brown’s *Life against Death* (1959) and *Love’s Body* (1968) suggested a near-pandemic of sexual malaise, almost a communicable disease of Freudian repression that inhibited the modern libido.

Also in the 1960s, the influential Herbert Marcuse offered a similar diagnosis to Erickson, Lasch, and Brown. He pointed out that libertine images of sexual gratification that had such negative force in Victorian society have been recouped, reformulated, and recruited—in a postindustrial society that no longer needs the glue of sexual taboo—to the maintenance of the status quo and the promotion of consumerism (“Sex sells”). Marcuse called this modern phenomenon “repressive desublimation” (Marcuse 1964: 72–79). And, although acolytes of “the Sexual Revolution” often simplified and distorted the views of Marcuse and these other thinkers into a promotion of unbridled sexuality, Freud, Lawrence, and most of the other authors cited above warned against a “dehumanizing promiscuity” (Langbaum 1977: 4) that led to the serial eroticism that permeated Western civilization and the cinematic world of Michelangelo Antonioni’s trilogy.

Antonioni’s People: Sex and the Pity

Without a doubt, the erotic life of Antonioni’s characters is an important part of his filmic universe, particularly his portrayal of the “sexual crisis” of modern humanity (Leprohon 1972: 168). In fact, it might be said that for Antonioni the interior psychological drama and tragedy of his people—in short, their narrative identities—is repeatedly revealed through their sex lives. In an interview following the release of *Zabriskie Point* (1969), the director made his view explicit: “In my other films, I looked upon sex as a *malattia dei sentimenti, a disease of love*” (Antonioni 1969a: 40; emphasis added). In addition to his depiction of characters and situations that reflect the malaise of Eros in our time, Antonioni uses cinematic signifiers to convey the psychological despair of contemporary desire. Although his films are often considered “sexy” (as Gilberto Perez once argued after a presentation at a scholarly conference)—part of an international marketing strategy by European filmmakers who gave the world auteurs and sex in contradistinction to Hollywood’s stars and sexual repression—Antonioni frequently provides a “cold shower” for his viewers and characters by focusing on the sociopolitical determinants of the failures of latter-day lust and love. In particular, his dispassionate, almost clinical, *mise-en-scène*, editing, and soundtrack articulations during actual love scenes and during symbolic sex sequences create the exact opposite effect of Hollywood cinema’s lyrical romantic imagery and music.

Moreover, it is important to note that Antonioni’s characters (like *all* fictional personages) are not psychologically individuated flesh-and-blood personages. Instead, Antonioni’s people are often bourgeois “figures in a landscape,”³ abstractions representing their social class, and/or plastic objects on a motion picture screen with no more humanity than the trees or buildings

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that surround them. All these Brechtian distancing devices make it difficult for audiences to identify emotionally and psychologically with Antonioni's characters; instead, the spectator views them from the outside, dispassionately, through the lens of an aesthetic distance. Put another way, Antonioni is interested less in the personal *psychology* of love and sexuality than in the social *phenomenology* of contemporary erotic behavior. As Fredric Jameson observed, "The modern libidinal apparatus is determined (indeed, overdetermined) by sociopolitical factors as well as psychic impulses" (Jameson 1979: 143). The failure of modern love and marriage has been a theme of much modern literature, going back to Flaubert, Ibsen, D. H. Lawrence, and other early modernists, and the social order has often been the context that determines that malfunction.

In contrast to the "downbeat" modernist discourse in film and literature, the classical Hollywood cinema's sexual regime generally involves a narrative trajectory toward marriage as a closural device, a suppression of the erotic impulse except for the inscription of fetishization of the female body through the agency of the male gaze, and a privatization of emotions, a withdrawal of the couple from the social milieu. This "us-against-them" retreat from the public sphere reflects the more individualistic ethos of American capitalism and American cinema. For Antonioni, even when his damaged psychological subjects find a moment alone, they bring their social baggage with them. As Peter Cowie explained, "Antonioni has always been a student of the couple" (Cowie 1963: 19). However, for Antonioni's couples, the dynamic is more often "me against you" than "us against them." And he often uses the sexio-politics of narrative space to convey that conflict. Seymour Chatman has articulated this strategy most astutely: "Antonioni's visual minimalism works best for certain kinds of themes and milieus. Central to his films of the early Sixties was the plight of the emotional life, the life that lies behind the visual façade that we present to the world."

These premises will be illustrated with examples from Antonioni's trilogy—*L'avventura*, *La notte*, and *L'eclisse*.

L'avventura

At the very outset of *L'avventura*, the neurotic Anna remains completely aloof during the lovemaking scene with Sandro (Figure 1). Later, when Anna says, "I don't feel you anymore," Sandro refers back to their "afternoon delight" in a crude manner: "Not even yesterday at my house? You didn't feel me then?" When Anna vanishes near a deserted island, Sandro simply replaces his fiancée with her best friend, Claudia. Shortly after Anna's disappearance, while on the yacht, Sandro embraces and kisses Claudia. During this scene, she is wearing a dark blouse that belonged to Anna. The suggestion here is that in our consumerist society, in which depersonalization and dehumanization are



rampant, people are disposable and replaceable. (This point is reinforced later when Claudia wears a black wig that makes her look just like Anna.)

In fact, Sandro even proposes marriage to Claudia on relatively short acquaintance. His weak, spur-of-the-moment proposal on a church rooftop in Noto also portrays the temporary nature of contemporary relationships, especially because a moment before “popping the question” the architect-manqué had pontificated on the impermanence of modern buildings: “Before, buildings were made to last for centuries; now they last twenty or thirty years.” The audience must draw its own inferences from this bleak statement about architectural longevity, but it seems to suggest that Sandro’s insincere marriage proposal implies that the vagaries of modern human associations are just as impermanent and disposable as the new buildings he builds (Chatman 1985: 5).

Sandro was initially attracted to Claudia out of a sense of loss over the disappearance of Anna, but we soon learn that he is a serial seducer who uses sex as solace for the void in his professional life. And, like many of the men in Antonioni’s trilogy who function as abstractions of bourgeois existence, Sandro is representative of a privileged cultural elite. In the Gramscian sense, the appeal of authoritarian male sexual practices to the intelligentsia is based in the desire to compensate for past priestly powers and present feelings of inadequacy through the reassertion of masculine authority (Gramsci 1998: 9). Antonioni suggests that such men are not real intellectuals, but rather members of a dissolute class. In Noto, for example, Sandro closes the shutters of a hotel room window before making love to Claudia, thereby blocking the view of a magnificent cathedral. In his mind, he is unconsciously blocking out the image of an architectural achievement he is incapable of producing—as well as Roman Catholicism’s injunctions against promiscuity.

Church architecture also figured in the ghost town sequence near Caltanissetta, where a modern cathedral, whose bold whiteness, hard angularity, and authoritarian crucifix accentuate the emptiness of the locale. The blank and empty buildings, with reverberations to Mussolini’s fascist era, act as cor-

Figure 1. L'avventura. The neurotic Anna remains aloof during the lovemaking scene with Sandro.

relatives for the inner void of Sandro's life and Claudia's predicament. But, as they drive away from the ghost town, Antonioni cuts sharply to the couple on a hillside, making love. The jump cut implies the suddenness of Claudia's decision to capitulate to Sandro's erotic demands, as well as Sandro's repetition compulsion to use casual sex to fill the vacuum of his inner being. As the couple makes love, the director cuts to a railroad train approaching them. Here a mechanical object, whose chugging engine approximates the rapid heartbeats and heavy breathing of the lovers, is juxtaposed with natural human sexuality. As the train rushes past, their intercourse is disrupted, reinforcing the mechanized, dehumanized nature of their lovemaking.⁴

Later, in the lobby of a fashionable hotel in Taormina, an ancient patriarchal painting that depicts the devotion of Pero to her father, Cimon, reminds us both of Anna's relationship to her father and of Sandro's dependence on Claudia's mothering and coddling behavior. During this scene, a female hotel guest flirts boldly with Sandro, perhaps by implication offering him her breasts. The difference between the charity of the ancient scene and the transient, grasping eroticism of the modern sexual meat market is clear.

Other minor characters like this aroused woman evince the same pattern of casual sexuality. Raimondo ogles Patrizia's legs and fondles her breast while she remains detached and uninvolved. Corrado and Giulia constantly quarrel in front of others. The young artist, Goffredo, engages in a mutual seduction with the frustrated Giulia, surrounded by his nude paintings (Figure 2). The background of sexual availability thus portrayed makes it easy for Claudia to capitulate to an affair with Sandro and for him in turn to be tempted by Gloria Perkins at the end of the film (Cameron and Wood 1969: 24–25). And, of course, Gloria Perkins, referred to as a "50,000-lira proposition," epitomizes the cash nexus of contemporary sexuality. A shot of money between her



Figure 2. *L'avventura*. The young artist, Goffredo, engages in a mutual seduction with the frustrated Giulia, surrounded by his nude paintings.

legs—her “souvenir”—and her acquisitive gesture of reaching for the bills with her feet confirm the “cash-and-carry” nature of this intercourse.

The long shots of throngs of men rioting over Gloria's torn skirt highlight the conjunction of libidinous sexuality with working-class masculinity and the extent to which sexual performance is a function of class structure in Italian culture. Roger Sandall has suggested that Antonioni does not “indulge or sentimentalize the Italian poor,” and that their emotional lives are portrayed as “less aimless and devitalized” (Sandall 1961: 54). However, it seems more the case that such facile ideological distinctions of class are obliterated as Antonioni collapses the façade between bourgeois “good taste,” through the choice of clothing and behavior deemed appropriate (*bella figura*), and the “improper” street-class behavior of the throng of men who talk loud, ogle women, and make lewd remarks, catcalls, and whistle at women (*maleducati*) (“Respectable,” Guano 2007: 51–52). Such performative class markers of public masculinity become transparent in a contemporary culture so fixated on sexual gratification. And whether or not the V-shaped slit represents “an incredibly overt . . . symbolic exteriorization of the female genitalia” (Brunette 1998: 9), as Peter Brunette says, the scene does present the ugly side of the male obsession with sex.

The enunciation of a theme through repetition is exemplified in the character of Gloria Perkins. She appears in the riot scene as a figure of comic relief but her promiscuous return at the end marks “the return of the repressed” for Sandro, who had ostensibly renounced his proclivity toward casual affairs. The cash nature of the Sandro-Gloria encounter is yet another instance of Antonioni's thematic insistence that money interferes with authentic human communication and love.

More important, the justly famous final scene puts visual shape to Antonioni's stated idea that Sandro and Claudia share a “mutual sense of pity” (Antonioni 1969b: 224). The film's final image makes the case that characters are representative figures in a landscape (Figure 3). Even Antonioni has articulated this position by equating Sandro with the crumbling wall on screen right and Claudia with the breast-shaped, semi-active volcano (Mt. Etna) on screen left: “The wall corresponds to the man and Mt. Etna corresponds somewhat to the situation of the woman. Thus the frame is divided exactly in half. . . . The concrete wall represents the pessimistic side, while Mt. Etna represents the optimistic” (Antonioni 1969b: 224).⁵ However, even this interpretation does not specify which, if either, side “wins.” The characters—backlit, in silhouette, and at a distance—are replaced by a compositional stasis in the *mise-en-scène*, a cinematic stopping that closes the film around an aesthetic device rather than a realist psychological conclusion.⁶

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Figure 3. *L'avventura*.
The famous final
image puts visual
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La notte

In *La notte*, Antonioni employs both actual erotic images and symbolic tropes to comment on the modern sexual malaise. In the opening sequence, for example, Giovanni encounters a “nymphomaniac” in a hospital corridor.⁷ She asks him for a match but Giovanni seems incapable of passion and so absent-mindedly proffers a cigarette instead, a substitute phallus. Soon, the woman entices him into a private room and seizes him provocatively (Figure 4). The normally passive Giovanni demurs at first but eventually succumbs to temptation and fervently returns her kiss and caresses her, until their heated embrace is broken by the medical staff. For the spiritually and sexually impotent author Giovanni—a writer who does not write, a lover who does not love—random intimacy seems the only salvation in the face of his friend Tomasso’s death. For Giovanni, the Freudian death wish (Thanatos) and life force (Eros) are but opposite sides of the same coin.



Figure 4. *La notte*.
Giovanni encounters
a “nymphomaniac”
in a hospital corridor
and the woman
embraces him
sexually.

In this scene, it is noteworthy that the wall that the strange woman leans on is pure white, a blankness that represents the emptiness of her (and Giovanni's) lust. Yet the nymphomaniac's uncontrollable lust (and Giovanni's horny response) is not so different from the rest of the characters, whose erotic desire is of a purely physical nature. As Arrowsmith notes, "Her illness is one which, to a greater or lesser degree, is shared by almost everyone around her" (Arrowsmith 1995: 42).

For example, early commentators analyzed Lidia's famous stroll through Milan as a sexual quest. In this context, the short, bomb-shaped concrete posts she threads her way through and fondles represent her unfulfilled desire and sexual restlessness, especially because her Benjaminian *flâneuse*-like stroll is through a peripheral suburban neighborhood she associates with her courtship days with Giovanni, her husband. Later in her walk, she observes a miniature rocket display ("What thrust!") and a vicious street fight between bare-chested, virile young men. Although at least one commentator has asserted that these scenes do "not reduce these images to systematic sexual allegories" (Sitney 1995: 152), and another has denied that Lidia suffers from "sexual restlessness" or that she is "cruising" (Chatman 1985: 67–68), the consistent pattern of such phallic iconography throughout Antonioni's oeuvre (and the attention paid to it by the critical community) suggests at least erotic symbolism, if not allegory. For Ian Cameron and Robin Wood, even the champagne bottle in the background of Tommaso's hospital room is a Freudian phallic symbol (Cameron and Wood 1969: 80). If nothing else, the sequence suggests that artificial stimulation has replaced natural Eros in a world where technology substitutes for authentic sexual gratification. Indeed, after witnessing the rocket display, Lidia, seeking human contact, contacts her husband, but even this attempt at rapport is mediated by an instrument of modern technology, the telephone.

Just as important, Lidia's wanderings set up the next two scenes: Lidia bathing in front of her disinterested husband and the "striptease" sequence in the nightclub. In the bath scene, Lidia ostentatiously dries herself in an attempt to attract Giovanni's attention. But he hardly notices; he is used to seeing her undressed, and her near-nudity has ceased having an erotic charge. So Lidia's sexual anticipation developed during her stroll is then given a literal and figurative "cold shower" by her husband's inattention. Georges Bataille's declaration seems apropos: "There is nothing erotic that is not transgressive. Marriage has many benefits and values, but eroticism is not one of them" (Bataille 1986: 23).

In the nightclub sequence, the African dancers enact a gymnastic, transgressive, and almost animalistic ritual that contrasts sharply with the moribund sexuality of the lifeless European white couple (Figure 5). Indeed, the black female performer is so vibrant and at ease with her body that the some-

Figure 5. *La notte*. In the nightclub, the African dancers' erotic display contrasts sharply with the moribund sexuality of the lifeless European white couple.



what racist, voyeuristic scene also conveys a legitimate dramatic point: that Giovanni's superficial intellectualism and Lidia's unexpressed psychological frustrations are far removed from the raw *jouissance* of the black dancer (Brunette 1998: 63).⁸

By referencing psychosexual practice in racialized terms, Antonioni seems to engage in *negrophilia*, an appropriation of blackness in essentialist tropes that seek to resuscitate a natural black self—oppressed by modernity; blackness thus functions as, “the original, incomplete germ of humanity against which the European could measure, humanize, or culturally regenerate himself” (Raphael-Hernandez and Gilroy 2004: 37). Although Antonioni avoids the negative essentialism of blackness characterized by Frantz Fanon as “intellectual deficiency” or “racial defect” (Fanon 1967: 112), the discursive strategy in this scene nonetheless results in what Stuart Hall has called an “essentializing moment,” which “sees difference as ‘their traditions versus ours,’ not in a positional way, but in a mutually exclusive, autonomous, and self-sufficient one” (Hall 2004: 260). As in the sequence in Marta’s apartment in *L’éclisse*, the African dance implies that blacks have a more “natural” approach to sexuality that is in sharp contrast to the more “civilized” white bourgeois Italian couple in *La Notte*.

Later, at the wild, decadent party, Lidia watches through a banister railing as her husband kisses Valentina. And, although Giovanni and Valentina have a brief happy flirtation, they are often physically distant on the parquet floor, which resembles a chessboard. Here the *mise-en-scène* conveys the idea that love is a psychological game for these bourgeois characters, one that can be played at a distance, without real emotional involvement. This is also seen in the play-acting of the “wife-swapping” exchange that takes place at the party. While Giovanni flirts with Valentina, and even kisses her, Lidia is attracted to Roberto, a married man, and even drives off in a car with him. Neither engages

in adultery, not because of any moral scruples but because both protagonists are not fully sexual beings. At the end of the revelry, a pre-dawn downpour breaks up the soirée. Some dancers scatter to avoid getting soaked and some actually jump into the swimming pool, fully clothed, but one woman remains on the dance floor, embracing a statue of a satyr in the rain. This affection for an inanimate object is symbolic of the despairing state of heterosexual relations in the erotic landscape of Antonioni's cinema: the women long for affection and understanding, and the men are stiff and inadequate, almost lifeless companions.⁹

In the final scene of *La notte*, Giovanni and Lidia begin to make love in a sand trap on a beautifully manicured golf course. The mise-en-scène provides ambiguous clues about the resolution. On the one hand, the couple's renewed sexual activity could be perceived as a natural act, in the context of the surrounding greenery and the trees, whose heliotropic "embrace" creates a cinematic simile for the human lovemaking below. This is, after all, *real* sex, a far cry from the figurative rocket launchings, spurting fountains, stripteases, and spurious flirtations seen previously. On the other hand, the setting is an arid bunker—suggestive of barrenness, hopelessness, and frustration—and the confining nature of the *trap* comments on their larger imprisonment within bourgeois society. In this sense, Giovanni and Lidia's coupling is emblematic of the sterility of modern love and intercourse. In addition, the final shot's aesthetic distance depersonalizes and de-emotionalizes the moment, leaving the viewer without a proper vanishing point (Figure 6). The middle-ground trees on screen right contradict the deep-focus open space on screen left, thus preventing establishment of a monocular visual perspective that would unify the spectator and close the discourse around a "happy ending."

Figure 6. La notte. Giovanni and Lidia make love in a bunker on a golf course, where the confinement of the trap comments on the sterility of modern love and intercourse.



L'eclisse

L'eclisse begins with a sequence filled with sexually symbolic correlatives. For instance, Riccardo is juxtaposed to the phallic solidity of a tall granite pyramid and Vittoria is seen fingering a cunnic vase as they discuss their impending break-up. Like Lidia in *La notte*, the only fulfillment Vittoria can find is through such objects, because her lover appears to be incapable of satisfying her. Later, Riccardo knocks over the vase, shattering it—just as the fragile relationship between the two is destroyed. At one point, Vittoria removes an ashtray filled with cigarette butts from an ornate picture frame, and then moves a modern sculpture forward. These gestures suggest her desire to get Riccardo (associated with the tobacco remains and ashes) out of her life and to highlight herself more. It may be that, as with similar iconography in *L'avventura* and *La notte*, that (due to censorship and other factors) the cinema had not yet developed a meaningful means by which to signify female sexuality except through modernist metaphoric or symbolic modes of representation. Likewise, the psychological tension between Riccardo and Vittorio in this break-up sequence can be said to be enunciated by the Jackson Pollack-like abstract canvas in the foyer of the apartment. That discordant and disturbing painting, which is seen in the background separating the two “lovers,” conveys the emotions of the exhausted characters much more than their minimalist words or actions.

In this same opening scene, a much larger metaphor—a bulbous mushroom-shaped water tower, with surrounding “pubic” trees—is associated with Riccardo, while Vittoria’s head is linked visually to a large evergreen tree (Figure 7). At the precise moment when the lovers are positioned against this backdrop of civilization and nature, respectively, the man suggests one last



Figure 7. *L'eclisse*. A phallic-shaped water tower, surrounded by “pubic” trees, is associated with Riccardo, while Vittoria is linked to an evergreen as the man begs for one last roll in the hay.

roll in the hay, for the road, so to speak. Philip Strick referred to this edifice as an “alien fungoid of an architectural aberration . . . explicit both as a phallic and an atomic symbol” (Strick 1963: 23). Just as important as the subtle statement about the fear of thermonuclear warfare that inhibits lasting love in a chance universe, the water tower represents the conflation of a natural entity (a mushroom) and a manmade monstrosity (the concrete building), a connection that figures prominently throughout the trilogy, especially in *L'eclisse*. Other examples include (1) the elephant leg used to support an end table in Vittoria's friend Marta's apartment; (2) the verbal equation of women and commodities in the *Borsa* scene, in which a young man displays a “cheese-cake” photo of a woman and asks “What am I bid?”; and (3) Piero's pen (an inanimate item), which features a woman dressing and undressing as ink cascades through its length—“a very immature view of sex” (Perry 1970: 218).

African imagery also figures prominently in *L'eclisse*, most notably in the sequence in Marta's apartment, which features Kenyan decor. At one point, Vittoria dresses up as a Kenyan native and does an erotic dance (Figure 8).

Unfortunately for Vittoria—a confirmed heterosexual—her diegetic audience is all-female. Antonioni uses backlighting to make her costume transparent, thus emphasizing the sensual outline of her curvaceous body. However, this sensual image is on display only for her female friends and the male film spectators. As a prop, the spear conjures up images of the hunt that are reinforced by the hunting trophies throughout the room, but



Figure 8. *L'eclisse*. Vittoria dances like a Kenyan native, with a phallic spear that implies that women are becoming more independent and predatory in fulfilling their erotic needs.

this “primitive” connotation is juxtaposed to the modern trappings of bourgeois society, including Marta's bed. Another possible reading of the spear, given the recurring phallic imagery in *L'eclisse*, is that today's women are becoming more like men: more independent and more predatory in attempting to fulfill their erotic needs. Of course, nothing sexual takes place in this scene; Marta rests her head on Vittoria's pudendal region, but even this action is suggestive less of latent lesbian eroticism than of sexual indifference (Perry 1970: 218).

Later, a bed figures prominently in Piero's apartment. After a truly alienated kiss through a pane of glass (Figure 9)—an image perhaps derived from an unusual source: The “Lullaby of Broadway” musical number in *Gold Diggers of 1935*—Piero and Vittoria kiss more directly and more passionately. Unfortunately, her dress gets ripped in the process. And although she initially seems



Figure 9. *L'eclisse*. Vittorio and Piero engage in a truly alienated kiss through a pane of glass, an image perhaps derived from a musical number in *Gold Diggers of 1935*.

willing to go to bed with her paramour, she loses interest after hearing the tolling of church bells outside. They end up back to back, returning to a more alienated position. The sounds of church bells, as well as the presence of priests and nuns, frequently dot the landscape of Antonioni's films—as symbols of unheeded authority and repression. In one scene, a priest passes in the background when Vittoria and Piero decide to go to his apartment; shortly thereafter, a group of nuns passes by just before Vittoria submits to Piero's crude advances.

When Piero does finally kiss her and she begins to undress (like the novelty pen), the off-screen tolling of church bells causes Vittoria to pause. Similarly, in *L'avventura*, nuns walk past the building Sandro lives in just before he has sex with Anna; later in the film, a group of priests leads a group of schoolboys through the grounds of a cathedral just before Sandro has sex with Claudia in their hotel room in the town of Noto. These examples suggest the meager, background role that the clergy and its teachings have on modern mores: the Church is virtually ignored in favor of a more easygoing *dolce vita* lifestyle, with little or no moral anchoring. Although Antonioni is far from a prude, his films illustrate the social and psychological interregnum between a fixed morality based on Church doctrines and the as-yet-undefined new consciousness and “identity” mores.

The “Sick Eros” theme recurs in almost every scene of *L'eclisse*. Other examples include Piero's casual, voyeuristic gaze at a nurse's legs as she adjusts her stocking when he's supposedly involved with Vittoria; the ironic “Romeo and Juliet” balcony scene, in which the modern Juliet rejects her suitor and his car is stolen and driven into the Tiber; another scene that seems romantic—Piero's offer of chocolates—ends up ironic when the box turns out to be

empty; and Piero's little joke pen that, when inverted, "undresses" the figure of a woman—a gadget that defines the stockbroker's psychological and sexual immaturity (Figure 10). Furthermore, Piero often uses the insider language of finance when he refers to a woman as a "good deal" and to his stock market transactions, as he sees love relationships, as "quick turnovers." He also says he prefers women (like investments) that "give abundantly and quickly." An associate shows Piero a "girlie" photo and asks, "What am I bid?"—thereby equating sex and money. Nonetheless, the stock exchange scenes have "an unmistakable *erotic frenzy*" (Arrowsmith 1995: 79), albeit a displaced, mechanical, and materialistic one. Piero's "financial Eros" (Arrowsmith 1995: 79) turns people into exploitative (and transitory) cash propositions, similar to *L'avventura's* Gloria Perkins.

For Antonioni, late capitalism has distorted human values, even those related to sexuality. As Karl Marx put it, "The bourgeoisie has . . . left no other nexus between man and man [he might have said man and woman] than naked self interest, than callous cash payment. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies . . . in the icy water of egotistical calculation" (Marx 1965: 15).

Antonioni once referred to *L'eclisse* as "a story of imprisoned sentiments," where the characters are all trapped—literally and figuratively—in their respective psychological situations (Quoted in Gilman 1962: 10–12). Barricades, fences, gratings, gates, and other architectural structures often act as impersonal, objective correlatives of alienation by visually foregrounding the estranged predicaments of the protagonists. In one scene, Vittoria, stuck in her apartment, looks outside at Piero, who is framed in the fence grillwork. Piero's former girlfriend, "the beast," is seen through a chain-link fence; even more significant, shortly after Piero and Vittoria meet, they are separated visually by a massive pillar of the ornate Borsa, which houses the Roman Stock Exchange. In effect, capitalism itself interferes with their potential romance, just as the



Figure 10. *L'eclisse*. Piero has a joke pen that, when inverted, "undresses" the figure of a woman—a gadget that defines his psychological and sexual immaturity.

abstract expressionist painting had “come between” Riccardo and Vittorio in the first scene. Thus, the materialist *mise-en-scène* of the Borsa, this temple to Mammon, foreshadows the couple’s failure at love in the utilitarian, money-obsessed society of Fiat, Pirelli, Olivetti, and Gucci.¹⁰ It is of note that the woman is cut in half by the column and is relegated to the weaker screen-left portion of the screen, evoking the Marxist message that women are more subjugated than men because they are (at least in Engels’s time) less involved with the ownership of property and capital, as well as the production of socially productive labor (Engels 1978: 221).

In reference to *L’ecclisse*, Robert Kolker has said that “the final sequence serves as a coda to a large-scale work on desiccated love and the dehumanization of the stock exchange, a work which is really about the human figure being displaced by the architectural and economic forms it has created” (Kolker 1983: 142). When the two lovers do not show up for their expected rendezvous, Antonioni shows us their intended meeting place, a building site, in a seven-minute, forty-three-shot montage. Although both had exchanged vows of love and sworn to meet that evening in the EUR district, they do not appear. (As such, their previous declarations of affection are as fleeting as Sandro’s proposal of marriage in *L’avventura*.) As dusk turns to night, the area becomes depopulated—dehumanized, so to speak. The few people we see on the streets are anonymous, quickly observed and then cinematically obliterated in favor of a focus on their environs. Essentially, technological things—buildings, streets, buses, streetlamps, sprinklers—replace the inhabitants, and those lifeless, non-anthropocentric entities take on metaphorical, psychological, and even sexual connotations.

Ted Perry has pointed out that “there could hardly be a more phallic-shaped water sprinkler” (Perry 1970: 186), and its diminished spurting and eventual dripping suggests the limpness of contemporary male sexuality. That it is a mechanism is another commentary on modern man. The water tower, that “alien fungoid,” is also reprised, a *ritornello* gesture that both parallels the repetition compulsions of the characters and links the phallus with nuclear annihilation. The scaffolding rods, striped intersection, and other phallic iconography all substitute for the appearance of the flesh-and-blood Piero. An anonymous woman, perhaps a surrogate for Vittoria, gazes through bars, trapped in her circumstances as much as the heroine is. Finally, the rain barrel—the third site connected with water—is shown again, as the water flows into the gutter. In the barrel are two objects connected with fire—a stick and a matchbook—one natural, associated with Vittoria; the other manmade and artificial, linked to Piero. They both drain out with the water.

L’ecclisse’s building site serves as an apt metaphor for Antonioni’s views on modern human psychology and sexuality. In one sense, a building under construction, like a blossoming heterosexual relationship, is an uncompleted so-

cial arrangement; as such, the empty location could signify simply that Vittoria and Piero will not be dating anymore. On a larger level, the sheer phenomenological *presence* of this skeletal shell and its surrounding locale (Rome's EUR district) could be seen as a synecdoche for modern Eros: a Western society caught in an interregnum, a transition phase between an old, outdated morality with puritanical strictures and a new consciousness that seems to promote free love but is fettered by postindustrial capitalism's spirit of competition and acquisitiveness. This new morality conspires to diminish our humanness and reduce our free psychological response to the transcendental pleasures of love and true Eros. As Antonioni put it, "Even though we know that the ancient codes of morality are decrepit and no longer tenable, we persist in remaining loyal to them" (Antonioni 1970: 209).

Conclusion

The psychological and sexual themes expressed in Antonioni's trilogy should not be seen as merely the invention of one talented film director. They must be seen within the larger context of their times. More specifically, the filmmaker's oeuvre can be viewed as part of the same historical process by which the contradictory inner logic and dynamics of late capitalism are expressed. Antonioni's work, however, is more than just a decadent reflection of social life in the 1960s; it is also a prescient revolt against reification and the anomie of life under capitalism. Indeed, even Karl Marx conceded that "consciousness can sometimes appear further advanced than the contemporary empirical relationships," a notion that has been reified as the "unequal development" of the base and the superstructure. Thus it is possible to put ideology on display and enable spectators to see life afresh, to see some psychological and sexual aspects of the human condition for what they really are—contingent, man-made structures and systems.

As such, Marcuse's "aesthetic dimension" can be interpreted in Antonioni's trilogy as inherently subversive, a critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental universe. The Marcusean negations in those three films—especially their political and representational aspects—are often based on the hope of an "emancipatory effect." In this sense, the auteur's films have the potential for liberation because they both hold a mirror up to the causal and administered material world in which we live and take us into a recreated world of the imagination in which everything appears to be fresh and significant. Marcuse insisted that the aesthetic dimension could depict an imaginary universe of human relations not conditioned by the market or based on competition and exploitation. Even if such a society is portrayed only through a work's formal symmetry and beauty, its stark contrast to the repressive instrumental reason of late capitalism (and Hollywood) implies that forms and modes of reality can exist in art and the imagination before their realization in any actual society.

Although this article has not focused on Antonioni's cinematic aesthetic, in favor of a concentration on psychology and sexuality, international critics have always hailed the visual beauty of his images and *mise-en-scène*.¹¹ Thus, by creating such images of freedom, symmetry, and beauty, the director's movies could be a progressive force in the material as well as the cultural transformation of society. This can be achieved through his development of a "new cinematic language" to communicate and define new values—in this case, human sexual mores. By breaking the oppressive rule of established *langue*, deception, and indoctrination over the minds and bodies of human subjects through a revolution in perception, Antonioni's rupture with the continuum of domination and dominant forms may mark it as a discourse that can anticipate socio-sexual transformation.

Although Antonioni's characters often wallow in the *Weltschmerz* that comes from internalizing the rules of society, depicting alienated people may not necessarily be *prima facie* evidence of political commitment. In fact, the depiction of such individuals may well reify them into representative types within a timeless "human condition." These dead-in-life people may even be perceived as "cool" embodiments of late capitalism and become role models for the affluent, as was seen in the reception of *Blow-Up*'s mod photographer in 1967. Therefore, the notion that Antonioni's characters are "alienated" needs to be "turned on its head." They are not so much alienated from capitalist society as too much involved in it, too willing to compromise their humanity in their efforts to succeed (e.g., *L'avventura*'s Sandro, *La notte*'s Giovanni, and *L'ecclisse*'s Piero). In a world that has removed the personal from its center, these characters have trouble relating to each other. It is important to note, however, that these sorry people are not intended to be positive role models. Their pain and defeatism may have the progressive effect of encouraging viewers to think about the causes of their own predicaments. Robert Kolker has noted this aspect of modern characterization: "In the cruelties visited upon them and that they visit upon each other are the clues as to how these cruelties might be avoided" (Kolker 1983: 152).

In particular, Antonioni's trilogy foregrounds a despairing view of erotic relations. The filmmaker posits "pseudo-couples" (Beckett 1965: 297) whose basic unhappiness evinces a fierce opposition both to the institution of marriage as bourgeois society's sanctified disavowal of desire and to the "let-it-all-hang-out" *Zeitgeist* of the new consciousness. Modern sexuality is thus depicted as a complex psychiatric symptom of the fundamental estrangement of contemporary life, a mutual codependency of two "always already" damaged subjects. Within the rapidly changing social milieu of the 1960s, Antonioni chronicled women's growing independence from conventional sex roles and how women remained frustrated by their lovers and by the system of pa-

triarchy that devalued their personhood: "The common factor [in the trilogy] is the inadequacy of the men to satisfy the women. The women's frustrations are the emotional core" (Cameron and Wood 1969: 109). In addition, the films of the trilogy depict the changes in male psychology, whereby modern men become "hollow men," "nowhere men," who enact a ritualized and socially determined "masculinity without virility."¹²

Nonetheless, even though most of Antonioni's people are certainly flawed characters, there is usually no overt villain in his cinema. Instead, larger social forces seem to be the antagonists to the goals of the main characters. Sandro may be selfish and immature; Anna may be demanding and neurotic; Giovanni may be self-centered and bored; Lidia may be long-suffering; Vittoria may be too idealistic and romantic; and Piero may be overly wrapped up in his amoral and acquisitive goals, but they are as much the *products* and *victims* of their changing times as the *makers* of their fates. Likewise, although they are not cruel in a traditional sense, neither are they heroic; they seem never to have goals outside of themselves and their own immediate pleasures and preoccupations. Thus, these characters display the modern tragedy of the individual, rather than the Greek ideal of the tragedy of the nation-state. This is in part because of the construction of the characters themselves, their sociohistorical circumstances, and the director's dispassionate view of their bleak psychological and sexual predicaments.

Antonioni is hardly a bluenose, yet his films do condemn the perverse and pervasive pornography of contemporary culture, without implying a return to priggish puritanical (or Roman Catholic) strictures. Instead, the director's erotic politics remind us that modern civilization corrupts, stifles, and commodifies natural Eros, thereby creating Marcusean "one-dimensional" men and incomplete women. As an antidote for the sexual disease he diagnosed as Sick Eros, the filmmaker proposes a more revolutionary society, one in which a revolution of the inner life is a precondition for more satisfying *jouissance* and social relations. Although Antonioni is in favor of natural, work, sex, and love, he shows the diametric opposition to those ideals in his films. His message may have been misconstrued by the "identity society" of the 1960s as a libertarian license for sexual fulfillment of any sort, but the evidence of the trilogy suggests a more dialectical approach.

On the one hand, Antonioni illustrates the futility of mere physical passion or "free love"; on the other hand, he depicts the modern admixture of outdated moral pressures, personal passions, and acquisitiveness conspiring to fetter our humanness. As such, in their representation of contemporary psychology and gendered sexual roles under the thrall of late capitalism, Antonioni's films are social possessions that both reflect the crisis of the couple in their era and reveal much about the state of Eros today.

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Notes

¹ Antonioni passed away on 31 July 2007, at the age of ninety-four, within a few hours of the death of Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman.

² For more detail on this point, see Tomasulo 1986, esp. ch. 6.

³ Ted Perry (1975) introduced this phrase to Antonioni criticism. Film reviewer David Ansen used it (without attribution) in his obituary of Antonioni and Bergman (Ansen 2007: 55).

⁴ In a UCLA doctoral seminar, Michael Renov referred to this scene as *locomotus interruptus*. Renov, unpublished comment, Film and Social Reality seminar, UCLA, February 1978.

⁵ Antonioni attributed this interpretation to French film critic Georges Sadoul.

⁶ For more on the ending of *L'avventura* (and the director's other films), see Tomasulo 1983: 133–39, and Tomasulo 1986: 208–31.

⁷ Although most of the academic literature on Antonioni (and even the screenplay) refers to this woman as a nymphomaniac, sexual designations of this sort should be analyzed in their historical context. While this term may have been acceptable to use to describe female erotomania (what we might today refer to as “sex addiction”) in 1961, contemporary psychiatry has discarded such usage. For instance, the American Psychiatric Association removed the term from its *Diagnostic Manual* in 1987. (The authors thank *Projections* editor Ira Konigsberg for calling this fact to our attention.)

⁸ The term “raw” is used here to evoke Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1969) famous dichotomy between Nature and Civilization.

⁹ A similar scene appears in the director's *Identificazione di Una Donna* (*Identification of a Woman*, 1982) in which a female shop girl caresses the underwear and genital region of a cardboard male manikin.

¹⁰ It is of interest to note that the ancient building that now houses the Roman Stock Exchange was originally a memorial temple to Divus Hadrianum, a deified emperor. Thus, in addition to international high finance, religion and the state are also in some measure (at least visually) culpable for the eventual estrangement of the two potential paramours (Tomasulo 1993 11–12).

¹¹ At the 1960 Cannes Film Festival, *L'avventura* was given a Special Jury Prize “for its remarkable contribution toward the search for a new cinematic language and for the beauty of its images” (Chatman 1989: 186).

¹² Dyer argues that contemporary life has necessitated “a special kind of doomed marriage . . . within and peculiar to a society as moribund in its way as that of *Les Regles du Jour*” (1962: 21).

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