

*The End of the Affair:
Rossellini and Antonioni after Neorealism*

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WHEN MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI and Ingmar Bergman died just hours apart on 30 July 2007, the coincidence was eerily symbolic. Together, the directors embodied a distant moment in the European art film, when a cascade of experimental masterpieces pushed the medium into uncharted areas while still managing to communicate its discoveries to the public. In Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), the children gather at night to play with a magic lantern, which entrances them with images of *den vackra flickan* (the beautiful girl) Arabella projected onto their bedroom wall. But an intruder breaks up their reverie with a frightening roar, and an adult arrives to shoo them back to bed. The scene is shorthand for Bergman's cinema: a place where magic and threat, enchantment and anxiety, go hand in hand. The nighttime screams end the show, and the golden-haired Arabella awaits the Grim Reaper.

For the Italian film buff, Antonioni's death was especially poignant: he had been one of the last survivors of a cinematic golden age that began in the documentary-like neorealist films of the 1940s and continued through the auteur classics of the 1950s and 1960s. The passing of Antonioni's contemporary—and artistic polar opposite—Federico Fellini in 1993 had already signaled for many the obituary of the *cinema italiano* writ large. So the loss of Antonioni only intensified the funereal mood of a once-legendary national film industry.

The year of Antonioni's death also marked an anniversary for another deity of the Italian screen, Roberto Rossellini. At a conference at Yale in 2007 dedicated to the centenary of the late director's birth, his daughter Ingrid Rossellini spoke about the unusual approach of "Father" to making films and rearing children. He would often appear on the set with little or no script and, lured away by

a fast car or the chance to scuba dive, leave actors and crew in the lurch for hours if not days at a time. Meanwhile, he consigned his children, Ingrid and her twin, the actress Isabella Rossellini, to the care of a nanny in an apartment separate from the one he shared with his wife, Ingrid Bergman, the Swedish actress whose extramarital affair with Rossellini had caused such outrage (Senator Edwin C. Johnson of Colorado called her a “powerful force for evil” in 1950). A professor of Italian who bears a striking resemblance to her famous mother, Ingrid Rossellini came across as someone who felt privileged to have lived in the presence of genius, but who was also aware of its cost. During a speaker’s presentation on Rossellini’s documentary about India, she asked him sharply how her father could pretend to know a country he had only limited contact with. I don’t think I was the only one in the audience to wonder if she felt these words also applied to her.

Though Rossellini and Antonioni were born only six years apart, a yawning gap separates them. Rossellini belonged to the initial generation of post–World War II neorealist filmmakers who helped shape a cohort of emerging auteurs including Antonioni, Fellini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. A late bloomer from a prosperous family (like Rossellini), Antonioni did not gain international acclaim until he made *L’avventura* in 1960 at the age of forty-seven, by which time Rossellini had already established himself as a cinematic *éminence grise*. In fact, by the 1960s Rossellini had begun to move away from film and into television, as he made a series of historical documentaries about such figures as Pascal, Louis XIV, and the Medici family for RAI, the Italian national network.

Like Rossellini’s, Antonioni’s cinematic glory was not long for this world. After the groundbreaking trilogy *L’avventura*, *La notte* (*Night*, 1961), and *L’eclisse* (*Eclipse*, 1962), he shot the masterpiece *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964). But then the kiss of death arrived: a Hollywood contract from MGM. A disastrous film that resulted from this arrangement, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), anticipated the problems that would plague Antonioni for the rest of his career. The film narrates the unrest of the Vietnam generation in California

through the love affair between a handsome young renegade, who flees Berkeley after killing a cop during a protest, and the beautiful idealist he meets while on the run.

It's often said that in Antonioni's film universe all is surface: his carefully controlled compositions and palette compel us to view his images as ends in themselves, independent of the film's actual story and themes. I agree to a point. His individual frames are obsessively stylized, as he creates breathtaking images to which he then gives movement and life. But beneath the surface of Antonioni at his best—especially in the films about a rebuilt Italian society in the 1960s during the nation's so-called economic miracle—a world of social and historical currents makes its presence felt. When he stopped filming in Italy, its crises no longer sustained his cinematic vision. *Zabriskie Point* is indeed all surface: its images read like postcards sent by a tourist from the front. All the themes of sixties youth culture are there (including an orgy in the desert), and they are dutifully, even beautifully, recorded. Yet these pretty pictures don't point beyond themselves. They leave us with a flat and inert portrait of America, lovely to look at but ultimately superficial.

Though Antonioni went on to create films into his nineties, *Zabriskie Point* can be called his last film, for it confirms that his aesthetic sense never changed, whether he was making a film about Italian playboys or American hippies. The issues differed from one decade to the next, but the look of Antonioni's cinematic frame was always the same: a Renaissance-like devotion to balanced and symmetrical compositions, an affinity for architectural shapes and volumes, and a predilection for silence and ambient sound. To grasp Antonioni's aesthetic, one might visit his hometown, Ferrara, where the graceful proportion of the buildings and cobblestone streets anticipates his vision. The great French film critic André Bazin wrote that not every artist is made for every age, and genius is only possible under certain conditions. We admire Voltaire's philosophy and ignore his theatrical works, because his thought pieces capture the remarkable intellectual energies of his time, while his plays merely reflect the limitations of the era's stage productions. Antonioni lived

to the ripe age of ninety-four, and the same audience that sat mesmerized by his existentialist themes and mysterious scenes in the 1950s and 1960s offered ironic smirks and puzzled glances in the 1970s and 1980s. He outlived his artistry by a few decades.

He also outlived the legacy of neorealism.



Ever since I was twenty, I've been haunted by a film that, the first time I saw it, struck me as beyond tedious. It was my junior year abroad in Florence, and I daydreamed through most of Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (1954). I kept waiting for something—*anything*—to happen, but all I got was the strife of an upper-class English couple, Katherine and Alex Joyce (played by Ingrid Bergman and the impossibly suave George Sanders). Occasionally, the arguing would pause when Katherine visited one of Naples's cultural attractions. I was in Italy seeing its splendors firsthand; following Katherine Joyce around a museum and looking at them through her eyes seemed like a waste of time. One day I would realize that Katherine and Alex were on a failed Grand Tour, and I would write about how Rossellini deconstructs our stereotypes of Italy as what Goethe called "the world's university." But during that first viewing as an undergraduate, I registered only the boredom and dissatisfaction that filled the characters like the lava of the now dormant but still menacing Vesuvius, the volcano featured throughout Rossellini's film (figure 1).

Katherine and Alex come to Naples to claim an inheritance left to them by an Uncle Homer. Away from their high-society English life and alone together for the first time, they begin to discover things about each other: the haughty Alex is quite the ladies' man; the chilly Katherine is actually rather sentimental. Alex even learns that before they married Katherine had a young admirer, Charles Lewington—an expatriate poet who lived in Italy and composed the following verses: "Temple of the spirit, no longer bodies but pure ascetic images, compared to which mere thought seems flesh, heavy and dim." Katherine tells Alex that on the eve of their marriage, Lewington showed up shivering at her door to confess his love for her.



Fig. 1. Katherine and Alex Joyce engage in one of their many standoffs in Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy*.

“He was thin, tall, so pale and spiritual,” Katherine says.

“You know, that young man got me to thinking about something,” Alex remarks, having met Lewington in passing. “That you can learn more from the way a man coughs than the way he speaks.”

“What did Charles’s cough tell you?” she asks.

“That he was a fool,” he answers.

“He was not a fool, he was a poet!” Katherine counters.

“What’s the difference?” Alex asks.

Later, Alex tries, and fails, to have an affair with a woman on Capri (he then tries, and fails, to solicit a prostitute). Meanwhile, Katherine tries, and fails, to pretend she’s asleep when he arrives home late from these misadventures. She plays solitaire as he enters, a metaphor for their marriage: a slow, painstaking game of manipulation with little action, less satisfaction, and likely defeat. Later, on a visit to a lava field of Vesuvius, they watch as archaeologists unearth two lovers wrapped in each other’s arms. *Two people*, the guide remarks, *just as they were at the moment they died*. The eternal passion of the lovers, sealed in lava, exposes the Joyces’ own relationship for the fraud that they now acknowledge it to be. They are a pseudo-couple, unable to fill the void between them that the years of cocktail

chatter, fine dining, and luxury hotels had covered over. The couple finally agrees: “Our situation is quite clear,” Alex says. “We have decided to get a divorce and that settles it,” adds Katherine.

You may well wonder: how could the director of heroic partisan struggle against the Nazis in the founding film of neorealism, *Rome, Open City* (1945), bother to make a movie about two self-absorbed foreigners adrift in Naples and suffocating in each other’s presence? What happened to the clash between good and evil he explored in films like *Paisà* (1946) and *Germany, Year Zero* (1948)? Many early critics of *Voyage to Italy* asked as much. One reviewer suggested that Rossellini should retire, while another argued that the director had ruined himself with the film. One critic went so far as to say that *Voyage to Italy* had no subject, no dialogue, no script, and no direction—that it was a muddle of empty images that insulted the audience’s intelligence. Yet some, especially the directors of the French New Wave, could not praise *Voyage to Italy* highly enough. Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Éric Rohmer, and François Truffaut all worshipped the film. The respected journal *Cahiers du cinéma*, which had been instrumental in discovering the groundbreaking attributes of neorealism, ranked *Voyage to Italy* among the greatest films ever made, a view supported by the prestigious magazine *Filmcritica*. Defending the film from Marxist criticism, Bazin proclaimed that with *Voyage to Italy* Rossellini discovered a new and abstract neorealism that stripped appearances of the inessential and arrived at the essence of reality itself, just as Matisse had done.

The critics weren’t the only ones confused by *Voyage to Italy*. The crusty Sanders, furious because Rossellini wouldn’t show his actors what little script there was, threatened to quit many times during filming. Though Sanders was at first intrigued by Rossellini’s eccentric filmmaking style, eventually the director’s obsessive attention to detail and innumerable takes reduced the actor, in the words of his *Memoirs of a Professional Cad* (1960), to a boredom bordering on “stupefaction.” Even Ingrid Bergman, whose attraction to Rossellini’s genius had led her to abandon her marriage and her

Hollywood stardom, voiced misgivings about her husband's unorthodox methods. Sanders put the matter more bluntly: Rossellini was ruining her career.

For many, the biggest problem with the film was its ending. After they encounter the lovers sealed in lava and decide to divorce, Alex and Katherine drive into the middle of a Neapolitan religious procession that pulls Katherine away from her husband and into a wave of praying Neapolitans. Suddenly, the otherwise remote and snobbish Alex springs to life and pursues his disappearing wife—the only instance where we see him driven by passion. That same bewildered look that covered Katherine's face in her confrontations with Italy's ancient culture returns as she seeks Alex in the throng. They find each other, and for the first time in the film an expression of relief releases from her body. They decide then and there, just as rashly as they did to divorce, to stay together.

"Tell me that you love me," Katherine says.

"Well, if I do," Alex responds, "will you promise not to take advantage of me?"

"Yes, but tell me, I want to hear you say it," she says.

"All right, I love you."

And with these words from Alex the film concludes.



The first time I saw the film, the ending mortified me. It seemed so cheap, so Hollywood, as though the inscrutable Italian classic I'd been watching suddenly underwent a transfusion of saccharine from *Ghost* or *Pretty Woman*. How could the great realist Rossellini stoop to so farfetched a conclusion?

When I watched the film again as a graduate student, I had the opposite reaction, though no less categorical. I believed that Rossellini had thrown the two antagonists together at film's end in a fitful embrace to underscore their ultimate and insurmountable loneliness—which, in a futile act, Katherine and Alex try to overcome with a last-ditch attempt at intimacy. My Hollywood sellout became my existentialist hero.

I returned to the film years later and realized that I had been wrong on both counts. As I wrote in 2010 in the journal *Adaptation*, we'll never know whether the Joyces' reconciliation during San Genaro was caused by the fear of being alone, the complications of companionship, or even the miraculous potential of the religious festival. In an interview from 1965, Rossellini explained the ending of his film in terms of the physical differences that distinguish the tall, pale Joyces from their Neapolitan counterparts and leave the couple so exposed. "It's logical that someone who finds himself naked should try to cover himself up" (*My Method*). He also described the film as "bitter."



The ending of *Voyage to Italy*, I believe, preoccupied Antonioni, who had cowritten the Fascist-era film *A Pilot Returns* (1942) with Rossellini and, like so many of his generation, cut his teeth on neorealism. His two superb documentaries from the 1940s—*N. U.* on Rome's street cleaners and *People of the Po* on the rhythms of life along his hometown river—reflect the neorealist preference for nonprofessional actors, natural lighting, and long shots in real time. But by the time of *Voyage to Italy*, Antonioni found that the innovations of neorealism had become formulaic. Likewise, Fellini, a scriptwriter for Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* and *Paisà*, said of his landmark film *La strada* (1954) that just because he filmed a dilapidated shack and some vagrants, people assumed he was a neorealist. Even Rossellini joined the dissent. We can no longer make films in bombed-out cities, he said, alluding to his *Germany, Year Zero*, a portrait of life in the rubble of Berlin after World War II.

In an interview from 1958, Antonioni expressed his ambivalence toward neorealism by taking on one of its most legendary films, Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948):

Am I a neorealist director? I really couldn't say. And is neorealism over? Not exactly. It is more correct to say that neorealism is evolving...The neorealism of the postwar period, when reality

was what it was, so intensely present, focused on the relationship between characters and reality....Today, instead, since reality has—more or less, for better or worse—been normalized, it seems important to look for what is left inside the characters of all their past experiences. That's why, nowadays, it's no longer important to make a film about a man whose bicycle has been stolen....Today, once the problem with the bicycle has been eliminated—I am speaking metaphorically, try to see beyond my words—it is important to see what is inside this man whose bicycle was stolen. (trans. Allison Cooper)

Antonioni believed that because the Italian economy had stabilized during the postwar boom years, the challenge was to represent the emotions and spiritual life in a rebuilding nation that emerged from the war somehow intact. De Sica's film followed an unemployed worker on his vain quest to recuperate his stolen bike in an impoverished postwar Rome. By 1958, thanks to the Marshall Plan and the economic miracle, Antonioni—like Rossellini in *Voyage to Italy*—wished to replace the stolen bike with the broken heart.

The word *avventura* in Italian has two meanings: the English cognate “adventure,” as in “eventful occurrence”; and “love affair,” as in “amorous adventure.” The title and themes of the film contrast with the bitter and dignified necessities of *Open City*, *Bicycle Thief*, and other neorealist classics, for Antonioni's film dramatizes an indulgence: the romantic adventure between a ladies' man and a gorgeous ingénue, whose introduction into Italian high society causes her to lose her bearings and betray the memory of her closest friend. The film begins innocuously. Two young Roman women, the rich Anna (Lea Massari) and more humble Claudia—played by Monica Vitti, whose classic Greek mask of a face, according to Antonioni, suggested the impervious nature of the film—join the successful and shallow contractor, Sandro (B-film heartthrob Gabriele Ferzetti), on a pleasure cruise. The lovers Sandro and Anna attempt to fill the gaps in their relationship with sex, and squabble their way from one Sicilian island to the next. On board the yacht, the banter fails to disguise the emptiness in the lives of all the wealthy characters,

except for the effervescent Claudia. Then Anna goes for a swim, after a nasty exchange with Sandro (“I don’t feel you anymore,” she says. “Even yesterday, at my house [when we made love], you didn’t feel me anymore?” he taunts her. “You always have to sully everything,” she responds). She doesn’t return, and the subsequent search yields nothing. As the investigation continues, the tension between Sandro and Claudia rises. Just as all are losing hope of finding Anna, Sandro imposes himself. Claudia’s protests become halfhearted. Soon enough, they begin their *avventura* (figure 2).



Fig. 2. Sandro and Claudia search for the missing Anna in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura*.

The making of *L’avventura* has a mythology to rival the film’s harsh Homeric landscape. Antonioni oversaw each detail of production with a ferocious meticulousness. He sequestered cast and crew in the Sicilian islands for weeks at a time and began the day’s shooting in the raw dawn in search of the perfect light. During the filming, Lea Massari suffered a heart attack. Meanwhile, production continued at a glacial pace—and ran out of money. An early episode, a brief scene in a Roman apartment in which Sandro and Anna meet for the first time in the film and then, after barely exchanging greetings, proceed to make love while Claudia waits in the square below, took

weeks to shoot. Early reactions to the film matched the severity of the Sicilian locales and the director's procedures. At the Cannes premiere in 1960, the audience jeered so loudly that a near riot ensued. Despite the bile, many realized that they were witnessing a turning point in the history of film. Thirty-seven artists wrote an open letter praising the film. The first name to appear on the declaration was Roberto Rossellini's. *L'avventura* went on to win a Special Jury Prize at Cannes that year, establishing Antonioni as one of the world's leading filmmakers.

In making *L'avventura*, Antonioni hoped to influence our way of seeing the world. He refused to tell a story, unfold a narrative, or convey a message in the traditional cinematic or neorealist sense. The search for Anna leads nowhere, and she becomes, in Antonioni's words, a black hole in the center of the film. To Antonioni, what mattered was the language of cinema, which meant an inquiry into the nature of the film image and, by extension, the act of vision. In a gem of an essay published in *Sight and Sound*, "The Event and the Image," Antonioni notes that the "filmmaker is a man like any other; and yet his life is not the same," for he sees differently:

Seeing is for us [filmmakers] a necessity. For a painter, too, the problem is one of seeing: but while for the painter it is a matter of uncovering a static reality, or at most a rhythm that can be held in a single image, for a director the problem is to catch a reality which is never static, is always moving toward or away from a moment of crystallization, and to present this movement, this arriving and moving on, as a new perception.

Antonioni's desire to change the way we observe reality permeates *L'avventura*, especially its conclusion. By film's end, Sandro and Claudia, now a couple, openly wish for Anna never to return. "A few days ago," Claudia says, "the thought of Anna's death made me, too, feel as though I wanted to die. Now, I don't even cry. I'm afraid she could be alive. Everything is becoming horribly simple." They check into the luxury hotel where Sandro's business partner is throwing a lavish party. Claudia complains of fatigue and decides not to attend.

While Sandro dresses for the party, she asks him to tell her that he loves her. At first he says that he does, then, when she keeps pressing him, he says that he doesn't. "I deserve that," she replies.



Fig. 3. Antonioni's camera surrounds Claudia with a heavy inanimate world.

That night, Claudia can't sleep and begins to fear that Anna will reappear. Dawn arrives, and Sandro still hasn't returned. Frantic, she dresses and begins to search, but can't find him anywhere. Antonioni's camera swallows her, and by extension her human drama, in a parade of objects, angles, and geometrical patterns (figure 3). Then Sandro surfaces from behind the jet-black hair of a voluptuous foreign prostitute (figure 4). Claudia storms out, Sandro gives chase (after flinging some lire in the direction of his purring, provisional mistress), and, again, the vastness of the Sicilian landscape dwarfs their human love story. The men in Antonioni's films are always ready for sex but for little else, and a celebrated shot of a divinely backlit Claudia with the open womb of a church behind her shows why many consider Antonioni to be the consummate woman's director. The stronger of the two, she will forgive her man-child and take him back, after absolving him with what the critic Peter Brunette called a sign of "cosmic pity"—the placing of her hand on his shameful



Fig. 4. Claudia discovers Sandro in the act of betrayal.

head. The film's final shot suggests that, despite their reconciliation, Claudia and Sandro have reached the end of their affair. The frame is divided in two, she on one side, linked to both the womb of the sea and the mouth of explosive Etna; he on the other, blocked from it all by an insurmountable wall (figure 5). Someone once asked Antonioni if, after this bleak reunion, Claudia and Sandro could ever be happy together. He answered that he did not know.



Fig. 5. Antonioni divides the screen at the conclusion of *L'avventura*.



The scenes of reconciliation in Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* and Antonioni's *L'avventura* represent the end of an affair between the Italian people and the stark sociopolitical realities of the post-World War II era. Rossellini's and Antonioni's characters enjoy the privilege of wavering over emotional ambiguity and personal entanglements—a luxury inconceivable to the partisans of Rossellini's *Open City*. When Antonioni claimed that Italians should no longer make films about a man who has had his bicycle stolen, the admission was bitter-sweet: though most Italians of the 1960s didn't suffer the hardships depicted in films of the 1940s, they also had lost many of the moral and ethical certainties and much of the collective sense of engagement of the immediate postwar years. Matters between wealthy couples like Katherine and Alex, Claudia and Sandro, could become so complicated that they would remain together out of habit, circumstance, obligation, fear of being alone, or—here lies the genius of the films—a vague combination of all of the above. Did all those Italian patriots in Rossellini's war trilogy from the 1940s die for *this*: the unfathomable subtlety and complexity of human intimacy?

The birth of Rossellini in 1906 and the death of Antonioni in 2007 basically span the history of cinema. The first film ever, a documentary less than a minute long of workers exiting a French factory by the Lumière brothers in 1895, unwittingly contains many of the elements that would drive the neorealist enterprise: nonprofessional actors, natural lighting, real-time takes, the lack of montage effects, and the choice of proletarian locales and subjects. The dawn of neorealism with Rossellini's *Open City* in 1945 remains a mythical event for the Italian film industry, at once its glorious point of reference and unattainable standard of excellence. Films like *Voyage to Italy* and *L'avventura* bid farewell to neorealism and its progressive ideals to seek something that filmmakers believed had been lost in the public slogans of the postwar films. It is understandable that such a pursuit should end in the breaking of hearts on screen. The quest was a melancholic one, fueled by the desire to chart what was dissatisfied

and incomplete inside us, and to try to bridge the gap between couples who only gain each other by losing the world. To love in this way, both Antonioni and Rossellini understood, was neither new nor real.