



Cristina Popescu

The Woman as a Misfit in Michelangelo Antonioni's Tetralogy

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to propose a theoretical reading of Michelangelo Antonioni's tetralogy that emerged in the early 1960's (*L'Avventura*, *La Notte*, *L'Eclisse* and *Il Deserto Rosso*). Our research focuses primarily on the theme of the woman as the epitome of alienation and it is based upon the recent theories of the New Materialism. In this respect, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's view of the misfit will provide the necessary theoretical framework, along with Gilles Deleuze's groundbreaking perspective on cinema. One of the key issues tackled in our paper is the *sick Eros* in Antonioni's work and, in this matter, Nicolas Grimaldi's *Les métamorphoses de l'amour* will function as a philosophical point of departure.

Keywords: Michelangelo Antonioni; New Materialism; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson; Misfit; Eros; Nicolas Grimaldi.

CRISTINA POPESCU

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
cristina.popescu1502@gmail.com
DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2017.32.24

Our paper aims at a theoretical reading of Michelangelo Antonioni's tetralogy of the early 1960's, made up of the movies *L'Avventura*, *La Notte*, *L'Eclisse* and *Il Deserto Rosso*. The main theoretical support of our research is Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's article entitled "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept."¹ Although the issues tackled by the author of the misfit theory are in connection with the concept of disability, we think that one can quote Garland-Thomson's ideas in a larger context without turning into a menace for the author's original theory. Quite on the contrary, our view is that such a theory can be highly illuminating as far as one speaks of an "incongruent relationship between two things,"² no matter the space where such a relationship develops. Be it in our contemporary society which has yet to redefine itself in order to create space for the disabled or in the fictional world of Antonioni's cinema, which had been equated with the realm of alienation by film critics ever since it appeared on the big screens, one cannot omit speaking of the relationship between the subject and the environment without missing out a key issue.

In an article entitled "Antonioni's Women, Lost in the City,"³ Clara Orban



inadvertently reproduces all the myths about Antonioni instilled in the critical mind. Thus, we read that “one of the most powerful ways in which Antonioni underscores the dehumanizing effect of modern society is by allowing landscape to shape human relationship.”⁴ Our reading of Antonioni’s cinema, while not trying at all to decipher the director’s intention – a pretense which we consider by all means an epistemological naivety – would nevertheless not hesitate to consult the testimonies offered by the Italian director before emitting such conclusions. Fortunately, Antonioni was particularly generous with interviews. In one of them, when being reproached that he can be accused of not sending across a clear, unambiguous message regarding his treatment of technology,⁵ Antonioni replies:

But I do not say that technology is bad or something that we can do without. I say that the people nowadays do not come to adapt themselves. They are only the terms of a conflict: “technology” and “old fashioned characters”. I carry no judgment. [...] You see, I am an admirer of technology. [...] In *Red Desert* as well, I confronted this technology with her machines with people who are morally and psychologically retarded and incapable of approaching the modern life.⁶

Even though he does make use of the word “misfit” while speaking about the necessity of adapting oneself to the environment and about the conflict between the human being and his milieu, it is evident that the *auteur* points out in such a direction. According to Rosemarie

Garland-Thomson, “this condition of mis-fitting slides into the highly negative figure of a person unsuited or ill-suited to his or her environment, work, etc.; spec. one set apart from or rejected by others for his or her conspicuously odd, unusual, or antisocial behaviour and attitudes.”⁷

Moreover, the director remarks in the same article that “modern life is very difficult for the people who are not prepared. But, little by little, the new environment will provide for more realist relationships between people.”⁸

In a press conference given for the opening of *L'Avventura* at Cannes, Antonioni elaborates upon this misfit between man and the environment in the following manner:

And what is even more serious, this new man immediately finds himself burdened with a heavy baggage of emotional traits which cannot exactly be called old and outmoded but rather unsuited and inadequate. They condition us without offering us any help, they create problems without suggesting any possible solutions. And yet it seems that man will not rid himself of this baggage. He reacts, he loves, he hates, he suffers under the sway of moral forces and myths which today, when we are at the threshold of reaching the moon, should not be the same as those that prevailed at the time of Homer, but nevertheless are.⁹

There is a paradox at the heart of Antonioni’s tetralogy, due to the fact that although the women in his movies are much more prone to existential angst than men, and are, therefore, more easily rendered a



misfit, it is still they who adapt more easily to the changing environment. When asked whether he thinks that women are the first to adapt themselves to an epoch, that they are closer to nature and thus stronger: "I said that they have a sixth sense. They can intuit things."¹⁰

Being a misfit, we may infer from Antonioni's films, may also have something to do with the impossibility of establishing a hierarchy among the things or the people surrounding the woman. Véronique Buyer writes about the look in her article on *Red Desert*:

A woman knows the importance of the look that one places on the things and on the beings. She refers, in fact, to sight many times in the film. In the cabin scene, Giuliana says to Corrado: "I do not know what to look at," to which her lover responds: "You don't know what to look at, I don't know how to live. It's the same thing." And it is quite the entire instability of the character of Giuliana which is summarized by Corrado with accuracy. During her hospitalization, the doctors tell her to learn to love something or someone but the links which connect the young woman with the world are troubled, deformed, sometimes disappointing but always at the heart of her difficulties to adapt. She does not know what to look at in the same manner in which she does not know what or whom to love or how to love, and the look becomes the symbol of her gap.¹¹

We learn, therefore, that not knowing how to prioritize one's look is a symptom for the impossibility of attaching oneself to

anything or to anyone. In this sense, Veronique Buyer quotes a very subtle paragraph from Deleuze's *Cinema 2* in which he speaks about the differences brought about by the advent of the time-image in cinema:

The character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action.¹²

However, Giuliana is not the only female character in Antonioni who no longer has a grasp of a visual hierarchy. In *L'Eclisse*, Vittoria makes a highly interesting statement: "We spent the whole night talking things over. And for what? I'm so tired and depressed. Disgusted and confused. What can I say? There are times when holding a needle and thread, or a book, or a man – it's all the same."¹³

Such a line, owing to the aesthetic message that it carries, makes one think of Antonioni's style as being tributary to the Flaubertian aesthetic revolution. According to Jacques Rancière, "this equality of indifference is the result of a poetic bias: the equality of all subject matter is the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content. [...] This equality destroys all of the hierarchies of representation and also establishes a community of readers as a community without legitimacy, a community formed only by the random circulation of the written word."¹⁴



However, this is not the only link between the Italian auteur and the author of *Madame Bovary*. In the *Politics of Aesthetics*, we read that it was Flaubert's "very refusal to entrust literature with any message whatsoever"¹⁵ that led to the claims of Flaubert as the auctorial origin of a "democracy in literature."

There is another French theoretician who addressed the importance of the look in Antonioni and that is Roland Barthes. In his open letter entitled "Dear Antonioni," Barthes states the fact that Antonioni looks "at things radically, until [he has] exhausted them": "On the one side you look lengthily at what you were not expected to look at either by political convention (the Chinese peasants) or by narrative convention (the dead times of an adventure)."¹⁶

The theoretician explores what he considers to be the three virtues characterizing the director's work: "the vigilance of desire," "the wisdom of the artist" and "the fragility" of such an artistic endeavour. One of the twofold nature of this fragility is related, "paradoxically, [to] the firmness and insistence of his look."¹⁷ The other one is a particular "existential doubt" presupposed by the fact that both the environment and the artist himself change and that "the artist never knows if what he sets out to say bears truthful witness on the world as it has changed or is just an egotistical reflection of his nostalgia of desire."¹⁸

Barthes also embarks upon a discussion of Antonioni's modern treatment of the message by quoting a statement belonging to Antonioni in an interview with Godard – "I feel the need to express reality, but in terms which are not completely realist."¹⁹ Roland Barthes comments in the following manner:

You show a true sense of meaning; you don't impose it but you don't abolish it. This dialectic gives your films (and I shall use the same word again) a great subtlety: your art consists in always leaving the road of meaning open and as it undecided – out of scrupulousness. In this respect you accomplish very precisely the task of the artist as our time requires it: neither dogmatic, nor empty of significance.²⁰

Apart from the subversive nature of the look in Antonioni, one cannot omit speaking about the corporal dimension in the tetralogy discussed. Deleuze's reading of Antonioni in *Cinema 2* pays particular attention to the way in which the body is the place in which the psyche expresses itself. *Tiredness* is a key concept in this sense: Deleuze remarks that "the body is never in the present, it contains the before and the after, tiredness and waiting. Tiredness and waiting, even despair are the attitudes of the body."²¹ What Antonioni manages to do, Deleuze suggests, is to manage to obtain a glimpse of the interior through behaviour.

"No one has gone further than Antonioni in this direction. [...] no longer experience, but 'what remains of past experiences', 'what comes afterwards, when everything has been said', such a method necessarily proceeds via the attitudes or postures of the body. This is a time-image, the series of time. The daily attitude is what puts the before and after into the body, time into the body, the body as a revealer of the deadline."²² Deleuze concludes by stating that through the time-image represented by the body, "what Antonioni shows [is] not the drama of communication, but



the immense tiredness of the body, the tiredness there is beneath *The Outcry*, and which suggests to thought 'something to incommunicate', the 'unthought', life"²³

Gilles Deleuze differentiates between "a cinema of the brain and a cinema of the body" and he exemplifies them quite clearly by assigning Alain Resnais to the first one and Godard, to the latter.²⁴ However, he also mentions that a director can use both types of cinema and states that "Antonioni would be the perfect example of a double composition."²⁵ Subsequently, he deconstructs the usual critical reception of Antonioni, by referring to the same ideas that Antonioni puts forward in his public statements. Deleuze exposes the philosophical conflict beyond the more clear conflict between morality and science which Antonioni had repeatedly spoken about. According to Deleuze, in fact it is a conflict that emerges from "the coexistence of a modern brain and a tired, worn-out, neurotic body."²⁶ This body, we may point out, has grown weary of everything around him. At a certain moment in *L'Eclisse*, Vittoria utters the following line: "Here everything is so tiring. Even love."²⁷ Where does this tiredness come from, we may ask? Deleuze had pointed out a word of paramount importance: *waiting*.

We think that Nicolas Grimaldi's *Les métamorphoses de l'amour*²⁸ would give us an edifying perspective upon the "Sick Eros," which is one of the key issues in the tetralogy discussed. According to Deleuze,

if we are sick with Eros, Antonioni said, it is because Eros is himself sick; and he is sick not just because he is old and worn out in his content, but because he is caught in the pure form

of a time which is torn between an already determined past and a dead-end future. For Antonioni, there is no other sickness than the chronic, Chronos is sickness itself²⁹.

Therefore, what makes Eros sick (and Antonioni's characters, for that matter) sick is history itself. They all have the nostalgia of a time outside (or beyond) history, which they had never known, but whose absence they feel nevertheless. The two temporalities identified by Deleuze – "an already determined past" and "a dead-end future" find their explanation in Kimura Bin's description of the post festum temporality and the ante festum temporality.³⁰ Antonioni's characters are caught between "the temporality of the melancholic" and "the experience of the schizophrenic." The former presupposes, according to the psychiatrist, the awareness of an "irrecoverably accomplished past with respect to which one can only be in debt" while the latter constitutes the other *polle*, in which "the problem of one's own possibility [is that] of being oneself, the problem of the certainty of becoming oneself and, therefore, the risk of possibly being alienated from oneself."³¹

Nicolas Grimaldi speaks of an "original waiting" – and we shall later see that it is a common human condition and it springs from no particular circumstances whatsoever – "which hinders us from ever coinciding with ourselves [...]. In making us experience the present as a lack of something to come, it dissociates us and it makes us in fact feel the void. It is that which cuts us off from everything that we live, that which makes us strangers."³² Therefore, the typical theme of the Italian



auteur, the so-called alienation, is something that goes beyond a simple misfit between the environment and the man, as it is something characteristic to human condition. However, the women in Antonioni, as they are prone to self-analysis much more than the average person, gain much more insight into this matter. They all share – except for Giuliana, whom we shall take as a separate case – what Giorgio Agamben calls a kind of constitutive “melancholy” of human Dasein, which is always late with respect to itself, having always already missed its “celebration.”³³

The “Sick Eros” is made up by what Grimaldi would call “the two faces of the same fabric, waiting and solitude are, however, indissociable.”³⁴ The French philosopher asks – isn’t it “rather sufficient to wait in order to feel secretly separated from everything that surrounds us? And vice versa, isn’t it sufficient to be alone in order to wait that which could put an end to our solitude [...]?” To our original waiting thus corresponds a just as original feeling of solitude and the desire to break it. Without any doubt this is the principle of love.³⁵

L'Avventura seems to find its best explanation in the following words of the same author:

As for waiting, don't we spend our entire life trying to obtain things which we grow weary of or which seem derogatory to us once we have obtained them? Waiting, that is our big business. We do only that. Because waiting is conscience itself, our conscience ceaselessly assigns some object to come and we detach ourselves as soon as it happens. In order to lose its prestige, it is enough for it to exist. As soon as it is

in our possession, we discover that we regard it with contempt.³⁶

There can be no clearer illustration of this passage from Nicolas Grimaldi than Sandro's attitude in *L'Avventura*. As soon as Anna disappears from the narrative, he turns his attention to her friend, Claudia and follows her through more than half of the movie, trying to seduce her. As soon as he had managed to obtain this adventure, he still cannot fulfill the void which he feels – the scenes from the hotel in Sicily are particularly enlightening in this case, in which, after having the frustrating encounter with the young promising architect, Sandro tries to fulfill his void through a sexual encounter between him and Claudia. From this moment on, it will not take long until he embarks upon a new adventure with Gloria Perkins.

The constitutive melancholy of Antonioni's characters, portrayed through this perpetual waiting carries

from the beginning in itself the sense of that which will leave us not waiting for anything, the entire waiting places in front of it, as its horizon, the sense of infinity, of eternity, of perfection, of bliss, that is, the sense of the absolute. It is this surreptitious waiting of the absolute which turns into disappointments finitude and the relativity that we usually live.³⁷

It is precisely this longing for the absolute, for a time outside history, for a time in which neither Chronos, nor Eros were sick.

Deleuze mentions the two aspects of the time-image to be found in Antonioni:



“a cinema of the body, which puts all the weight of the past into the body, all the tiredness of the world and modern neurosis; but also a cinema of the brain, which reveals the creativity of the world, its colours aroused by a new space-time, its powers multiplied by artificial brains [...]”³⁸ Deleuze’s conclusion is that the auteur of the tetralogy is

not an author who moans about the impossibility of communicating in the world. It is just that the world is painted in splendid colours, while the bodies which people it are still insipid and colourless. The world awaits its inhabitants, who are still lost in neurosis. But this is one more reason to pay attention to the body, to scrutinize its tiredness and neurosis, to take tints from it.³⁹

The part of Rome that Antonioni chose to set as a background for *L’Eclisse* – the district called EUR, which had been projected in the 1930s for a World Fair

which was meant to celebrate the beginning of the Fascist Era, but which never took place because of WW2 – is undoubtedly the best example of a world awaiting its inhabitants. Having itself missed its “celebration,” in Agamben’s words, it becomes the most suitable receptacle for perpetual waiting, while serving as a backdrop to a story of a woman and a man who, just having embarked upon an adventure, gradually understand that “on resignation, apart from pain or illusion, one can still build a trace of happiness”⁴⁰ and therefore tacitly give up any attempt to continue the relationship.

It is, however, in this extreme lucidity that we can trace the hints of a possible understanding of the need to adapt – first and foremost – one’s own self which has to catch up with the environment which had outmoded it. Therefore, the misfit at work in Antonioni is not only between the environment and man, it is at the same time between the body and the brain, the woman and the man and, essentially, it is a misfit at the very core of the human being itself.

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NOTES

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