

L'Eclisse: Antonioni and Vitti

By Gilberto Perez

In the history of cinema, there have been several notable collaborations between a director and an actress over a series of films. Think of D.W. Griffith and Lillian Gish back in the silent era, Josef von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich in the early 1930s, Jean-Luc Godard and Anna Karina at the time of the French New Wave. Without going into theories of the “male gaze,” it may be said that in these cases the woman is a figure of beauty, an object of contemplation for the man behind the camera. This doesn't mean that she is merely an object, a passive recipient of the camera's attention. Gish was a great actress, and though neither Dietrich nor Karina can claim as much, all three are, not least for their beauty, commanding screen presences, figures of special power. They have a hold on the beholder, whether director or spectator.

The collaboration between Michelangelo Antonioni and Monica Vitti is of a rather different kind. Not that Vitti isn't beautiful, but her presence is less commanding than that of Gish, Dietrich, or Karina, her beauty more tentative, which is in keeping with the unsettled, questioning beauty of Antonioni's visual style. And in her films with him, Vitti is as much beholding as beheld. Unlike those other actresses, she is identified with the director as the beholder behind the camera, whose gaze she doubles. Other male directors have adopted the point of view of a female character, but none has made a woman his surrogate in the way that Antonioni has Monica Vitti.

“I especially love women,” he has said. “Perhaps because I understand them better? I was born amongst women, and raised in the midst of female cousins, aunts, relatives. I know women very well. Through the psychology of women, everything becomes more poignant. They express themselves better and more precisely. They are a filter that allows us to see more clearly and to distinguish things.” His tendency to filter our perceptions through the perspective of women was already manifest in such accomplished early works as *La signora senza camelie* (1953) and *Le amiche* (1955). But it reaches a culmination in his films with Monica Vitti, which display a peculiar intimacy between director and actress (similar in some ways to that between Godard and Karina and no doubt in both cases having something to do with the fact that director and actress were intimate in real life).

L'Avventura (1960) was Antonioni and Vitti's first film together. She was a little-known actress; he had directed some remarkable films, but this was the one that made him famous. And it made her famous along with him. Their names became inseparable as their collaboration continued in *La Notte* (1961), *L'Eclisse* (1962), and *Red Desert* (1964). Greatly admired by some, quite disliked by others, Antonioni gained renown as the maker of films short on action and long on the spaces between. But even if nothing much is happening, those empty spaces, those intervals of an uncertain modernity, are fraught with intimations of something that happened or is about to happen, narrative paths that may be taken. And though Vitti inhabits those spaces tentatively, quizzically, in the way of someone who feels like a stranger in her own land, she brings a lively presence to that landscape of absence and a sense of narrative expectancy, a search for connection in the midst of alienation. Troubled inquiries into the shifting appearances of our reality, Antonioni's films are modernist mystery stories, and Vitti's characters are something like detective figures.

Antonioni's camera is itself a kind of detective. His method of looking at things "consists in working backward," as he has explained, "from a series of images to a state of affairs," whereas most filmmakers start with a state of affairs, a story that determines their choice of images. But Antonioni is a detective faced with a mystery too large and implicative to admit of a solution. Even at the end of *L'Eclisse*, when the awaiting camera registers, around the suburban corner where the protagonist couple are supposed to meet, the uneventful daily passage from afternoon to evening, daylight to twilight, twilight to darkness, a clipped series of images holds a conclusion in unsettling abeyance.

This distinctive interrogative gaze of Antonioni's camera is paralleled by the gaze of Vitti's characters—Claudia in *L'Avventura*, Vittoria in *L'Eclisse*, Giuliana in *Red Desert*. Take the two stock-market sequences in *L'Eclisse*. In the first one, Vittoria, after having been up all night in a draining quarrel with the lover she has decided to leave, arrives at the market, the Borsa in the center of Rome, looking for her mother, wishing to talk to her about the love affair that has just ended. But her mother is too preoccupied with the financial to talk about the personal, and Vittoria observes the hectic activity of the market as an uncomprehending outsider, taken aback yet curious about the strange spectacle, the energy unleashed in the pursuit of money. That's exactly the observing position of Antonioni's camera. In its second, longer visit to the market, the camera goes there with an insider, Piero (Alain Delon), the stockbroker with whom Vittoria starts a new love affair, but all the same its point of view remains that of an outsider, immersed in the turbulent proceedings without knowing quite what to make of them. Vittoria herself turns up only after the market has crashed, yet somehow her outsider's perspective, the point of view of a stranger she shares with Antonioni's camera, is something we feel through the entire sequence, even in her absence.

Monica Vitti may be described as an actress of the gaze, both the gaze she turns on the world and the gaze the world turns on her. Every performer, of course, is there to be looked at, on display before the audience. But just as Antonioni's films enact a special way of looking, so Vitti's special quality as a performer arises from the way she looks at things and the way she is looked at and aware of being looked at, from the interplay between her as the subject and as the object of the gaze. In both positions, she is visibly a little self-conscious, as if she always felt on her the eye of a beholder and responded in kind with her own beholding. Just as Antonioni is, more than a director of dramatic scenes, a director of attention, so Vitti is a performer of attention, which she pays to her surroundings and receives from Antonioni's camera with much the same inquiring, responsive intentness.

Watch her, for example, as she watches a Borsa trader who, after losing a lot of money, goes to a café, takes a tranquilizer, and draws flowers. Or as she pauses, while walking with Piero, to gaze at a good-looking young man passing by: like Antonioni's camera, she is open to distraction as a way of paying attention to the world around her. Or when she arrives early at the corner where she is to meet Piero and has time for a private preamble to the meeting, for bringing the place, the passersby, the unfinished building mirroring her own sense of suspension, into commerce with her consciousness. Or when, in the most peaceful sequence in *L'eclisse*, she takes a plane ride to the Verona airport, another public place she invests with her subjectivity and somehow makes private. She feels at ease for no particular reason during her visit to that nondescript provincial airport, where a man drinking beer at the bar looks at her and she looks at the people and the place, the airplanes on the ground and in the sky, with a reflective contentment that just manages to hold off anxiety. Nothing happens in such scenes except an experience of awareness, awareness of the world and of the self in transaction with the world, and that's Vitti's specialty as a performer.

Ingmar Bergman once told an interviewer that he considered Antonioni—as well as Carl Dreyer—an amateur and Monica Vitti a talented but technically insecure performer. The truth is that Bergman is a master of conventional film technique, the way a good professional does it, by the rules; and that Antonioni—like Dreyer—is the kind of artist who goes his own way in disregard of the rules and achieves an unconventional mastery. The conventional camera is a storyteller that knows the story and picks out for us at each moment just what we need to see; Antonioni's camera continually explores the alternative, the stray aspect, the revising angle, the newly revealing movement. And its inquiry into appearances, its searching rather than knowing apprehension of things, finds its acting counterpart in the similarly searching Monica Vitti. Her engaging diffident verve consorts with the uncertain beauty, the arresting tentativeness, the detached intensity of Antonioni's images. What Bergman calls her insecurity—a fair enough term for her characteristic tinge of self-consciousness—Vitti makes into a style of performance, one that couldn't be better suited to her partnership with Antonioni.

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