

# The Last Thread of Things

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*Beyond the Clouds* (1995) was the first Antonioni film that I saw "simultaneously" when it was released. Made after his stroke in 1985 with the company of Wim Wenders, the film created quite a stir. I see it as a treasure. Nevertheless, I know well that without the suspense and the anti-suspense ambience, the somewhat exaggerated performance of some of the actors could have turned the male theme into self-pity instead of salvation. With Europe torn apart beneath the appearance of unity, the scene of Jeanne Moreau and Marcello Mastroianni was one of my few delights and Antonioni's most important message in the film: the couple in *La notte* (1961) have survived the crisis and reached the sunny slope. Seeing that I realized Antonioni had entered a new phase - he was relaxed in his new life but at the same time also decomposing. Seeing *Beyond the Clouds* I knew deep in my heart that heaven was near for him (though still to come was "The Dangerous Thread of Things" in *Eros*). I knew I had to prepare myself for the moment when he would really leave us. That lasted twelve years. All the while, I was reminding myself to stay calm when the time finally comes. Yet, at the end, tears just came.

Through the years in waiting I had plenty of time to think and contemplate what *Antonioni* had achieved through his films.

I read the director's quote in chapter nine of *Antonioni* by Sam Rohdie: "We know that under the image revealed there is another which is truer to reality and under this image still another and yet again still another under this last one, right down to the true image of that reality, absolute, mysterious, which no one will ever see or perhaps right down to the decomposition of any image, of any reality." I saw this as an artist's soliloquy on self-discovery and the world of cinema, until I came across a behind-the-scenes photo of *L'avventura* (1960), in which Antonioni had wooden scaffold built against a steep slope for the shooting of the detached dialogues between Anna and Sandro, a not too eye-catching shot in the film that enlightened me on the true significance of what was said.

I used to believe the classic shots of Lisca Bianca in *L'avventura* had been carefully selected through substantial observation and consideration on geography, space and weather. However, the director's decision to take the trouble and build a scaffold just to present a perspective never seen before has proved to me that this was not a random decision, but one made out of his tireless pursuit of the image that is real, absolute and mysterious. It is the reverence of reality that dominates reality itself; it is the abstract that originates from reality and reconciles with reality.

Many find Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963) a work of the stream of consciousness, while I see it more as a sober narrative. To me Fellini hardly appears to be into alienation. After spending time on understanding alienation, I am convinced that it was only the one-sided belief of an era.

If alienation is an inevitable part of existentialism, I would like



L'avventura

to state that Antonioni was among the first to cast a doubt on skepticist existentialism. This is a moral statement. Emptiness in modern life is not inevitable but determined by one's capacity for reflection, and Antonioni's main characters (led by Monica Vitti) strive to prevent themselves from falling into alienation. In terms of aesthetics, Antonioni didn't attempt to decompose images but instead reflected on images as well as enhancing and transforming the sense of space in reality. He extended the take on the abandoned space, suggested the beginning of next shot at the end of a shot, turned the subjective perspective into narrative illusion, and established what is seen by his characters as contradicting interpretations - the director forces the audience to reflect on what they have seen. Seen with this in mind, the visual fantasy of the moment of life and death in the famous seven-minute "penultimate" in *Professione: Reporter* (1974) is a manifestation of ultimate faith in life.

If Ingmar Bergman doubted god in order to affirm the belief in god, Antonioni sought to feel the presence of god by avoiding god. Anna's capitalist father determines that his daughter would not commit suicide once he arrives on the island and discovers that she had been reading the bible before her disappearance. But that is not the hint. The most important thing is that Claudia walks away silently when she hears it. Instead of talking about god, she overcomes her incomprehensible fear through her persistence in life and longing for serenity. Over and over again, Antonioni conveys internal chaos via the appearance of calm. Heaven is found at the pier in the fog in *Il deserto rosso* (1964), in the valley of death in *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and at the lake at dawn in *Identificazione di una donna* (1982). As such, Antonioni is a romantic.

The departure of Ingmar Bergman and Antonioni marked the end of modernism that established film as art - not to rule out the possibility of reversion. The two masters had already given their followers more than a decade to adjust to growth. July 30 was thus a good moment to be the guardian angel. Abbas Kiarostami, unlike what Godard predicted, will not be film art's last person.

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