

DOSSIER

Even Ghosts Desire Touch: The Lonely Image of *L'eclisse* (1962)

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Michelangelo Antonioni and The Lonely Image

Within the concluding montage of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (1962), the filmmaker offers a profound expression of loneliness *vis-à-vis* the figure of the (*in*)visible spectre. Throughout the film's final seven-and-a-half minutes, Antonioni imbues seemingly vacant spaces with vitality, as the very ontology of absence appears negated. The absent is far from *empty*, as a montage of ostensibly fragmented images dissolve the distinction between the *seen* and the *unseen*. Reaching not only an apex in relation to the narrative because Vittoria (Monica Vitti) and Piero (Alain Delon) fail to meet at their spot at 8:00pm (with their romantic pursuits therefore ultimately appearing fruitless), the concluding montage of *L'eclisse* undoubtedly embodies one of Antonioni's central preoccupations with exploring the liminal space wherein the parameters between *visibility* and *invisibility* become increasingly thin.

Throughout the film's closing montage, the camera persistently lingers upon the material surfaces of the landscape, as Antonioni's gaze returns to spaces that hold explicit reference to prior memories within the narrative. The camera's intense attention towards materiality remains central to the film's evocation of loneliness: the *invisible* subjectivities of Vittoria and Piero manifest themselves through both the camera's gaze, and also the features of the physical landscape. In a masterful exploration of cinematic (*in*)visibility, Antonioni's montage becomes haunted by the *immaterial* presence of the lonely lovers. The camera's actions are purposeful, rather than merely accidental, where the fragmented images, despite their apparent bareness, are instilled with the phantoms of Vittoria and Piero. Seeking connection – and touch – by recourse to the materiality of the landscape, their ghosts manifest themselves through the sentimentality that has been subsequently eschewed by their unfilled future. Drawing attention to the pair's *absent presence*, Gilberto Perez notes that the viewer “share[s] with the camera a recollection of the lovers through a beholding of things associated with them, things that for the camera, for us, carry their memory and at the same time point up their absence” (1991, 261). However, in order to enrich Perez' observation, I argue here that Antonioni's camera functions beyond what he describes as a “distinctive individual eye, an autonomous eye percipient mind” that “makes itself felt with peculiar eloquence” (*ibidem*, 260). Rather, the gaze, through its attention to the landscape, simultaneously envelopes their lingering pasts and deferred futures. For Antonioni, it is evident: the camera's gaze is never simply a means of offering the viewer an objective

insight into the realities of his characters, but conversely, it becomes a profoundly abstract vehicle for exploring the *hidden* tensions that reside at the core of the image's ontological structure.

The Usual Spot...

The camera's attentive focus to the unfinished building situated at the corner of the lover's usual spot – their failed meeting location – is most evocative of their *absent presence*. While the camera is persistently drawn back to the sentimental location, the viewer is thus confronted with an aesthetic space that transcends the visual, as Antonioni's lonely images cannot be characterised by merely what the filmic *technē* is able to capture (see *Figure 1*). Antonioni's content, and his difficult-to-define sense of 'emptiness', is cultivated out of a dynamic lyricism between the *visible* and the *invisible*, alongside the *familiar* and the *unfamiliar*. Here, the auteur's social realities, as thematised consistently throughout his *oeuvre*, are not simply lonely by virtue of their visual content, but instead, by the abstraction and estrangement augmenting from beneath the image's exterior. While it is perhaps correct that "one of the most powerful ways in which Antonioni underscores the dehumanising effect of modern society is by allowing landscape to shape human relationship" as Clara Orban (2001, 12) observes, my understanding suggests that it is not merely the *visual* framing of social milieux that produce pervasive sensations of loneliness but a destabilised distinction between the *visible* and the *invisible*, and the *empty* and the *abundant*.



Figure 1: Vittoria and Piero's 'usual spot' in L'eclisse (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

Material objects, such as the reoccurring attention towards the drum of water or the wooden fence, absorb a visceral intensity, transfiguring into the very threshold where a multitude of tensions, such as the *past* and the *present*, and the *familiar* and *unfamiliar*, are placed into immediate dialogue (see *Figures 2* and *3*).¹ Piero and Vittoria's subjectivities, despite having ostensibly vanished from the landscape, persistently render themselves present *vis-à-vis* sentimental objects and surfaces, thematising, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, how "[e]veryone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants" (2023, 98). However, in building upon this notion, it is useful to reiterate that it is not simply non-human objects that offer connection to the absent characters, but the focus of the camera itself.

Antonioni thematises the flux between *material* and *immaterial* realms, embodying a fluidity shared between two ostensibly juxtaposed phenomena. As the lover's *absent presence* is manifest throughout the concluding montage, the auteur's moving image affectively speculates upon not only cinema's limits, but also on how even beyond the materiality of flesh, one's spectre remains vitally alive.



Figures 2 and 3: The wooden fence and drum of water in L'eclisse (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

During the film's final moments, the camera slowly pans to the right: its gaze moves away from *their* corner, momentarily exhibiting the uninhabited street, glistening with streetlamps. Cutting to a single eclipsed streetlight, the camera maintains its fixed gaze. An unclassifiable intensity floods the frame, as the blinding light shatters representation (see *Figure 4*). Abstraction undermines the tangible, as the viewer is confronted with an aesthetic affect that has apparently emancipated itself entirely from narrative spectacle. This sentiment of emotional and intellectual stammering is suggested by Antonioni, who explained that “[e]ven during an eclipse, our feelings appear to stop” (2007, 196). The score reaches a blinding apex, as Giovanni Fusco's menacing score pulsates throughout the frame.

Only ghosts loiter amongst the landscape. They too, desire touch.

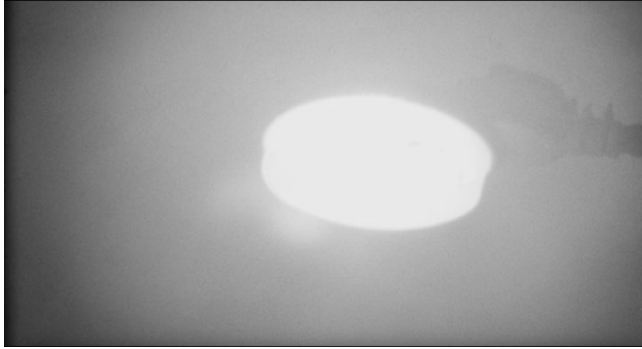


Figure 4: The eclipsed streetlight in *L'eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

NOTES

1. The wooden fence and the drum of water are both particularly notable. Earlier in the film, the pair shared their initial 'embrace' at the fence, whereas Vittoria tossed a piece of wood into the drum of water.

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Oscar Bloomfield is a PhD student in Film Studies and sessional academic at Deakin University. Focussing on the filmic imagination of Michelangelo Antonioni, his research situates itself at the axis where critical and creative practice intersect. Drawing upon a diverse range of theoretical contexts, including 'slow' aesthetic, phenomenology, and sound theory, Oscar's work explores how Antonioni's cinema is experienced within a contemporary moment defined by precarity and instability.

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