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## Framing, painting, collecting images – Antonioni's legacy

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## Exhibition reviews

**Exhibition:** *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo. Antonioni e le arti*, Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara (10 March 2013 – 9 June 2013)

**Catalogue:** *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo. Antonioni e le arti* (Ferrara: Ferrara Arte, 2013), edited by Dominique Païni

### Framing, painting, collecting images

*Antonioni's legacy*

Francesco Di Chiara

*Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* is an ambitious exhibition; it portrays Antonioni as a filmmaker, a visual artist, and a celebrated part of Italian culture of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, along with Federico Fellini, in the early 1960s, Michelangelo Antonioni was responsible for the transition of Italian cinema from the neorealist legacy, before the much younger generation of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Marco Bellocchio.<sup>1</sup> Six years after his death, Antonioni's legacy still proves to be challenging even for contemporary film studies. This has recently been proven by a rich collection about the director that came out in late 2011<sup>2</sup> and by a conference that was held the following year<sup>3</sup> in Ferrara, the director's birthplace, as a celebration of the centenary of Antonioni's birth.

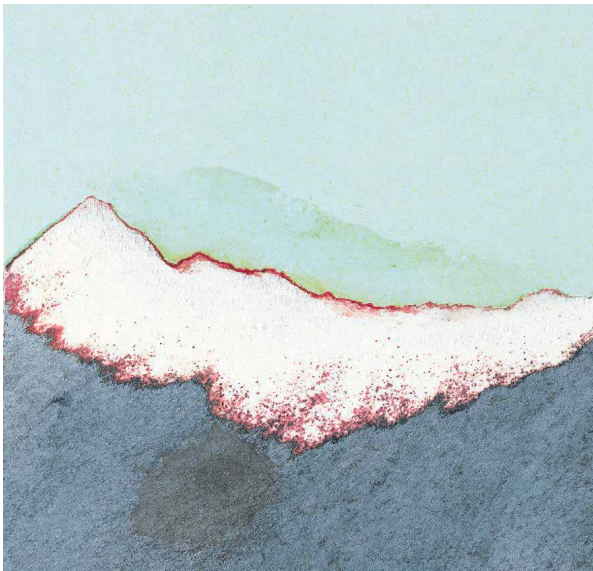
*Lo sguardo di Michelangelo: Antonioni e le arti* is also part of a series of celebrations that the municipality of Ferrara has devoted to Antonioni's centennial. The exhibition, curated by Dominique Païni along with Maria Luisa Pacelli and Barbara Guidi (Gallerie di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Ferrara and Fondazione Ferrara Arte), has in fact been conceived as a way of showcasing various materials coming from Antonioni's own archive – a collection that the Ferrara municipality acquired from the director in the late 1990s, that had been partially exhibited in the short-lived Antonioni Museum in Ferrara (1995–2006), and that is set to be fully classified and made available to film scholars in the following years.

The artifacts from the Antonioni Archive (pictures, letters, drawings, and paintings made and/or collected by the director) are of the three main groups of

materials that are being shown in the exhibition, along with several clips from Antonioni's films and with paintings that bear different kind of relationships with the director's works. In fact, as the title suggests, the main focus of the exhibition is the continuous relationship between Antonioni and the visual arts, and in particular with painting. This choice is due mainly to two factors: first, the importance that the relationship between Antonioni and painting has always had in critical literature about the director; second, the fact that Antonioni was a painter himself. In fact, since the mid-1970s, Antonioni had started working on *Le montagne incantate* (i.e. *The Enchanted Mountains*), a long series of visual works that would eventually be shown both in Venice and in Ferrara in the mid-1990s.



*Fig. 1: Le montagne incantate nr. 153, no date, mixed technique.  
Ferrara, Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Museo Michelangelo Antonioni.*



*Fig. 2: Le montagne incantate nr. 58, No date, paper collage with watercolor.  
Ferrara, Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Museo Michelangelo Antonioni.*

Antonioni conceived *Le montagne incantate* through a combination of painting and photography. He painted abstract sceneries on small-format paper supports the size of postcards, or even stamps, using a technique reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's dripping. Then, he photographically enlarged tiny details, turning these small pictures into big-format prints. Evidently, this procedure closely resembles the technique used by Mark, the main character played by David Hammings in *Blow Up* (1966), and was used by Antonioni in order to discover and expose hidden details inside of his extremely small paintings. A procedure that again demonstrates how close, and somehow indistinguishable, painting and camerawork were for the director.

Given the particular focus that was chosen for the exhibition, Dominique Païni was an obvious choice as a curator due to his many works devoted to connecting cinema to the broader visual arts sphere, such as the celebrated exhibit Hitchcock and Arts: Fatal Coincidences (2000).<sup>4</sup> He and co-curators Pacelli and Guidi have chosen to develop the exhibition mostly in chronological order,<sup>5</sup> following the main stages of the director's career and the evolution of his own style, from his early activity as a film critic to the declining years after the major stroke he suffered in the mid-1980s. Every room is devoted to a particular theme that the curators felt best described a phase of the director's career, such as the 'disappearance' theme of early 1960s masterpieces like *L'avventura* (1960), or the 'desert' theme of early 1970s transnational co-productions such as *The Passenger* (1973) and *Zabriskie Point* (1970). The paintings that hang in every hall thus bear different kinds of relationship with the film clips shown there. Some of these paintings have been chosen because they actually made an appearance in Antonioni's films. This is the case with Mario Sironi's *La caduta* (alternatively named *La notte*, 1933-1935), which is featured in a scene of *La notte* (1961); or with Giacomo Balla's *Balla fiore* (1924), which is reproduced as a mural painting in the décor of *Identification of a Woman* (1982). Other paintings have been selected because they feature some figural or iconographic analogy with some emblematic scenes from the director's films. For example, Jackson Pollock's *Watering Paths* (1947) is compared to the climactic explosion sequence of *Zabriskie Point*, while Alberto Burri's *Rosso plastica* (1961) is associated with the roughly-painted décor of *Red Desert* (1964). Finally, besides the room devoted to them, elements of the series *Le montagne incantate* complement every other hall.



Fig. 3: Mario Schifano, *Tutti morti*, 1970, Nitro enamel on emulsified canvas.  
Private collection.

The selection of paintings has clearly been guided by a philological methodology, and has been conceived by the curators through an examination of Antonioni's own letters and diaries in addition to the critical literature about the director. This approach, combined with the exhibition's chronological structure, clearly highlights the curators' main goal of allowing even a non-specialised audience to become familiar with Antonioni's works. This is a task that is generally accomplished, even though the placement of the projectors in the Palazzo dei Diamanti's rooms, which are often small and narrow, sometimes has confusing results, particularly when different speakers collide. On the other hand, an audience already familiar with Antonioni's films may find that the painting selection is somewhat limited, as there are only about a dozen works shown, probably due to budget restraints and other limitations experienced by the curators. Moreover, the focus on the relationship between Antonioni and painting comes at the expense of other aspects of Antonioni's work, leaving out other interesting elements such as props and costumes, for example.

A few of the selected paintings effectively succeed in stimulating new interpretations of Antonioni's complex relation with the arts world, even for an audience already familiar with critical works on the director. This is the case with Mario Schifano's *Tutti morti* (1970). Conceived through a mixed technique of photography and painting, this work closely resembles one of the iconic scenes of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*, released in the same year. *Tutti morti* is similar to the love-in sequence of Antonioni's film, albeit overturning its meaning through its own title.<sup>6</sup> Aside from possibly showing a direct influence of Antonioni's works on the paintings of Mario Schifano – one of the Italian painters mostly associated with the pop art aesthetic – through the juxtaposition of *Tutti morti* and *Zabriskie Point*, the curators also seem to suggest that in the 1970s, Antonioni's films were also perceived as cultural artifacts, as commodities that were susceptible to be mocked or to have their meaning subverted. This is a process which was actually occurring in other fields of early 1970s Italian culture, such as literature and songwriting.<sup>7</sup>

It is likely that the task of provoking new interpretations of the director's work is better accomplished by the archival materials, which are among the most interesting artifacts of the exhibition. A great deal of work has clearly been spent by the curators in order both to present a wide array of different materials coming from the Antonioni collection and to solicit autonomous connections on the part of the viewer. To this purpose, vintage-looking three-layered glass showcases have been commissioned by the curators, so that the viewer's gaze can wander among objects located on different levels that roughly coincide with the different levels of depth in the theme of the hall. These materials range from personal letters, set stills, and personal objects belonging to Antonioni, and they allow the viewer to further expand the main narrative emerging from the selection of images featured in the halls, particularly as far as two connected topics are concerned: the director's personal activity as a collector, and his relationship with mass culture and its products.



*Fig. 4: Michelangelo Antonioni's Film star postcard collection.  
Ferrara, Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Museo Michelangelo Antonioni.*

The curators have placed great attention in highlighting Antonioni's peculiar activity as a collector of both art objects and of mass culture items. This emerges in particular from the personal letters displayed in the exhibition's showcases. For instance, Antonioni's correspondence with the sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro deals with the director's intention to meet artist Mark Rothko for the purpose of acquiring some of his works. Apart from collecting paintings of celebrated 20<sup>th</sup> century artists, Antonioni also collected film star paraphernalia, particularly film postcards from the 1910s well into the 1970s. This personal collection is exhibited mainly through a large video installation that takes up the entire wall of the first hall, showing two hands browsing through the many leather bound albums where Antonioni arranged the postcards. Antonioni's activity as a collector of both paintings and film star postcards should not be dismissed as a curiosity, but rather should be considered as revelatory of an approach towards images that overlooks current distinctions between high and low culture; it should be related to Antonioni's ambiguous attitude towards the products of modernity.<sup>8</sup>

Other objects expand the already well-known interaction between Antonioni's 1950s and 1960s works and popular culture of the time. For instance, a selection of *fumetti*<sup>9</sup> show how not only films that explicitly deal with melodrama such as *Le amiche* (1955), but also works that were perceived as challenging and enigmatic such as *L'Avventura*, had been adapted in this photo-novel format. Though some of these photo-novel adaptations were already known to scholars interested in

the media environment of 1950s Italy, I believe that the inclusion of these objects helps the exhibition to push the boundaries of the relationship between Antonioni and visual culture, removing it from a confrontation with the high art world and conversely taking into account popular media.

*Lo sguardo di Michelangelo: Antonioni e le arti* successfully manages to reach different kinds of audiences at the same time, and it clearly aims at combining a local and an international dimension. After opening at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara in March 2013, the exhibition then moved to Brussels under the title *Antonioni: il maestro del cinema moderno* (June-September 2013). It will eventually reach the Cinématheque Française in Paris in the fall of 2014.

## Notes

1. On Antonioni as a master of modern cinema, see Chatman 1985.
2. Rascaroli & Rhodes 2011.
3. Cronaca di un autore: Convegno su Michelangelo Antonioni nel centenario della nascita. Università di Ferrara, Ferrara, 11-13 December 2012.
4. See Païni & Coceval 2000.
5. Actually, the chronological order is imperfect, as the second room jumps from Antonioni's early experiences as a film journalist to his foreign films *Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger*, before coming back to the director's 1940s documentaries in the third room. This is probably due to the physical constraint of the Palazzo dei Diamanti, a 15<sup>th</sup> century building comprising many narrow rooms and only a few big, square halls.
6. 'Tutti morti' means 'all dead' in Italian, and therefore seems to overthrow the optimistic and joyful atmosphere of Antonioni's love-in scene.
7. See for instance Eco 1975, a short piece that has the discursive structure of a do-it-yourself kit and is conceived as a parody of the film style of various Italian directors, beginning with Antonioni. See also the lyrics of *Il sociale* (1970), a song by Francesco Guccini, in which Antonioni's films from the early 1960s are mockingly treated as a mandatory past-time for rich hypocritical (as well as philistine) members of the Italian bourgeoisie.
8. See for instance the modernist attitude that Leonardo Quaresima highlighted in respect to Antonioni's early documentaries, specifically in *Gente del Po* (1947). Quaresima 2011, pp. 115-133.
9. *Fumetti* were one of the more popular mediums for the working class of early post-war Italy. Antonioni was very interested in this format, as is apparent by his documentary *L'amorosa menzogna* (1950) and by the scenario he wrote for Federico Fellini's *The White Sheik* (*Lo sceicco bianco*, 1952).

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## About the author

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Exhibition: Fellini – The Exhibition (EYE Film Institute Netherlands, 30 June 2013 – 22 September 2013)

Catalogue: *Fellini* (Amsterdam: Eye Amsterdam & Amsterdam University Press, 2013), written and edited by Sam Stourdzé; edited for EYE by Marente Bloemheugel and Jaap Guldemond

## Federico Fellini and the experience of the grotesque and carnivalesque

*Dis-covering the magic of mass culture*

Annie van den Oever

The Fellini exhibition at EYE Film Institute Netherlands presented the lasting visual magic of his work as it spans over four decades, from the 1950s until the 1990s. It showed his start as an actor and assistant director in the Neorealist era of the 1950s; the acclaimed earlier and mid-career masterpieces, among them *La Dolce Vita* (1960), *Otto e Mezzo* (1963), *Roma* (1972), and *Amarcord* (1973); and the extremely interesting late career re-interpretations of his earlier work within the context of popular television in *Ginger e Fred* (1986), with his wife and muse, Giulietta Masina, and his alter ego, Marcello Mastroianni.

Art, perhaps, is measured by its ability to enrich our understanding, but is also measured by its capacity to provide evidence for the falsification of whatever theories we arrive at. – Geoffrey Galt Harpham

To understand the unique role Federico Fellini was to play in the golden age of Italian cinema, it is important to acknowledge that the accounts of the history of this national cinema were always dominated by the critical centrality of a cluster of films made between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s which are commonly described as Neorealist. Fellini was only a very young assistant director then. The corpus of Neorealist films constitutes almost 100 titles (which is only about 10%