Featurette: The Sight of Unseen Things

Cinephilic Privileging and the Movement of Wind in *The Eclipse*

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An award-winning high-water mark of European art cinema, Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1962 film *The Eclipse* (*L’Eclisse*) was theatrically released at a time when the Italian auteur’s international prestige was increasing, following screenings of *L’Avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960) and *La Notte* (*The Night*, 1961) at the Cannes and Berlin film festivals, respectively. It was also a time when stateside cinephilia was entering a stage of maturation and reflection, thanks in part to the efforts of Andrew Sarris, who that same year published “Notes on the Auteur Theory” in a winter issue of *Film Culture* (Mast and Cohen 660). For many fledgling cinephiles who first encountered *The Eclipse* upon its original run in art-house venues such as New York’s Little Carnegie Theatre only to return to it, fetishistically, in subsequent years, the film’s celebrated payoff occurs at the very end, during an extended, wordless dénouement that paradoxically withholds an anticipated narrative event: the meeting between the drifting protagonist Vittoria (Monica Vitti) and her new lover, a handsome stockbroker named Piero (Alain Delon). Visually pivoting on the various details of an empty street corner in the heart of the Esposizione Universale Roma (a residential and business district simply known as the EUR), this slowly unfolding montage, comprised of forty-four shots, epitomizes Antonioni’s aesthetic preoccupations and perhaps lends credence to Sarris’s description of the Italian master’s work as “Antoniennui.” That which is experienced by some audiences as a prolonged inducement of tedium and banality registers as something quite extraordinary in the minds of more sympathetic viewers, who see this final scene’s evocation of absence and presence, alienation and community, engagement and disinterest, mystery and melancholia, as a sign of the artist’s sensitivity to the modern cityscape’s many contradictions.

In the span of seven dialogue-free minutes, the camera pans, tilts, and tracks to reveal often overlooked aspects of everyday life: quotidian spaces sparsely populated by real-life inhabitants of the EUR, but noticeably devoid of the two people whose planned rendezvous has been conspicuously withheld. Such withholding on Antonioni’s part — his decision *not* to show Vittoria and Piero converging like magnets at the end (each one part of a dyad of mutual attraction and romantic longing) — might at first frustrate viewer expectations. However, as suggested by the many critics who have already lavished attention on this final sequence, it ultimately contributes to the cinephilic pleasure experienced by those audiences who are attuned to the rhythms of the city and to the lives of its anonymous pedestrians. Spectatorial fascination is thus ironically linked to the *inconclusiveness* of this conclusion, which strangely satisfies by virtue of its *empty density*, its capacity to signify fullness in a virtual void.

Described by the director in interviews as a “decomposition of things” (Samuels), this contemplative coda “possesses an ordered, descriptive logic, the order of disestablishment,” according to Seymour Chatman, one of the many theorists to have examined *The Eclipse* as an example of high-modernist cinema (82). In Chatman’s and other writers’ assessments of the film, an inordinate amount of attention is given to its final scene, comprised of “peripheral synecdoches,” including a pile of bricks and other building materials at a construction site,
straw mats draped over partially exposed scaffolding, a leaking barrel of water at the corner of a wooden fence, a sprinkler system, and an assembly of beckoning trees, their branches swaying in the breeze. These synecdochal objects, Chatman states, “invite us to look for the central components” (82), the two missing characters who are there but not there, presently absent. However, this privileging of what is assumed to be the most profound and disquieting section of The Eclipse has peripheralized — or pushed to the margins — other, earlier moments that are equally deserving of our attention. Indeed, the underlying enigma of the film, related to its ambiguous title (which points “everywhere and nowhere at once,” according to Peter Brunette [166n1]), is lent additional shadings when those other, less fetishized scenes are revealed to have been “eclipsed” in the minds of cinephiles by the final seven minutes.

Although Brunette informs us that the film’s title refers to an actual solar eclipse “that Antonioni went to Florence to film” (166) but ultimately left out of the finished work, several critics have grappled with its various connotations in light of The Eclipse’s thematic emphasis on the concealment of real emotions, the dissolution of the Italian bourgeoisie, and the disintegration of meaning as well as personal relationships in spaces that are festooned with American commodities and driven by mechanized routines (Kovács 96-98; Arrowsmith). If we accept the general definition of the term “eclipse” as an astronomical event that involves the temporary concealment of a celestial object which has passed into the shadow of another heavenly body, then perhaps we can expand its metaphorical suggestiveness as a marker of the way that the critical privileging of one particular scene in a motion picture necessarily entails a kind of convenient “covering up” or suppression of other scenes. Briefly, I wish to further expand this notion of an eclipse, construing it as a “natural event” that is something of an anomaly; an out-of-the-ordinary occurrence that is accounted for in nature and which can be explained through scientific discourse, but which disturbs the normal state of affairs and momentarily alters the world, thrusting us into an enlightening darkness. Specifically, I shift the critical focus to two other scenes in The Eclipse in which Antonioni’s predilection for combining abstract and concrete forms is on view. Those scenes, besides demonstrating the filmmaker’s synthesizing tendencies, further highlight some of the ontological characteristics of the motion picture medium, which even at its most “still” is riddled with movement; in particular, the movement of the wind — an omnipresent but oft-ignored part of the cinematic image.

As a filmmaker with a background in documentary but predisposed to a compositionally expressionistic, rigorous ordering of the world, Antonioni understood the challenges involved in lending nature an unnatural form, in placing the unpredictable rhythms and unplanned movements of daily life into a meticulously conceived mise-en-scène — one that, to some viewers, might appear airless or even lifeless. “Airless,” however, is not a word that I would use to describe The Eclipse, a film in which the wind actively participates, like an invisible yet palpably felt protagonist, no less present (or absent) than Vittoria or Piero. Indeed, the two scenes that I wish to point toward — the two epiphanic moments that precede the film’s coda and anticipate its uncanny juxtapositions — each revolve around the flow of air, a circulatory current that is at once contained yet unconstrained in its capacity to register the motion picture medium’s unique attributes. If, as Alex C. Purves has stated, the motion picture camera has a “special ability to reveal things that were previously unremarkable to the human eye” (325), then the presence of wind in these moments
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suggests that there is more to mise-en-scène than meets the eye.

The first moment occurs during the film’s opening scene, a lengthy, early-morning encounter between two people whose relationship is not immediately discernible upon initial viewing. Running twelve minutes, this introduction to Vittoria and her soon-to-be-ex-lover, Riccardo (Francisco Rabal), plays out entirely indoors, within the latter’s claustrophobic apartment looking out onto a mushroom-shaped water tower and other EUR buildings. It begins with what Gilberto Perez refers to as “a kind of still life, nicely composed and held for a few moments” (371). However, the stillness of the first shot, showing a white shape nestled among a row of books, a lamp, and other small objects, soon gives way to movement, a physical stirring prompted by the left-to-right panning of the camera. The mysterious white shape, splayed across five of the seven tattered books, stirs slightly and is revealed to be the sleeved arm of a man seated at a desk, his forlorn gaze scanning the room in a deliberate manner that emulates the camera’s pan (Fig. 1). This is Riccardo, disconsolate over his lover’s decision to leave him. The couple’s incompatibility is registered in the juxtaposed image of a solid black marble obelisk that is placed conspicuously on his desk and the ensuing shot of Vittoria standing before a backdrop of soft, closed curtains. She avoids Riccardo’s look and instead focuses her attention on another collection of objects, including a dish filled with cigarette butts, a small metallic sculpture, and a white vase. Vittoria runs her fingers delicately around the opening of the vase, an object that evokes both female and male genitalia (one of Antonioni’s less-subtle uses of mise-en-scène to “speak” the unspeakable). Joined to a reaction shot of Riccardo suddenly snapping out of his numbed state with a renewed sense of hope and desire, this image hints at each character’s yearnings (his for sexual union, hers for escape) as well as the underlying dramatic tensions of the scene. What is unusual about this arrangement of the cigarette dish, the sculpture, and the white vase, revealed in this opening scene’s third shot, is the presence of a picture frame, which the woman holds in front of the

![Fig. 1: The first shot of Antonioni’s The Eclipse, showing Riccardo surrounded by a collection of objects, including an oscillating fan whose movement mimics the lateral panning of the camera.](image-url)
objects (i.e. between those items and the camera). This frame-within-the-frame literally foregrounds the prominent role that Antonioni gives to mise-en-scène — to the positioning, lighting, and composition of objects, figures, and settings — more generally within his oeuvre.

In the absence of an establishing shot or some other prefatory signpost that might provide information about these characters and the artifact-littered space that they inhabit, the viewer is required to piece together the puzzle of their relationship from their elliptical dialogue and Antonioni’s staging of the scene, which breaks free from the convention of eyeline matching and makes maximum use of material objects (including framed artworks, such as the painting of a beach scene that momentarily attracts Vittoria’s roving gaze) as associative triggers. Carefully arranged though they may be, these objects, like the director’s disjointed blocking of the scene, “establish a mood of disarray,” according to Mitchell Schwarzer, who argues that the reason for the couple’s dissolution can be found in the things that surround them: “the paintings, vases, trinkets, razors, and manuscripts that pull people apart from each other and from themselves” (210). One object in particular — an oscillating electric fan — is prominently featured throughout the scene, its right-to-left, left-to-right movements being indicative of the film’s structural alternations and anticipating the female protagonist’s internal fluctuations over the course of the narrative. The fan furthermore suggests that there is something “mechanical” about these people’s behaviours, demeanors, and conversation, which drips from frowning lips like perfunctory asides lacking real human emotion (one of the hallmarks of 1960s European art cinema in general and Antonioni’s oeuvre in particular). The wind that it generates, both invisible yet perceivable in its physical effects on objects and figures, suggests that absence is a defining facet of these characters’ lives (Fig. 2).

What I find remarkable about these first dozen minutes of the film, besides the scene’s in medias res invitation to the audience to intuit the cause of the couple’s collapse, is the way that a seemingly suffocating space of “opaque silences and sighs” is opened up or perforated by the presence of wind,
which has been invisibly circulating within the supposed stillness of the opening shots (Brunette 73). Much like the way that Vittoria attempts to imaginatively escape the confines of Riccardo’s apartment by parting the curtains and peering out of the inviting windows (thresholds to the outside world that merely exacerbate her feeling of figurative imprisonment), so too has Antonioni introduced an element that tightens the film’s grip on its audience by paradoxically making the cage-like space seem slightly less stifling. In that sense, the scene is similar to an equally suffocating yet airy moment in Ingmar Bergman’s 1963 film The Silence (Tystnaden), when a terminally ill woman named Ester (Ingrid Thulin) receives temporary relief from the clammy conditions of her hotel room, where an oscillating fan is perched on a nearby nightstand, spreading a delicate sigh across her bedridden body (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: An oscillating fan spreads a delicate sigh across the bedridden body of Ester, the terminally ill protagonist in Ingmar Bergman’s The Silence (1963).

Fig. 4: Standing in front of a window looking out onto the Esposizione Universale Roma, Vittoria is simultaneously imprisoned inside Riccardo’s apartment and emancipated by the invisible presence of the wind, which—despite being generated by an indoor fan—evokes the outside world that beckons throughout this opening scene of The Eclipse.
In a manner that recalls the slowly rotating blades of the fan in Bergman’s black-and-white chamber drama, a device that promises to lower the woman’s temperature but whose persistent, metronome-like clicking serves to remind her of her “mortal predicament” (Grunes), the repetitive movements of the persistently humming fan in The Eclipse stir up the air and Vittoria’s emotions along with it. Artificially generated and contained though it may be, the wind in this scene makes a swooshy dance of the woman’s hair, which gently lifts and lowers as if she were standing before an open window (Fig. 4). Significantly, Antonioni includes a reverse-angle long shot of her standing before the panoramic window, its curtains parted to reveal a group of trees whose limbs sway in the breeze. In the foreground, on the bottom left-hand side of the frame, is the electric fan, and for a moment it seems as if the interior and exterior spaces — each vying for Vittoria’s attention — are metaphysically connected, the tree leaves moving in accordance with the mechanical object’s to-and-fro oscillations. Besides anticipating a later encounter in the film, in which Piero gives a fellow stockbroker a small, battery-run fan (which will prove useless once the disastrous day of trading ends), this air-filled scene sets the stage for another moment when the wind makes itself felt and seen, this time transpiring in an open courtyard outside the Olympic stadium (Fig. 5).

Having left Riccardo, Vittoria has now given herself over to a series of small pleasures, and her nighttime journey beyond the confines of her own stuffy apartment culminates with a scene that encapsulates the filmmaker’s seemingly contradictory aesthetic tendencies — his penchant for abstract compositions (Affron 140; Forgacs 101) as well as concrete objects and physical structures that, in the words of Dudley Andrew, “become the driving force” against which Antonioni’s characters stand (41). Walking alongside a line of flagless flagpoles, she stops to listen to the sound of the wind; or, rather, to the eerily unnatural reverberation of the steel poles as they sway in the breeze (Fig. 6). She is pensive yet alert, alone but joined in her solitude by a kind of celestial presence. The fascination elicited by this everyday spectacle, her capacity for experiencing the kind of sensorial wonderment that...
comes from the most mundane things, could be said to represent the cinophile pleasure felt by some audiences, who might likewise be transported by the mere movement of the poles (Fig. 7). When she steps back, behind an Olympic statue, Antonioni cuts to a reverse-angle shot, the camera peering up to illustrate the contrast between the static fixity of the stone figure and the leafy elasticity of the surrounding trees, which likewise move to-and-fro to the accompaniment of the wind’s whispered incantation.

Such magnifying of seemingly minute details reveals a level of sensitivity that is akin to the wonderment displayed by Delphine (Marie Rivière), the precocious heroine of Eric Rohmer’s *The Green Ray* (*Le rayon vert*, 1986), whose tear ducts are suddenly unloosened by the rustling of hedgerows and the unexpected vision of trees bending in the wind. Hers is a fascination born of the epiphanic instant, the fluttering, familiar otherness of the breeze, similar to Vittoria’s uncanny encounter with nature in *The Eclipse*, when she is held spellbound by the swirling currents of air that make flagpoles appear as spindly reeds, their unnatural sound a result of the wind’s felicitous intrusion into a largely unpeopled place. It is the kind of embodied euphoria that leads critics, perhaps initially speechless and equally spellbound, to wax effusive about the most “banal” or aleatory moments in film, as illustrated in theorist Gilberto Perez’s cinephilic aside that, “Nowhere in cinema are trees more beautiful than in the Roman suburb pictured in *The Eclipse*” (374). Cinema’s unique capacity to record movement, to deliver the subtle fluctuations of the natural world to audiences who might similarly be “moved” by such scenes, is effectively highlighted in the aforementioned moment. Actually, it is one of several evocative moments in the film, one that — while “eclipsed” in the minds of some cinephiles by the film’s more famous final scene, set in a nearly empty yet wind-filled piazza — demonstrates with beauty and subtlety the need to see the invisible things in a motion picture’s mise-en-scène.

**Works Cited**


