

Dr. B or : How I learned to stop worrying and love cinema

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Analysis of M. Antonioni's »L'Eclisse » (1962)



Michelangelo Antonioni, born in 1912 in Ferrare, remains one of the most important and inspiring figures of the history of cinema, along with Murnau, Godard, Kurosawa, Kubrick or Bergman. If he started to make documentaries and feature films akin to the Italian Neorealism trend (e.g. *La Signora senza camelia* in 1953, *Le Amiche* in 1957), Antonioni's style fully emerged in his famous "trilogy of the incommunicability" starring Monica Vitti. These three movies (*L'avventura*, *La notte* and *L'eclisse*) established Antonioni as one of the most talented filmmakers of his generation. Leaving aside the long Neorealist-like sequence shots, Antonioni's *mise-en-scène* began to work symbiotically with his narrative depiction of modern life and alienation.

Without any possible doubt, Antonioni belongs to what David Bordwell identifies, in his article *The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice*, as Art Film which "has to be read as the work of an expressive individual".

In our analysis of *The Eclipse*, we will first focus on the opening scene which acts as a seminal scene for the rest of the film, as it introduces the dichotomy between objects and humans. Then, the description of Antonioni's peculiar narration will help us to see how he depicts modern life in Italy and the characters' relationship to it. Finally, the analysis of the last scene will enable us to see how strongly Antonioni's sight was anchored in the philosophical and intellectual movements of his time.

The Eclipse's opening scene takes place in the apartment of Vittoria and Ricardo who just had an argument and are on the verge of breaking their sentimental relationship. However, Antonioni doesn't give the audience any factual clue about the reason of this rupture. Rather, through the small actions of the two characters and the way they interact with the surrounding objects, Antonioni gives the audience a more profound sense of what is now separating the two former lovers. Throughout this scene, Ricardo is often seen sitting on a chair while Vittoria is standing up, already ready to go. Ricardo's physical immobility causes anguish to Vittoria. Nevertheless, unlike Séverine in Bunuel's *Belle de jour* who denies the immobility (symbol of impotence) of her husband by having extensive sexual fantasies, Vittoria wants to free herself in reality. As she seeks an exit, her longing to escape can be seen when she desperately peers through the curtain at the dawn world outside, only to find herself imprisoned by the window glass. In this shot, behind the huge glass window, Vittoria faces, for the first time in



the movie, the strange modern setting of her neighborhood: a combination of nature (with tall trees) and modern architecture (like the mushroom-like water-tower). As the very first shot of the film suggests it, Ricardo is linked to the inanimate objects of his apartment whereas Vittoria seems to refuse this objectification of her person. In this first shot (see screenshot 1), a series of books, a lamp and a white formless thing can be seen in a motionless composition. Then suddenly, the camera moves to the right and the audience discovers that the white "thing" was actually Ricardo's elbow. Among the objects of his apartment, Ricardo was off-frame, decentered, unable to provide his human presence to the camera and thus objectified. On the opposite, Vittoria moves constantly. Actually, if at one point her immobile legs become momentarily associated to some chairs' legs (see screenshot 2), she refuses this association and walks in another direction. However, it would be too simplistic to reduce that scene to a dreadful objectification of human presence. For instance, throughout this scene the ubiquitous presence of the fan can be seen either as the increasing dominance of objects in human life or either as the salvation for Vittoria, a momentum for her departure. Here one has to ask a fundamental question for the rest of this essay: "is the increasing importance of objects in modern life the cause of human's new alienation, or, on the opposite, is it rather the modern Man's superficial sense of existence which contrasts with the seeming vitality of some objects?".



Antonioni answers these two questions rather ambiguously. On the one hand, it seems that some objects are the rendering of the capitalist's superficiality, and that objects alienate people from each other. For instance, Piero's car, a symbol of his masculinity, is traditionally thought of as a tool for seduction, hence linked

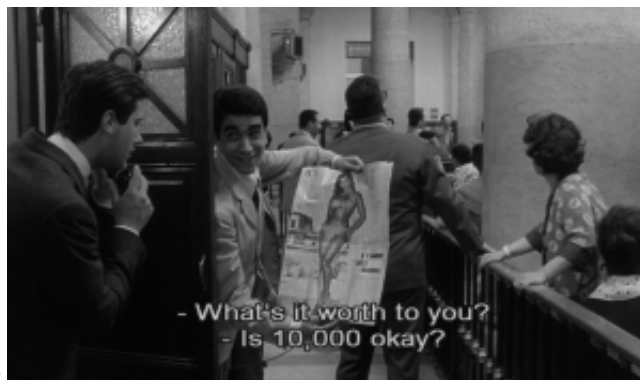


to Eros. However, in the film, when Piero's car is stolen by a drunken passerby and is then found in a river with the dead body of the drunken thief, the car is rather linked to Thanatos, the counterpart of Eros. More importantly, through his *mise-en-scène*, Antonioni stages the physical barrier created by modern objects between people. For example, when Vittoria first meets with Piero at the stock exchange, they are seen in a shot which decomposes the frame in three equal spaces (see screenshot 3): at the left Vittoria and her mother, at the middle a huge column separating the two other spaces, and at the right Piero and his boss. On the other hand, Antonioni also stages moments where the modern landscape becomes somehow lively, where objects have an existence of their own. Here, one can think of the telephones which keep ringing at the stock exchange while the stockbrokers are having a minute of silence for one of their recently deceased colleague. But more strikingly, when Vittoria is looking for Marta's dog at night, the audience sees her confrontation with a cryptic urban landscape where a line of metal pillars are shivering because of the wind and making an astonishing sound. The insistent look of Vittoria (and thus of Antonioni's camera) on this harmless phenomenon discloses the autonomous existence of objects apart from the human existence. The intensity of her gaze enables a positive rediscovering of the world that surrounds her. Then, non-human existence will obviously be accentuated in the very last scene of the film.

In his "trilogy of the incommunicability", *The Eclipse* appears to be Antonioni's most thorough attempt at the depiction of modern urban life in Italy. Throughout the movie, modernist architecture (the best example being the mushroom-like tower) and historical buildings are intermingled; technological inventions, whose usefulness is more or less obvious, are used by characters (e.g the plane that Vittoria is taking to Verona, the electric razor used by Ricardo, the portable-fan of Piero). Antonioni's great talent lies also in his ability to mix the mood and tempo of modern life. For instance, when Vittoria flies to Verona she seems perfectly serene and peaceful saying to Marta: "It's so nice here". However, just after this sentence, Antonioni cuts back to the noisy crowded stock market. As William Arrowsmith remarked in his book: in *The Eclipse* "time is experienced as time in modern life, not as natural serial unfolding of organic time but as a series of discontinuous moments or scenes. The purpose of this kind of cutting is not merely contrast but rather incongruity of mood and tempo, the effort to describe time itself as dissonant, discontinuous, disjointed (violent alternation of landscapes: city, country, the planned suburban world of EUR). But the rhythm of time is also shattered¹." This confrontation of distinct tempo intrinsically belongs to Antonioni's narrative style. Drawing on the Neorealist *temps mort*, Antonioni goes even further when he decides to slow down (or even sometimes stop) the narrative plot in order to privilege hollow moments, digressions, where he frees the event from its subordination to the narrative. Like Antonioni's camera, Vittoria is open to distraction as a way of paying attention to the world around her. In some scenes,

nothing happens except an experience of awareness, awareness of the world and of the self in transaction with the world. In 1966, Christian Metz emphasized that Antonioni's use of *temps mort* is an integral part of his dramaturgy. When Antonioni films a *temps mort*, "the waiting of a quarter-hour will no longer be a *temps mort* because it will have become momentarily the inner subject of the film, and that, in this instant, it is all the life of the film which will pass by this *temps mort* (...) This filmmaker excels at showing these instants' diffuse significance which are commonly considered as insignificant; when integrated to the film, the *temps mort*'s meaning resuscitates²". Moreover, thanks to the dialectical use of two successive scenes with distinct tempo and mood, Antonioni succeeds at increasing the effect of his *temps mort*.

However, if Vittoria's flight to Verona appears to be an attempt to reach a peaceful freedom, to find transcendence, the sudden cut back to the stock market also suggests that modern life has more to do with the daily considerations of the economic market. A lot of critics have dismissed the middle of the film at the stock market because of its repetitiveness and non-attractive atmosphere. Why is Antonioni taking so much time



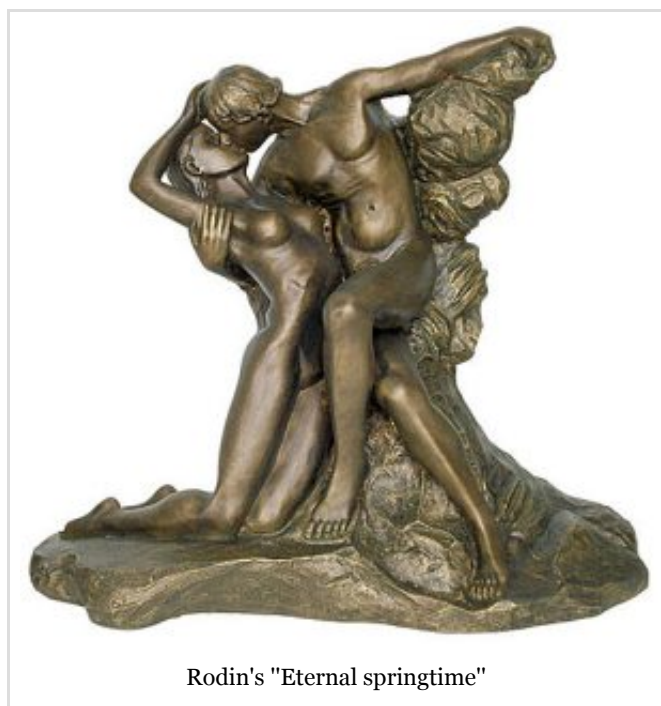
depicting what's going on at the stock market?

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Arrowsmith proposes that it stems from Antonioni's will to emphasize the "unmistakable erotic frenzy" taking place at the stock market. He argues that men, while pulling away women from the "box ring" and "transforming the goods of the earth into things, and things into abstractions", are devoted to the cult of money. As the few allusions to sexuality suggest³ (see screenshot 4), the ritual of the stock exchange is linked to a sexual impulse. Interestingly, in 1960 when he presented *L'avventura* at the Cannes Film Festival, Antonioni spoke of what he identifies as the "emotional sickness of our time" saying that "Eros is sick; man is uneasy, something is bothering him. And whenever something bothers him, man reacts, but he reacts badly, only on erotic impulse, he is unhappy". Unlike Vittoria's flight to Verona, in the church-like building of the stock market, there is no spiritual longing at all.

Depicting the changes of modern life also imply the depiction of human character and interpersonal relationships. As said previously, Ricardo (the former husband of Vittoria) appears to be the archetypical Antonioni's confused intellectual (like Thomas in *Blow up*, Niccolo in *Identification of a woman*) lacking a sense of existence, thus displaying a neutral physical presence. Piero, like Sandro in *L'avventura*, is closer to a narcissistic version of the Antonioni's male character. He is also (even though less than Ricardo) quite unable to reach the same level of vital exigency and existential questioning as Vittoria's. Throughout *The Eclipse*, the growing desire between Vittoria and Piero is qualified by a sort of modern existential inability (or refuse) to lose oneself into the being of another. As Vittoria admits to Piero when she says "I wish I didn't love you or love you much more", the modern love relationship isn't as simple as it was before. Here, one has to think of the physical awkwardness of Piero and Vittoria when they are having a romantic moment on a coach at Piero's apartment.

They have trouble finding a comfortable place for their bodies. Unlike a sculpture of Rodin such as *Eternal Springtime*, their arms are causing problems rather than suggesting a symbiotic encounter of bodies. Interestingly, when Vittoria and Piero are kissing each other through a glass window (screenshot 5), they both seem unconsciously aware of the presence of something that blocks their encounter.



Rodin's "Eternal springtime"



Another important theme of *The Eclipse* has to be seen in the profusion of the symbol of the frame whether it is as a window frame, a door frame or simply as a painting. Vittoria is especially associated with this symbol of the frame, and throughout the movie she desperately seeks to escape from the reduction of herself into a framing (see screenshot 6). The door and the window are both very important as they are a locus where the frame and off-frame are put into tension. Before appearing into a window's framing, Vittoria seems either to be struck by the obsessive fear of her presence or either by the nostalgia of her absence. Like José Moure correctly remarks, it is as if “these heterogeneous spaces of passage and apparition were measured by a will to preserve the vacuity and inconsistency of any human presence”⁴. A compelling example can be found when Vittoria looks at a woman also standing in a window's framing, symmetrically facing the apartment of Piero (screenshot 7). As Vittoria gazes at her symbolic double, the unknown woman suddenly leaves in the darkness of her apartment. Vittoria is here directly confronted to a paradoxical sensation of presence and absence.



Screenshot 7

Her physical presence in Piero's apartment is questioned by the departure of her symbolic double therefore increasing her existential anguish. Furthermore, this displeasing feeling of being entrapped in a framing will be transformed in a longing for escape on the part of Vittoria. As W. Arrowsmith explains “everywhere gates, gratings, bars, barriers, doors [are] clanging shut with prison finality (like when Vittoria is seen, as in the cell of her apartment, peering out at Ricardo, himself framed in the grill of the fence outside)”. To represent this longing for escape, Antonioni will enable the character of Vittoria to explore the possibilities of the off-frame.



When she meets Marta in her apartment and is amazed by the African decorations, Vittoria unconsciously makes a first attempt at defining the off-frame. Indeed, when she puts her finger out of the frame of one of Marta's African photograph, she is already exploring the off-frame (screenshot 8). At the same time as the spectator, Vittoria seems to discover that the choice of a specific framing in a photograph necessarily imply the consideration of an off-frame. What is absent of the photograph also impacts on our vision of the actual photograph. This feature shared by cinema and photography will obviously be sublimed in the last scene of *The Eclipse*. Moreover, it seems that Antonioni here also explores the abilities of representation in Art (painting and photography). Vittoria seems rather intrigued by the lively feature of some artistic objects of her surroundings. In Piero's apartment, she looks at the Roman busts and strangely feels the materialization of Piero's parents when she looks at their photographs on the wall. In this sometimes dull world, it is as if the paintings, sculptures and photographs have the ability to convey more life energy than the actual living people. Notwithstanding her consciousness of that feeling, Vittoria doesn't want to be entrapped in a frame⁵, in a representation which always bears the risk of rendering a false image of her. Here perhaps, one has to refer to the counterpart of the shot 7 (screenshot 7) where the unknown woman gazes at Vittoria. A few moment after this brief gaze, Vittoria looks again outside a window (screenshot 12). However, this time Antonioni's camera does a reverse shot and we see Vittoria from the point of view of a beholder whose physical presence isn't seen onscreen (perhaps just a surrogate for Antonioni's eye). Vittoria is again standing in a window's framing; she is objectified, made part of a frame like all those women in Piero's apartment's paintings.



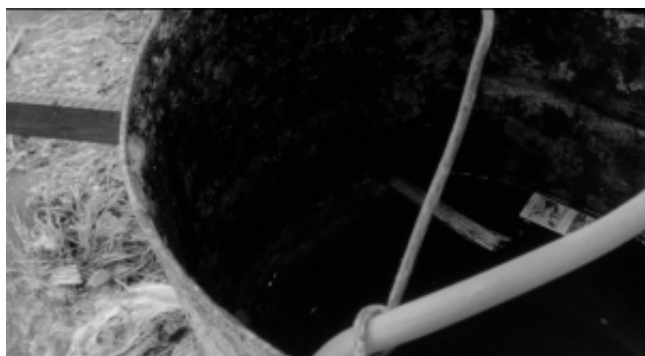
screenshot 12

The scene just preceding the final famous scene of *The Eclipse* acts as a summary of what has been said before about Vittoria's longing for escape. Indeed, the audience first sees her through the gratings of a shop frontage and then, in the next shot, freed from these gratings with a peaceful face (see screenshot 10-11) as she goes out of the cinematic frame and empties the screen of her presence. Nevertheless, even though it is the last time that the audience sees Vittoria, her off-frame presence will haunt the last sequence.



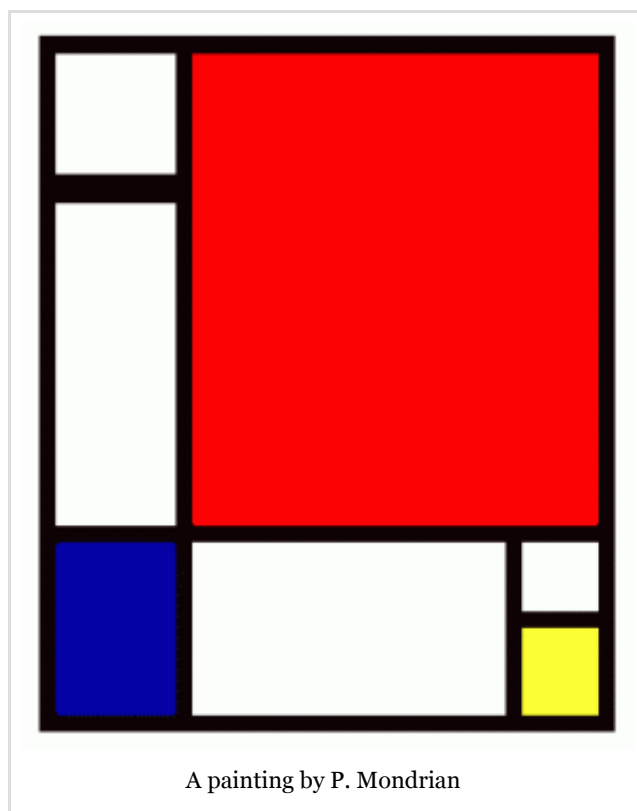
Throughout the last sequence of *The Eclipse*, the audience is constantly looking for the two main characters of the film, namely Piero and Vittoria. However, as their absence becomes increasingly tangible, the viewer perceives a strange sense of *déjà-vu*. The spatiotemporal field seems to be altered as the audience identifies reminiscences of objects from previous scenes. The nurse with her pushchair and the old man driving the horse-carriage were already present when Piero and Vittoria were walking together in that exact same place. The nurse and the old man, therefore, seem entrapped in this location and become part of its urban landscape.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre takes the example of someone looking for someone else (Sartre calls him Pierre ... interestingly, Pierre is the French version of the Italian Piero) in a café. When looking for Pierre in the café and seeing that he is not there, there is a negation, a void, a nothingness, in the place of Pierre. Everything he sees as he searches the people and objects about him are “not Pierre”. The last sequence of *The Eclipse* displays the same existential consideration. When the audience is looking for Piero and Vittoria, the audience does an act of “*neantisation*” (a creation of nothingness) of the location (and of



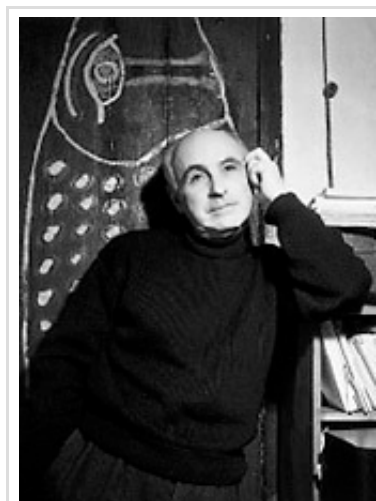
the things contained in it) which is now defined according to the absence of the two characters. When the viewer sees the barrel of water wherein a piece of wood floats, he doesn't pay attention to the piece of wood or to the water flowing out, rather he sees those things as “non-Piero”

and “non-Vittoria”. Their role is active because they remind the audience that Piero and Vittoria used to walk among them. Interestingly, the flowing water coming out of the barrel perhaps represents metaphorically the emptying of Piero’s and Vittoria’s passion (see screenshot 13). It would therefore be the pessimistic counterpart to a scene in Jean Renoir’s *La bête Humaine* where the two main characters’ devouring passion is visually associated to an overflowing of water in a barrel. However, the objects and things of this strange setting also manage to take a life of their own. Indeed, thanks to Antonioni’s framing, some objects reach the level of abstraction and emancipate themselves from the rest of the world. For instance, the shot 14 (see screenshot 14), with its black thin rods of steel against the cloudy sky, completely bears no narrative meaning but looks like a painting by Mondrian, the famous abstract painter whose goal was the “denaturalization” of painting.



In this last scene, Antonioni’s *mise-en-scène* subtly stages a dialectical use of continuous shots and discontinuous shots. The first device is intuitively linked to the human or animal movement. At the beginning of the sequence, the audience is indeed able to see the horse-carriage or the man reading his newspaper in continuous shots rendering the movement. The second device is displayed according to a series of discontinuous and short shots on objects or natural motionless things: bricks, steel rods, wood fences, tree trunks, ... This *mise-en-scène* doesn’t go against our intuitions and thus could be defined as classical. However, what makes

Antonioni a true filmmaker of Art film is that he seeks to frustrate our intuitions. Thus, Antonioni deconstructs his strategy in order to change the meaning of the sequence through his *mise-en-scène*. The more the scene advances, the more the associations continuous-shot/human-movement and discontinuous-shots/still-objects are turned upside down. Indeed, when Antonioni's camera films the flowing of the water out of the barrel in a continuous shot, the viewer feels the liveliness of water (which he didn't feel just before in the static shot). The same effect occurs when the camera follows the movement of the bus's wheel whose tire makes a disturbing noise breaking up with the general silence of the sequence. On a visual and auditory level, the objects seem to replace the lifeless human forms. Antonioni also uses a series of magnifying close-ups as a scientific would use a microscope in order to get closer to reality. The extreme close-up on the ear of an old man seems to freeze his face, objectifying it. Unlike the objects whose liveliness appears suddenly, the human movement seems impossible anymore. As J. Rosenbaum emphasizes in his essay on *The Eclipse*, "the chilling climax brings to a head Antonioni's preoccupation with objects and spaces overtaking and supplanting people that already figures in such sequences as the visit to the volcanic island in *L'avventura* and the helicopter buzzing outside the hospital window near the beginning of *La Notte* – as well as earlier in *L'Eclisse*, after the couple's morning breakup, when various objects in the room, and a tower seen outside through the window, momentarily seem to displace them"⁶. However, Antonioni was always clear that his real interest remains people and their feelings: "I have a great sympathy for the things, maybe more than for the people, but people interest me much more"⁷.



Francis Ponge in 1954

The reference to Francis Ponge's poetry will now enable the original question of this essay ("is the increasing importance of objects in modern life the cause of human's new alienation, or, on the opposite, is it rather the modern Man's superficial sense of existence which contrasts with the seeming vitality of some objects?") to be answered. Francis Ponge was a French poet whose goal was to create a poetry able to be opened to the most commonplace objects and to reveal their inner characteristics and beauty. In one of his most famous book entitled *Le part pris des choses* (1942), Ponge seeks to give a voice to the ordinary speechless things of our daily life such as a crate, rain, or a candle. He strongly believes that Man who cannot go out of language⁸ is able to approach objects in a new way through a poetic description. Ponge gives the example of a stone saying: "if we can extract from the stone other characteristics than only solidity" we will have succeeded into being more sensible approaching things without prejudices. However, language will always remain unable to find the essence of the thing –in-itself, because language is only a feature of Humanity. Here, according to Josiane Rieu, Ponge's poetry

has to be understood, not just as an attempt to reach the essence of ordinary objects, but as a way to reach an intersubjectivity with universal resonance. This is where the link between Ponge and Antonioni can be made.

Antonioni seems more annoyed by the fact that the people in the last sequence are more like a ghostly manifestation of modernity than by the growing importance of objects in our lives. For Ponge, even though the thing can only be thing for Man as long as he can speak it, “the procedure of denomination doesn't concern anymore the thing itself but the subjectivity which is in contact with her”⁹. Moreover, as he seeks poetic ways to explore this subjectivity, Ponge is focused towards the “transcendental ego” of Husserl involving the elaboration of intersubjectivity. That's how one should understand the last sequence of *The Eclipse* with its growing presence of objects. An object is useful for human beings insofar as it can be a way to connect distinct human subjectivities. However, when the lack of vital energy strikes the human beings, they are not able anymore to connect and they tend to shelter on themselves. Francis Ponge's *Le parti pris des choses* was also very important for another filmmaker who emerged in the 1960s, namely Jean-Luc Godard. Indeed, *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (1967) relies directly on Ponge's research for an increase in intersubjectivity. When Godard films in several magnifying zooms a cup of coffee while talking about the necessity to attain the consciousness of being-in-the-world with others (and therefore other subjectivities), he believes in the existence of object, in their capacity to link human beings. Interestingly, at the end of the movie, Godard films a burning cigarette in an extreme close-up therefore responding to a poem in Ponge's *Le parti pris des choses* called »La cigarette «.



To conclude, one has to agree with W. Arrowsmith who remarked that “Antonioni insists in *The Eclipse* that we should view Vittoria's withdrawal into her own psychic landscape as healthy, intelligent, psychological navigation, not neurotic withdrawal”. As I have suggested with the reference to Ponge's poetry, Antonioni, with this film, attempted to depict the struggle of a woman to find an equilibrium both in her relationships with people (especially with Piero) and with her envioning world (whether it is organic or industrial).

1.W. Arrowsmith in *Antonioni : the Poet of Images*

2. Christian Metz, "Le cinema modern et la narrativité", in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (tome I), 1983
3. Like when a seemingly effeminate stockbroker says "who want to go to bed with me"
4. José Moure in *Michelangelo Antonioni : cinéaste de l'évidement* (p.19)
6. J. Rosenbaum's essay « A vigilance of desire : Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* »
7. In « Entretien », *Cahiers du Cinéma*, October 1960
8. Heidegger said : « Language is the house of Being »
9. Josiane Rieu's essay "La subjectivité dans *Le parti pris des choses* »

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