
Film Review: Red Desert

The mental cracks of an unstable mind loom large over Michelangelo Antonioni's first color film. But although main character Giuliana (Monica Vitti) is parallel to the film, it isn't her student. Red Desert is too unresolved, too contingent, too woolly to reduce to a purely psychological reading rooted in Western cinematic bylaws where expression is distinctly and unambiguously a refraction of the protagonist's mental geometry. The common reading that Giuliana is "mentally ill" mistakenly clarifies and pacifies an instability that the film intentionally, beautifully, cannot quantify. The mistaken assumption unduly emphasizes the individual, the protagonist, as a "special" or "unique" case-study that is different from, or tangent to, the world around her.

Contrarily, Antonioni is the great filmmaker of the relationship between the world and the self, specifically the impact of the world on the self, rather than a bard of the lone individual at odds with the world (American cinema adores the latter). The minds of his protagonists expressionistically stretch across the film's physical exterior, but the space of his films project a mental consciousness that exists outside of his characters, a consciousness locked in dialectical tension with those characters without an obvious answer as to whether the world or the character is the primary agent. Antonioni's worlds do not justify their presence by groveling at the characters' feet; instead, they assert, they interrogate, they even make demands of the characters. And when the character isn't enough, they leave the frame and the film is too fascinated and intoxicated with the world that it refuses to follow the protagonist to their new locale; the resting pace on physical space denies the audience's desire to gift a film to its individual characters and find catharsis only in the actions of those characters. Antonioni's film isn't a portrait of an arbitrarily dissonant individual but of a dispassionate world with disaffected individuals who bleed into that world as offspring.

Antonioni's films aren't argumentative then, nor are they conclusive; they interrupt and unfurl rather than stitching together loose ends for a solution, a "point". His films don't function according to conceptual edicts about theme and symbol; like a whirlpool and a trance, Red Desert is far too unstable in structure and stridently unbalanced in its luxuriantly ominous color scheme to fit our categories for indexical meaning. An unmoving hurricane of inertia, Antonioni conjures something we can only consider, something we can never compartmentalize. Although meditative and languid, Antonioni never subsists on connect-the-dots metaphors for the world. He never sands down the unknown secret violence with a literate emphasis on concepts and themes that can be mapped, charted, and explained. Rather, Antonioni's films, like Malick's, Murnau's, Tarkovsky's and many others, are experiential and lyrically suggestive rather than mathematically structured to achieve a set goal. Red Desert, although a startling commentary on the listlessness of modern ennui, is unpolluted by obviousness, unclipped by fixed meaning. Always slipping away from us, it asks us not to clarify but to observe, to interact, to float around in its mysteries, marooning its characters and its audience within patterns of light and movement that ultimately resist structured purpose or identity. Thus, as Vitti stumbles in a state of mental inebriation around an indecipherable melding of hostile dust and deformed modern industry, the overwhelming sensation is distinctly ambivalent. On the surface, the world of the film is ensnared in dialectical tension between elusive, capacious, repressed nature and the consequential disarray of modernity infringing on nature (billowing factories and polluted smoke infringe on the landscape and suffuse it in a putrescent green). Yet this forced dialectic between

the modern and the antiquated or natural is merely a chimerical top-soil for a more metaphysical sense of imbalance found in the act of searching through the world, acclimatizing to it, exploring it, rather than compartmentalizing it along specific prefigured pathways of “nature” and “modernity” or “artifice” Mental categories aren’t simply analyzed but confounded in the way Carlo Di Palma’s luxuriant, searing, fire-and-brimstone cinematography casually dips between natural deserts and industrial geometry, all photographed as a wasteland of enormity and intimacy, rapturous beauty and deathly, infected clouds of horror that are, for Antonioni, inseparable from another. The crags of rocky social outcroppings overlooking beaches, the domes of the human head, and the industrial, Bauhaus corrosion of modern human architecture are all photographed in unison to suggest the overlap in each, to bleed flesh, dirt/stone, and concrete, to conceptualize each as a world of beauty and malevolence.

Certainly, the film tethers ennui to the shifting contours of technological development (a shift that is, for Antonioni destabilizing more than specifically positive or negative) not matched to a corollary advancement of mental states that can cope with the fluxional and destabilized nature of progress. But Antonioni’s goals are more lyrical than a mere privileging of the past over the present; the plastic beauty of the super-saturated reds, yellows, and oranges somehow both inject life into this world and only lie about life, erecting a false, overly-mediated scheme of artificial beauty that elides something deeper and more sensuous. At the same time, for Antonioni, these man made constructs and the realm of beauty aren’t mutually exclusive. Exultancy can flower from within the modern world (Antonioni’s camera is undeniably fascinated with the corporeal energy of physical spaces both constructed and natural). But the energy is also disfiguring because modernity redraws the world and forces people to perceive the world anew, to keep up, to acclimatize to new spaces. Fantastical, otherworldly wonder and frigid alienation whirl around in the collective narcosis of contradiction, where the only seeming solution to an adrift world is to wander around adrift in a liminal state between wakefulness and sleep.

A liminal state that is Giuliana’s fate, her syndrome of stasis, even throughout her provisional escapades with her husband’s co-worker Corrado (Richard Harris). She’s left threshing around the rust of modernity and humanity oxidized by the existential editing rhythms (the shots exist in perpetual crisis about where they will cut to next, what to follow, rather than coasting along a presumed narrative pathway). Red Desert, as with many of Antonioni’s ‘60s fables, exteriorizes destruction not in a diegetic event (a hurricane, a meteor, a giant lizard) but in the venomous paralysis of a formal, visual collapse as the camera distinctly refuses, or struggles to, locate humanity in the frame anymore. Drawing attention away from the people while implying the lethargy in their own souls, Red Desert both invokes the flickering, dormant, even undetected desires of the characters and suggests that emotional fulfillment should be located not from within the human but from without, from the physical world and perception of it that Antonioni’s cinema is so entangled in. The paradox is that the vibrant color is both a chroma catalyst for rapturous luminescence and beauty and an aesthetic scheme that infringes, impedes, reconstitutes, and sabotages the narrative and the diegesis rather than simply serving as acquiescent and passive backdrop to fore-grounded people and events. People are displaced by space, they must read just to it, the world won’t grant them safe passage on their own terms.

Modernity and morality here are not in opposition but in heated combat that actually verges on attrition, humanity now tired, aimless, and cast astray in a drunken wake for their own souls. Antonioni corrodes dichotomies between the self and society, between the inner sanctum and

the outer surface, finding the essence of the world not hidden deep within but on the surface, in the transformable world. Antonioni's artistic expressiveness, his rejection of naturalism, doesn't simply reject the reality of the modern world for an escape into endless internal and psychological abstraction; it works within the world and with the world, recasting the physical space of existence for prismatic purposes and thus, despite the tension, ultimately reaffirming the potential emotional and philosophical quotient of the modern physical world. This concrete sculpture garden evokes both the possibility of uprooting the self and exploring the world as well as the ominous emptiness of this potentially asocial freedom. Relying on a style of free indirect discourse (the modernist term associated with Joyce in the literature field), the style merges the first-person subjectivity of the character and the third-person subjectivity of the camera/art, ultimately visualizing a thematic merging of person and world, an exploration of a person trying to understand the world's mysteries rather than attempting to affect the world and to transgress the world as in most Western narratives.

The filmmaker of the landscape, Antonioni transforms the world into the parched sizzle of loneliness as his camera crawls and creeps with anxiety through scenes rather than striding through them confidently like a protagonist who dominates the landscape (indeed, Antonioni's conception of omnivorous, overarching space is antithetical to the idea of personal conquest against a world that cannot be fully controlled). Even a chromatic intermezzo, a garishly hued and super-saturated bedtime story of mutual escape between Giuliana and her son, is too strained to feel conclusively liberating. Inscribed with tones of pastel tan, light blue, and white for an angelic, spiritual, pure demeanor, this exteriorization of a mental flight from modernity both recedes and advances into a realm of near-abstraction. Ultimately, it is ambivalent, reflective of something that is partially a bold and baroque escape from the world and partially a refusal to cope with that real world.