

“IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME”:
LA NOTTE AND THE TIME-IMAGE

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In his speech for the “Archiginnasio d’oro” (1980), Roland Barthes praises Michelangelo Antonioni’s role as an artist: “I call the wisdom of the artist, not an antique virtue, still less a discourse of mediocrity, but on the contrary a moral knowing, that discerning sharpness which enables him to distinguish meaning and truth. How many crimes has humanity not committed in the name of Truth! And yet this truth was only ever just a meaning. All those wars, repressions, terrors, genocides, for the sake of the triumph of a meaning.”¹ Although Antonioni’s critics have faulted his films for their absorption in aesthetics, Barthes sees Antonioni’s creation of a cinema that refrains from advocating a truth as an ethical decision. Instead, Antonioni’s reflective cinema searches for a new way of representing time and existence. He depicts modernity as ennui, indifference, and passivity: as in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” in his films, crowds in the city live as though dead. In *La Notte* (1961), people glare and pull away from one another in the streets, and in *L’Eclisse* (1962), they bet at the stock exchange as their only mode of excitement.

In striking contrast, his contemporary Federico Fellini, arguably, celebrates the careless life of the rich in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and excites the spectator with its vibrant soundtrack and dance scenes. The beautiful and erratic Sylvia, as she is lifted above the crowd at the Roman nightclub, becomes a Godlike figure that replaces the statue of Jesus that the helicopter so memorably carries away in the first scene. She also becomes a Madonna figure that leads her fans around the dance floor just as the children trick worshipers into following their imaginary Mary around the park. As the worshipful Marcello puts it, “You’re everything... You’re the first woman of creation. You’re the

¹ Roland Barthes, “Dear Antonioni,” from Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *L’Avventura* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 64.

mother, the sister, the lover, the friend, the angel, the devil, the Earth, the home.”²

Antonioni, however, always anchors the spectator in the point of view of his female protagonists who silently—and critically—watch the modern world around them. Instead of serving as the objects of the camera’s look, they become the subjects whose gaze the camera often follows. Along with his protagonists, Antonioni constantly seems to ask: in a world that bombards the individual with so much knowledge and so much “noise,” how can individuals awaken to one another?

Critics have frequently discussed the theme of alienation in Antonioni’s trilogy, *L’Avventura*, *La Notte*, and *L’Eclisse*. In his book *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*, William Arrowsmith describes the irrevocable loss of the past and the awakening of the self from love in *La Notte*. Peter Brunette in *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* revises the theme of modern alienation by focusing on “the alienated intellectual/artist at this specific moment in the history of Italian society.”³ Although they both advocate an “inescapable” reading of the ending as individuation and isolation, I argue that the Deleuzian time-images in the film instead present moments of rediscovering the significance of others and unleash a compassion that, for Antonioni, is more important than erotic love.⁴ In view of their deteriorating marriage, Lidia Pontano searches for a way to communicate with her husband, Giovanni, and embarks on a search for the past—a “lost time”—that culminates in her reading of his old love letter at the very end. Gilles Deleuze’s film theory allows for a reading of the exterior landscape as a reflection of interiority, so that thought and spiritual awakenings need not be expressed through

² *La Dolce Vita*, dir. Federico Fellini, Koch Lorber, 1960.

³ Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 56.

⁴ William Arrowsmith, *Antonioni: The Poet of Images* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 58.

dialogue—sparse in all of Antonioni’s films. In *La Notte*, the Deleuzian time-image points to the dead past which characters must uncover in order to become aware of their own existence and the importance of others. Moreover, it implies a diachronic time that resonates with Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophical articulation of temporality and alterity.

I.

Postwar Italian cinema inevitably centered on issues surrounding time and the historical past. Angelo Restivo uses the word “stain” to describe both the formulation of a new cinema in reaction to war and fascism and a new philosophical understanding of film and vision.⁵ In its political implications, “Neo” in Italian means “stain or blemish,” and while the first postwar neorealist films entered the artistic scene in a moment of transition, the later films lost their “radical openness” and became a “stained,” “pink neorealism” that created its own political agenda.⁶ In any case, these two waves of neorealism during the postwar period up to the sixties initially attempted to reconstruct Italian national identity with an “openness” that opposed the idealist, propagandist fascist cinema. Although the term “neorealism” tends to refer to the earlier period, various critics and theorists, such as Deleuze, used it to describe the later period as well, including the films of Antonioni.⁷

These “new” Italian films deconstructed myths of the idyllic countryside as the site of Italian tradition and urban modernity as the site of progress. Filmmakers like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Luchino Visconti instead depicted urban poverty and a more

⁵ Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 22-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ P. Adams Sitney, *Vital Crises of Italian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 1.

regionalist Italy.⁸ Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) poignantly depicts postwar depression as his protagonist, Antonio Ricci, searches the city for his bicycle, his means for employment as a poster gluer. De Sica's shots travel from the lines of the unemployed waiting for relief to Ricci's face in despair to the well-dressed and ineffectual policemen who are symbolic of a government that drives its people to steal and then punishes them for attempting to survive. De Sica makes everyday tragedy the subject of his film, and the development of the relationship between Antonio and his son Bruno as they search for the bicycle raises questions of loyalty, trust, and faith in authority. As Restivo puts it, the paradox of needing to elevate the everyday as well as evade melodramatic narratives and definitive meanings reveals the neorealist historical imperative, "the imperative to discover 'Italy,' to construct new maps that incorporate social, cultural, and economic *difference* into the homogenous map of fascist ideology."⁹ At the same time, filmmakers like Fellini searched for innovative narratives—different from classical Hollywood cinema—that could be "exported to the world."¹⁰ Neorealist cinema directed itself both towards the global community and Italy itself. In terms of depicting the regions of Italy, instead of reverting to a traditionally modernist cosmopolitanism, many neorealist films portrayed the radical and unbridgeable difference between the north and the south. While Rome and northern Italy dominated industry, capital, and culture, the south remained economically "backward." This disparity

⁸ Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles*, 18-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

provoked such films as Vittorio De Seta's *Banditi ad Orgosolo* about banditry and the economic rut of the south.¹¹

Antonioni addresses and makes even more intricate this issue of Italian identity and poverty through the layers of the past and present in *La Notte*. Urban construction and new buildings contrast the bombed or deteriorating houses in industrial Milan. Antonioni juxtaposes rich industrialists like Gherardini with the workers in the city and urban traffic noise with the quiet of the outskirts of the city. Lidia navigates, not through a nation divided between the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor, but through the spectrum of a diverse Italy in various stages of modernization just within the city. Symbolically in *L'Avventura*, Anna's friends discover ancient vases in the literally archaeological landscape of the Aeolian Islands. As much as Antonioni depicts the layers of the past and present in the national scope, he returns to a personal conception of time, the mundane, and Lidia as an individual. Indeed, Antonioni received much criticism for his documentaries about the people of the Po Valley because of his "failure" to "place the peasants within a historically determined political context."¹² His interest in aesthetics differed sharply from the immediately political films of his contemporaries, such as Visconti's *Ossessione* or Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta*.¹³ To his Marxist critics, instead of being committed to a political agenda, he seemed far too enraptured by the beauties of the landscape. As much as Milan serves as an archaeological site of postwar Italy, the city becomes a map of Lidia's life. Though Antonioni presents a new view of Italy different from the idyllic Italy of fascist cinema, significantly he avoids advocating a

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹² Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

new, definitive account of the nation. Experimenting with the way images reveal interior searches and personal awakenings allows Antonioni to address philosophically issues of temporality and the importance of the past without falling back on a consensual, national message.

In recent theoretical discussions of Deleuze, both D.N. Rodowick and Laura U. Marks elaborate on the philosophical and political implications of movement and time images. Deleuze does not simply present another theory of film but looks at film as the source of philosophical and political inquiry. While the movement-image or the organic regime “derive from a belief in the possibility of action and the stability of Truth,” the time-image reflects a sense that reality is “lacunary and dispersive.”¹⁴ In “A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema,” Marks distinguishes between official accounts of history and private memory that exist simultaneously in the cinematic image. She uses the word “archaeology” to discuss the “different regimes of truth” that clash against each other in these images.¹⁵ Like Foucault’s formulation of history as the interlocking of discourses, “Deleuze’s work on cinema disputes the ability ever to find the truth of a historical event. It is lost in its discursive representation, in the layers of words and things that build up over it. Yet it is only by being inscribed in this way that it can be said to occur at all.”¹⁶ For Marks, cinematic images have the unique ability of presenting various “disjunctive” archaeological strata. For example, Rea Tajiri’s video *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991) presents dominant accounts of history through newsreels and

¹⁴ D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 12-3.

¹⁵ Laura U. Marks, “A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema,” *Screen* (35.3, 1994), 245.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

fiction films that discuss Japanese-American internment while the blank screen and Tajiri's calling on the dead become the site of private memory.¹⁷

Antonioni's film *La Notte* allows for a similar archaeological reading that juxtaposes Italian modernization with Lidia and Giovanni's private, un-narrativized memories. At the same time, I argue that temporality in the film is not simply memory that disrupts official accounts of history. As much as the present depends on the past, the past preserved becomes a forgotten temporality in the film that has the potential of awakening the characters to the responsibility of others. Deleuze's time-image intersects with Levinas's conception of alterity through this conception of the past as other. Deleuze describes "pure recollection" in film as the preserved past that returns without referring to a subject's memory and exists as a layer of time relative to the present. In contrast, "recollection images" are "mental images" and often take the form of a flashback.¹⁸ For example, in *Casablanca*, the camera focuses on Rick's face as he thinks back to his earlier days in Paris and the shot dissolves into a representation of his memory. Unlike films such as *Citizen Kane* that rely on images of the past to create meaning, for Antonioni the recognition of the past as a time that cannot return in its entirety stimulates an ethical shock for both the characters and the spectator. In contrast with the films that Marks examines, the realization of the absent past—of the past as no longer knowable—rather than the presence of memory, serves as the crux of the *La Notte*'s ethical concerns. As I will later discuss, the past haunts the images of Lidia's walk but never emerges as a recollection image or pure recollection. *La Notte* points to

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247-8.

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 79.

the idea that memory or recollection images can never capture the “pure past” and brings into relief the way “pure recollection” is a construct of fictional forms.

II.

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze defines the time-image in terms of the subordination of movement to time. While in the movement-image, the development of plot and the actions of characters determine the shots and montages, the time-image draws the spectator’s attention to time as an extraordinary presence. In the films of Antonioni, the time-image has the power to awaken the spectator from the banal, and in *La Notte*, it points simultaneously to a past time that never appears on screen but has the potential of awakening the characters. Shots no longer follow perception, action, and response, but “The image had to free itself from sensory-motor links; it had to stop being action-image in order to become a pure optical, sound (and tactile) image.”¹⁹ In *The Cinema of Economic Miracles*, Restivo describes the brilliance of sixties Italian cinema in terms of its desire to end representation.²⁰ Deleuze’s theory of the time-image resonates with this description of Italian cinema’s project to go beyond representation. For Deleuze, time as an abstract concept, of course, can never be “directly” represented on screen. Instead the time-image relies on optical, sound, and tactile situations that allow the spectator to become aware of time as a central theme. In *La Notte*, “pure optical, sound (and tactile)” situations, as well as the camera’s capture of poetic language, make the spectator aware of the significance of a past that would allow the characters to feel a kind of altruistic compassion for one another.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles*, 5.

The “pure optical situation” plays a large role in Deleuze’s theory of the time-image. He calls the time-image cinema, which he links to the neorealism of Fellini, De Sica, and Antonioni, that “of the seer and no longer of the agent.”²¹ While in the movement-image, the spectator identifies with the motivations of the protagonists as they respond to and alter the world around them, the character in the time-image becomes a spectator—one who “records rather than reacts.”²² For example, Deleuze describes the heroine of Visconti’s *Ossessione* as “closer to a visionary, a sleepwalker, than to a seductress or a lover.”²³ Moreover, the objects of the characters’ gaze acquire an extraordinary quality beyond “functional reality.”²⁴ Their gaze seems to raise the material world out of the banality of everyday life and point to time’s presence as an active force.²⁵ Instead of giving the spectator a linear unfolding of plot or knowledge, “it is supposed to make us grasp, something intolerable and unbearable,” whether, in Edmund Burke’s terms, beautiful or sublime.²⁶

Certainly, Deleuze was not the first to link artistic experimentation with a revitalization of the banal. The time-image cinema is often linked to aesthetic goals of literary modernism. Antonioni’s cinema, in particular, expresses “an insistence on the need to find new narrative forms...and not from ‘life’, not in declarations of political or social faiths, but rather from within a new, ‘modern’ tradition of narrative: Flaubert, Proust, Joyce.”²⁷ In his preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’* Joseph Conrad defines

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 3

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁷ Rohdie, *Antonioni*, 39.

the goal of art as a creation of atmosphere. Like the Russian Formalists, Conrad attempts to defamiliarize and renew “the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.”²⁸ Similar to Deleuze’s neorealists, writers must appeal to the visual to evoke abstract concepts like atmosphere and time. In *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Virginia Woolf devotes an entire section “Time Passes” to descriptions of the decay of the Ramseys’ old house: “Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers.”²⁹ Darkness signifies not just the fall of night but becomes a metaphor for decay, dying, and the passage of time. By elaborating on the visual details of nighttime, autumn, and the wind’s invasion of the house, and even old Mrs. McNab who cleans the house, Woolf makes time the subject—the agent—of her narrative.

Lidia’s walk through Milan to visit the Pontano’s old home informs Deleuze’s description of the “pure optical situation” that gives significance to the banal. In his book, Peter Brunette presents various readings of Lidia’s walk in the city. For example, critic Giorgio Tinazzi reads Lidia as “Antonioni’s surrogate coolly exploring the modern urban landscape.”³⁰ Other critics have read the various objects along her walk as sexual symbols or have interpreted the walk as an affirmation of the materiality of the “actual” world.³¹ Given the importance of Giovanni’s old letter in the end which almost allows the past to burst into the present with its emotionality, however, Lidia’s walk serves as a

²⁸ Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’* (London: Penguin, 1989), xlix.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 125-6.

³⁰ Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, 57-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*

search for her youth and the past that they shared. It is as if she sifts through the objects that appear in her field of gaze in order to find an object that can provoke Giovanni to an awareness of their shared past and the present deterioration of their marriage—and it is only with this recognition that they can awaken from their indifference towards each other.

Antonioni frequently uses the female flâneur figure to ground his films' point of view. In *L'Avventura*, for example, Claudia serves as the outsider—the third—who stumbles upon her friends and their lovers. The camera that follows Claudia allows the spectator, too, to observe as an outsider and remain emotionally distant from these love affairs. In *L'Eclisse*, as well, Vittoria's entrance at the stock exchange and her attitude towards her mother's obsessive gambling facilitate the camera's critical gaze of the rowdy stock traders. Lidia in *La Notte* plays a similar role. The camera watches Lidia as she emerges flâneur-like from the crowd on the sidewalk: it focuses on her face as she walks towards it glancing at the pedestrians surrounding her as if searching for any sign of recognition and human contact. She peers at a worker at his lunch break and later looks through a window at a man sitting in his flat. Antonioni's portrayal of a world filled with strangers, each with an unknowable past and individuality for Lidia, and shots of trolleys, motor scooters, and cars that rush by as Lidia crosses the street draws attention to the modernity of the world around her. Antonioni attempts to heighten the spectator's awareness of the familiar and make it new and alien through the Lidia and the camera's gaze. Moreover, the urban noise contrasts the quietude—the familiarity—of her old home in the second half of her journey through the city.

The distinction between the modern world and a hidden, diachronic past emerges sharply in the scene where Lidia enters a deteriorating building. Like Deleuze's somnambulist, her movement does not advance the plot but seeks to be in contact with a subjective sense of time as change. The tolling of bells, rather than telling actual time, signals this diachrony, and in a series of shots, the crumbling stones of the building, the rust on the doors, and the peeling paint indicate a past separate from Lidia's present. The camera rests on her hand with its wedding band, not so much symbolically linking the failure of her marriage with the deterioration of the building, as critics have suggested, but to juxtapose her marriage with a forgotten past. Significantly, Antonioni focuses the camera on a broken clock on the ground as if gazing at the clock can revive the diachronic past which the clock records synchronically on its face.

Moreover, the montage of Lidia touching the paint, the baby that appears and rapidly disappears in the following frame, and the broken clock unfolds with irrational intervals that disorient the spectator from the banality of the present and allow for an awareness of change. As Deleuze explains it, in the time-image cinema, the montage does not link actions but assembles associated images with "incommensurable relations" between them.³² So shots of Lidia with the child and the clock do not show how she arrives at each of these settings. Instead, they ask the spectator to read these images across the intervals, surmise on the temporal spacing of these shots, and interpret these associated images as a reflection of her interior thought processes. Lidia also seeks contact with the past in the second half of her walk as she wanders to the couple's old home in the outskirts of Milan. She joins the crowd as they watch boys launch rockets

³² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 213-4.

into the sky. She tells Giovanni over the phone, “[I]n the same old field, kids are still firing rockets.”³³ And in a dreamlike shot, the smoke from the rockets floats towards the spectators and causes the boys to disappear. When Giovanni picks her up, he naively remarks that their old home “hasn’t changed at all,” but Lidia replies, “It will before long.” While Giovanni, who possesses a wall filled with clocks in his study, can only conceive of time as a synchronic abstraction, Lidia notes the changes that are occurring around her. Urban construction, which forms the background of so many of the scenes, is changing the cityscape of Milan, and Lidia, in her search for the past, experiences the shock of this difference.

For Deleuze, sound—or “sonsigns”—also contributes to the creation of an “image of time.” He writes, “[T]he sound as well as visual elements of the image enter into internal relations which means that the whole image has to be ‘read’, no less than seen, readable as well as visible.”³⁴ For instance, conversations may become “schizophrenic,” unmotivated by interests and desires, or sounds may have nothing to do with the visual image.³⁵ In *La Notte*, conversations that appear unmotivated and noise in the street form the soundtrack of the film, but it maintains a verisimilitude that differs from the surrealist films Deleuze mentions that divorce sound and image. In terms of music, jazz at the Gherardini party floats from the actual jazz band playing on the lawn but becomes a nondiegetic presence in the house where it would seem impossible to hear the music from outside.

³³ All direct quotes from the film refer to *La Notte*, dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, Fox Lorber, 1961.

³⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 230, 251.

However, sound also has the potential of awakening individuals to the hidden past. In “The Crystals of Time,” Deleuze links the gallop and the ritornello to the facets of the present and the past. He relates the sound of the gallop, particularly in Westerns, and rhythmic walking in musical comedies to the present that is passing. In contrast, the ritornello—literally a refrain—signals the “raising or falling back of pasts which are preserved.”³⁶ He describes Jean Renoir’s use of the ritornello as nostalgic and melancholic while Fellini’s ritornello “immortalizes a beginning of the world and removes it from passing time.”³⁷ Sound motifs also introduce scenes of pure recollection or dream sequences that become indiscernible from reality. For example, in *Belle de jour* (1967), sleigh bells accompany Séverine’s erotic fantasies, and at the very end, the mere sound of the bells, as well as the mewling of cats from another scene, indicates the merging of fantasy and reality.

In *La Notte*, like Deleuze’s ritornello, sudden and disruptive sounds point to a preserved past. But unlike Deleuze’s description of crystal images, this past time never emerges on screen. During Lidia’s walk in Milan, the sudden cry of the baby, its abrupt cessation, and Lidia’s nonchalance towards it transform the sound into an abstract sign that points to a past time, a past childhood that Lidia herself possess, or even a different dimension. Antonioni, to the dismay, of many of his actors, often continued filming after the end of a scene, producing uncomfortable silences and unexpected events. Michel Butor after meeting with Antonioni in 1961 describes this strategy:

Not that Jeanne Moreau was not shot as Jeanne Moreau, but rather, she was taken in a suspended moment where she was no longer Mrs Pontano, but not yet either her own self. Often he preserves these margins, these

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

‘ends’ as he would say, because the entire sequence then takes on another sense as a new dimension makes its appearance in the disturbance of the natural.³⁸

The abrupt sounds of the baby and Lidia’s response may be extemporaneous—in any case, Antonioni’s choice of shots and montages adds an otherworldly quality to the sounds. The cry of the baby also parallels the loud bursting of rockets that the boys send into the sky in Lidia and Giovanni’s old neighborhood. The sound of the rockets suppresses the noise of conversations from the crowd and, like the cry of the baby, seems to signal a different time. In contrast with the dissonance of the city, diegetic, nostalgic music plays in the food stand near their old home. When Giovanni joins her, it is as if music, along with the landscape away from the city, conspires to awaken them to their shared, irredeemable past. Interestingly enough, the music becomes nondiegetic as it follows them when they walk farther and farther away from the stand. This shift transforms the music into an abstract, decontextualized motif that signals the past. Lidia looks intently at Giovanni’s face as he walks in their old neighborhood—however, his face retains its usual, fixed expression, and he remarks casually that the old railway line is no longer in service.

Besides sound, touch and texture, conveyed visually, also draw the spectator’s attention to a diachronic sense of time. Deleuze discusses how Bresson “makes touch an object of view in itself: “The hand, then, takes on a role in the image which goes infinitely beyond the sensory-motor demands of the action, which takes the place of the face itself for the purpose of affects, and which, in the area of perception, becomes the

³⁸ Rohdie, *Antonioni*, 52.

mode of construction of a space which is adequate to the decisions of the spirit.”³⁹ In other words, shots of texture and touch lend themselves to an expressiveness that opens up to images of time and thought. During Lidia’s walk, touch helps to create a sense of her search for a different, past time in a way that resonates with other “modernist” works. Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* explores the way in which non-visual senses, such as taste, smell, and touch, normally overshadowed by sight, can open up the self to a forgotten past. In the beginning of the novel, Proust’s narrator searches for a Bergsonian pure recollection in objects. Deleuze explains Bergson’s concept of pure recollection as the pure and absolute past that splits from and exists simultaneously with the present. So in Proust’s novel, after the narrator tastes the madeleine, the past returns in its entirety.

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and thus effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised them the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and return to share our life.⁴⁰

In *La Notte*, Antonioni never uses the images of pure recollection that so distinctly characterize his later work *The Passenger*, in which the scene of a past conversation between David Locke and Robertson returns with the playing of the tape recorder. But he conveys the possibility, which in the end becomes an important failure, of recovering a sense of the past through touch. Just as Proust describes each sensation as his narrator tastes the piece of madeleine with a sip of tea, Antonioni’s camera frames and focuses on Lidia’s hand as it touches the peeling paint on the old building. The texture of the

³⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 12.

⁴⁰ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Volume I, Swann’s Way* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 59.

crumbling walls and corroded doors create rich, layered shots that seem to open up to an entirely different world from the clinical, blank, interior setting of the hospital and the Pontano flat.

Moreover, touch between characters plays an important role in the film: at each of the moments when Tommaso and Giovanni kiss Lidia's hand, they recognize the utter difference between the happiness of their past and the indifference of their present. In an intimate gesture, Valentina dries Lidia's hair and Lidia confides in Valentina despite Valentina's flirtation with her husband. These gestures indicate moments of compassion that transcend the erotic, possessive love that Antonioni so cynically portrays in all of his films. As Levinas puts it, the immediacy of touch, like the face, indicates a proximity that respects difference and distance. For Levinas, sensation and perception come prior to a rational ordering or appropriation, and "Proximity, beyond intentionality, is the relationship with the neighbor in the moral sense of the term."⁴¹

Different from his other films, language as aesthetics—beyond mere conversation and dialogue—plays an important role in *La Notte*. Brunette argues that the "barrage" of dialogue causes language to lose its meaning and authenticity, and he cites Antonioni's own discussion of the characters' inability to communicate. However, Antonioni in *La Notte* does create moments where shots focus on characters speaking spontaneously, and instead of losing meaning, language acquires a poetic quality that causes both the spectator and the characters to become aware of time and develop a sense of ethical responsibility toward others. In fact, Antonioni links cinema with the goals of poetry. In a discussion following the production of *La Notte*, he says,

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 119.

The reason I did this [abandoning logical sequences between shots] was that I believe...that cinema today should be tied to truth rather than to logic. And the truth of our daily lives is neither mechanical, conventional, nor artificial, as stories generally are, and if films are made that way, they'll show it...So I think it's important for cinema to turn toward...ways of expression that are absolutely free, as free as painting which has reached abstraction; perhaps cinema will even construct poetry, a cinematic poem in rhyme.⁴²

Although in *L'Avventura*, Antonioni uses the irrational interval to create a poetic “language” in images, he makes poetry an explicit theme in *La Notte*, where language heightens the sense of poetry in his rich, ambiguous juxtaposition of images. For example, at the beginning of the film, Tommaso realizes that he is about to die, and the camera focuses on his face as he talks about his desire to achieve more than he will ever be able to: “You appreciate many things when you’re all alone. You realize that so much remains to be done. I wonder if I’ve ever done anything really useful. I lacked the courage to probe deeply. Probably I never had enough intelligence anyway.” Moreover, these shots of his face reveal his sincere concern for his friends and brings into relief his consciousness of ephemerality as he bends over to kiss Lidia’s hand. Further on in the film, Valentina uses the tape recorder to create a gap in time that is able to renew momentarily her sense of life. The camera focuses on Valentina’s face as she plays the tape that records her past thoughts.

I heard snatches of television dialogue: “stop that car!” I wouldn’t do that, Jim.” After that, the howling of a dog rising effortlessly, in perfect misery. Then I thought I heard a plane, then silence...and I was happy. A garden’s silence is made of sounds; press your ear to a tree and listen. The sounds may be within us; I’d rather think it’s the tree. The silence is broken by an alien noise disturbing my peace. I close the window, but the noise persists; it’s too much for me. I don’t want useless sounds; I want to select them. Voices and words...there are so many words I’d rather not

⁴² Michelangelo Antonioni, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber: Tales of a Director*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xiii.

hear but you must resign yourself, like floating on the waves of the sea. Unlike the useless sounds that she desires to erase, Valentina attempts to capture past thoughts, imagery, and desires on tape in order to produce a sharp awareness of time that awakens her to thought as she listens to her own words. The camera captures her contemplative face and heightens the authenticity of the words on the tape recorder instead of eroding their meaning. Her words express a desire to create meaning out of noise, to break the urban ennui with silence, but the mechanism of the tape recorder, by capturing a “ghost” of the past, also has a creative force in itself. It is as if this semi-preservation of the past allows individuals to become momentarily aware of time and existence.

In the final scene of the film, the camera’s capture of language in Giovanni’s letter allows for him to awaken briefly to an awareness of the past as difference and to Lidia as an individual. Realizing how different their present lives have become from their past existence, Lidia tells Giovanni that she does not love him but pities him. While for Antonioni, erotic love always becomes destructive, Lidia’s pity indicates a compassion that allows her reach out to Giovanni without desiring to possess. The medium close-ups of her face and Giovanni’s while she reads the letter lend a heightened significance to her words. The reality of change contrasts the naïveté of the words of Giovanni’s letter, “We would remain like this all our lives, not only close but belonging to each other in a way that nothing could ever destroy except apathy of habit, the only threat.” When Lidia reveals the fact that he himself had written this letter at the beginning of their marriage, Giovanni’s face registers utter surprise. In that moment of shock, he becomes aware of the passage of time and realizes Lidia’s existence as an

individual separate from his own being. While, Arrowsmith equates individuation with isolation, instead individuation, as Levinas discusses, initiates an ethical relationship with others. In that moment, Giovanni bends over and kisses Lidia's hand in humility—just as Tommaso does in the beginning of the film. Like Valentina's tape recorder, the letter records past words in a way that allows for a compassionate awareness of the other.

III.

The evocation of a past time resonates with Levinas's description of time and alterity. For Levinas, "knowledge, by itself, is the project of an incarnate practice of seizure, appropriation, and satisfaction."⁴³ Although Levinas's discourse on alterity seems to imply a kind of religious or mystical transcendence, his idea of the unknown has important secular, ethical implications. Levinas's formulation of alterity radically departs from Western, Cartesian emphases on the self that can rationally assimilate knowledge of the world. He calls this tradition one of "grasp" and "manipulation."⁴⁴ However, Levinas enters philosophy at a moment when knowledge and progress have seemed to fail: "the conscience of Europe is a bad conscience, because of the contradiction that tears her apart at the very hour of modernity, which is probably that of ledgers set up in lucidity, that of full consciousness."⁴⁵ Knowledge and "progress" have led to twentieth-century horrors such as imperialism, exploitation, war, and genocide. Like Antonioni's project for neorealist cinema, instead of searching for another totalizing narrative to provide a panacea for global problems, he follows a World War II/postwar trend in imagining the

⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 152.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 132.

large in the implications of the small.⁴⁶ For Levinas, compassion most significantly occurs in the fundamental relationship between the self and the other. And, in a way intersects with discussions of time in film and film theory, the idea of time and diachrony catalyzes an ethical awakening to—and a respect for—the alterity of the other.

Levinas calls the present a “promise of the graspable, a solid” and refers to synchrony as “*being* in its egological gathering.”⁴⁷ So while the present signifies a knowable time where the self can grasp the other in terms of its own understanding, Levinas describes the past as “immemorial” and unrepresentable.⁴⁸ The alterity of the past, “[t]he signification of a past that has not been my present and does not concern my reminiscence,” calls for the individual to be responsible for the other without attempting to assimilate the other back into presence and the knowable.⁴⁹ Levinas warns against representation and history because they privilege presence by synchronizing past duration into the present. So, at the very end of *La Notte*, when Giovanni listens to the reading of his forgotten letter and realizes the alterity of the past, for a moment he subordinates himself in humility to Lidia as an other. In the final shots, however, as Lidia desperately asks him to admit that he does not love her, he reverts to a possessive, erotic love that attempts to revive the past instead of respecting its alterity. He attempts to assimilate Lidia back into his own understanding instead of respecting her as an other.

Like the alterity of a past time beyond memory, death signifies an unknowable time. Instead of calling death “nothingness,” Levinas describes death as a mysterious

⁴⁶ Marina MacKay, “Putting the House in Order: Virginia Woolf and Blitz Modernism,” *Modern Language Quarterly* (66:2, 2005), 227.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979), 98-9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

future. And unlike Heidegger, for whom death serves as the limit of all possibilities and leads to freedom, death escapes the graspable present, or presence, “marks the end of the subject’s virility and heroism,” and puts into question the self’s egocentrism.⁵⁰ In *La Notte*, death becomes one of the layers of diachrony that the characters must face in order to come to an ethical awareness. Significantly, the film opens with Lidia and Giovanni’s visit to their dying friend, Tommaso. The camera focuses on his face in pain as the doctor injects him with morphine. In spite of or because of his own impending death, Tommaso fears for the “uselessness” of his own life and reaches out to Lidia and Giovanni, whom he calls his only true friends. His unknown future brings into relief his friends’ lives, in which he can no longer have a part. In compassion, he reassures Giovanni that his new book will succeed and at the last moment of their meeting, bends down to kiss Lidia’s hand just as Giovanni does at the very end of the film.

Moreover, as Lidia observes Tommaso and Giovanni’s conversation from the corner of the hospital room, Tommaso’s death becomes an abstract concept of diachrony. The camera startlingly zooms in on her face and, after she bids goodbye to Tommaso, focuses on her crying outside the hospital. While she confronts visceral grief for the future death of a close friend, Tommaso’s death signifies her own “mysterious” future, not unlike the forgotten past that she and Giovanni once shared. Similar to Robertson’s death in *The Passenger*, which raises the question of identity and Locke’s ability to take the place of another, Tommaso’s dying at the beginning of the film becomes a way for Antonioni to address ethical issues like responsibility for the other. Not surprisingly, after the hospital scene, Lidia begins to question the indifference she and Giovanni feel

⁵⁰ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 70-72.

towards each other. Although death remains unknowable, she seems to ask whether one can find a way to understand the past. Like the notion of time in Antonioni's neorealism, death also becomes an unrepresentable concept that plays a role in the fundamental relationship between the self and the other.

In one of his notes for a potential film, "That Bowling Alley on the Tiber," Antonioni writes, "Several years ago I found myself in Rome, at loose ends. When I don't know what to do, I start looking at things. There's a technique for this too, or rather many techniques. I have my own. Which consists in working backward from a series of images to a state of affairs."⁵¹ Antonioni frequently worked backwards from observations and images to potential thematic material for films. But these descriptions of images and even cinema itself, as a sequence of shots and frames, become texts that capture Antonioni's process of brainstorming about ethical issues. In "That Bowling Alley on the Tiber," Antonioni imagines a man who watches a boy and a girl playing in the alley. They notice the man looking at them lovingly, and the boy, instinctively distrusting him, remarks, "The look was tender, loving, but a love so impassioned he'd never seen anything like it, not even in his parents' eyes."⁵² The man then reaches into his pocket, takes out a revolver, and shoots both the children. The crime seems so senseless that the police are unable to pin the crime to the man. Like Carol Reed's postwar film *The Third Man*, where Henry Lime's penicillin scam leads to the death of dozens of anonymous babies, Antonioni's narrative explores the idea of murder and responsibility towards others, even the anonymous.

⁵¹ Antonioni, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber*, 71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 73.

In this particular story, Antonioni attempts to provide an explanation of the murder, the man's "neurosis or madness." He writes, "But because this is a project doomed to end here, on this page, I can attempt a moral explanation, approximate and summative. This man kills to keep two innocent creatures from living a life he deems miserable, degraded, a life no better than a garbage dump. So his action is an act of love and at the same time an act of faith in something else."⁵³ Antonioni's description strikingly parallels Steiner's plight in *La Dolce Vita*—although he seems to lead the perfect life, with a loving family and a villa in the countryside, he becomes disillusioned by the "immorality" of modernity, kills his beloved children, and commits suicide. Both Fellini in the Steiner episode of *La Dolce Vita* and Antonioni portray the consequences of what Levinas would call a mad "egological gathering." Although Steiner and the man in Antonioni's story see their acts as ones of love, they judge others' lives through the self. They blindly take others' lives in their hands through their own beliefs—however "moral" they deem their actions in relation to the decadence of modernity.

In *La Notte*, too, Antonioni criticizes love when it becomes an appropriation of the other and depicts love as illness and a metaphorical murder. For both Antonioni and Levinas, ethical behavior in a postwar society begins with an awareness of the limitations of the self. In *La Notte*, Antonioni experiments with time or diachrony. Deleuze's time-image provokes a reading of time in the film as a potential catalyst for this realization of the limits of understanding. Instead, Lidia's pity—love as altruism—recognizes both the simultaneous closeness and distance between individuals, what Levinas calls proximity. For Levinas, love as a sentimental investment in the anonymous or a pretense of

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 74.

understanding would be as deluded as indifference is “inhumane.” Like the final shot of *L’Avventura*, where Claudia’s hand rests on Sandro’s back, *La Notte* explores the ethical possibilities of proximity beyond Giovanni’s insistence on possession in the final ominous frames.

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