

Routes of Return

Joey Skee (May 09, 2009)



Michelangelo Antonioni's 1960 film "L'avventura" provides a cinematic voyage back to Italy.

In preparing the recent conference "Land of Our Return: Diasporic Encounters with Italy" at the Calandra Institute, I came across a number of documents pertaining to the theme. One of the more intriguing ones was a brief scene in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1960 [L'avventura](#) [2], in which an old man suddenly enters a rustic cabin where vacationing Romans have found shelter during their search for a friend who has mysteriously disappeared from a small Sicilian island they are visiting. The man is a shepherd living in the shack whose owner has emigrated to Australia. In a mix of Italian, Sicilian, and English, the old man informs the city folks that he has spent thirty years in the



land down under, pointing to photographs of his family. “Bei tempi,” he proclaims. The scene ends after two minutes and the character of the returned emigrant is not seen or heard from again.

Film scholar Seymour Chatman [3] notes that the old man is an example of Antonioni’s frequent undermining of the linear logic of his films. This introduction of “unnecessary events” – the returned emigrant provides gratuitous information and his presence does not advance the plot – is part of a modernist agenda of “denarrativization.” The man “is simply there, as one more of Antonioni’s stubborn

‘found objects’.”

David Saul Rosenfeld [4] suggests that we see the “syntagmatic connotation” of these disconnected elements that accrue meaning not only within the film in question but also in relationship to other Antonioni films. This seemingly superfluous scene is similar to others found in Italian films of the period, such as **Fellini’s La Dolce Vita** [5] (1960), in which modern Italy is populated by American actors, French intellectuals, exotic entertainers, and the like, all speaking in a “Babel of languages.”

Yet for those who have any relationship to the immigrant experience, the unexpected arrival of this pre-industrial, manual laborer (shades of a fading neo-realistic subject?) in the midst of these angst-plagued, citified visitors gives pause. As **Frank Tomasulo** [6] observes, “Antonioni uses the background of his images to foreground the economic dislocations of Southern Italy and the class contradictions between his bourgeois protagonists and the poverty-ridden South.” The old man’s dramatic return/arrival – the rattling door, the pouring rain, his demanding question “Che fate?!” – forces the viewer to confront a condensed yet startling image of Italian proletarian migration that remains little understood by many in Italy and the United States.

Source URL: <http://ftp.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/art-culture/article/routes-return>

Links

[1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/returning-emigrant-michelangelo-antonionis-lavventura>

[2] <http://www.criterion.com/films/209>

[3] http://books.google.com/books?id=pypx5cA_logC&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq=l'avventura+antonioni+Panarea+old+man&source=bl&ots=FywZCIFawo&sig=RaCSDULXiCuaaGF38Wj2QQA5i4I&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=8&ct=result

[4] <http://www.davidsaulrosenfeld.com>

[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLS_VNiXHNs

[6] <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/Tomasulo/text.html>