The Trials of Individuation in Late Modernity: Exploring Subject Formation in Antonioni's *Red Desert*

**Christine Henderson**  
York University, Toronto

*Red Desert* (*Il Deserto Rosso*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964) is, simply, a work of art made before its time, with the clarity, insight and intuition of a true masterpiece. Michelangelo Antonioni, in his first full-length colour feature, uses cinematic language to explore what contemporary psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, decades later, has called the crisis of primary narcissism, one of the 'new maladies' afflicting the modern subject that she describes in *Tales of Love* (1983). At the time of its release, *Red Desert* put the trials of individuation that confront the modern subject on the screen, long before they had become pervasive on the psychoanalytic couch. As one of a handful of intellectuals attuned to the deep-seated transformations taking place in the everyday life of modern capitalist societies, Antonioni was among the first European directors to question and explore the devastating consequences of these changes on the human psyche. Indeed, I argue that, much more than a film about technological alienation, *Red Desert* poetically describes the struggles of subject formation—the acquisition of a distinct and separate identity, that allows one to establish and maintain meaningful and ethical bonds with others, without the risk of psychic disintegration—in the conditions of late modernity. For Antonioni, psychic survival in the modern world is not merely a question of seamless integration, but a form of (dis)adaptation: the recognition of severance and of separation, both from nature and our own human nature, that allows one to affirm her environment and act as a responsive agent in the world, without being overwhelmed or engulfed by otherness, or alterity. In Kristeva’s terms, this involves the capacity to bear, and even to creatively elaborate, the painful necessity of loss and separation from the primal (m)other—a transformational journey upon which Giuliana eventually embarks.
While, on the surface, *Red Desert* may appear to be a film about alienation in a technological world of mechanization and commodification, a critique of a modernization which has left natural landscapes ravaged by industrial production processes, what is really at stake for Antonioni is the 'spiritual confusion' entailed by the correspondingly violent upheavals in ethical, moral, religious, and even political spheres that have accompanied these economic and environmental transformations (1996, 291). As Antonioni suggests,

My interest is not in man facing machine but in man facing man, with his acts, his story, his attempts at love, according to the style, the pace, the place, and the occasions which today’s civilization allows... machines are not the cause of the crisis of anguish that people have been talking about for years (1996, 98, my italics).

Antonioni’s work is not so much a straightforward condemnation of the logic of capitalism, nor a nostalgic yearning for a lost past, as it is an open-ended exploration of the impact of the disintegration of traditional social fabrics, familiar contexts, proscribed identities on human relationships, and on the subject’s ability to relate to others, her world, and her own self—to become a functioning individual. He states:

The world that the characters in the film come into conflict with isn’t the world of factories. Behind the industrial transformation lies another one—a transformation of the spirit, of human psychology. This new way of life conditions the behaviour both of those who work in the factories, and of those who, outside of it, suffer its effects (1996, 284).

He attempts to capture the individual’s becoming in a historic moment of transition, his movement toward a new sensibility, toward new formations of subjectivity, one inevitably fraught with great difficulty, sacrifice, and loss. Indeed, much like the paradoxes he explores in the film, between beauty and degradation, the horror and allure of an emerging world, with its strange sounds, sights, and landscapes, Antonioni’s words and writings are characterized by a marked ambiguity:

It’s too simplistic to say—as many people have done—that I am condemning the inhuman industrial world which oppresses individuals and leads them to neurosis. My intention was to translate the poetry of that world, in which even factories can be beautiful (1996, 287-8).

Antonioni, acknowledging both the perils and possibilities afforded by this ‘brave new world’ refuses to make an ultimate value judgement. The question he poses to himself and to his audience is not whether the
revolutions we are witnessing across the Western world are right or wrong, good or bad, because for him change is inevitable; rather, it is a matter of how the individual is to adapt, or better: what does adaptation mean in late modernity, and how is it related to the crisis of the subject?

Nevertheless, despite Antonioni's carefully nuanced, and sometimes optimistic, accounts of the reality encountered by the modern subject, Red Desert is, undeniably, a portrait of suffering subjectivity: the cinematic expression of 'a piece of reality that has come to grief' (Beardsworth 2004, 13). The film's drama revolves around the agonizing tribulations of a psyche confronted by a world which no longer makes sense, to which it is utterly unable to respond in a creative and non-pathological way. Giuliana, the central character of the film, 'lives through a profound crisis because of her inability to adapt to the modern world,' states Antonioni (1996, 285), just as, at one point in the film, she herself suggests her own inability to 'readjust to reality’. While, in general, his protagonists inhabit a seemingly desolate universe, are often unable to communicate or make meaningful connections with others, and are unable to adequately face the challenges of love, loss, and selfhood with which they are presented, for Giuliana, the attendant crises have reached a critical point. The very borders of her subjectivity appear to be on the verge of disintegration, of total collapse. Her psyche is, at times, overwhelmed by a threat that lacks a clear source: at once internal and external, it looms ominously in the mechanistic environment from which she is estranged, while at others, it seems to well up from inside, suggesting a flood of instinctual energies or passions that lack adequate channels for expression and containment. Interior and exterior landscapes are inextricably intertwined: this is what endows the forms and contours of the built environment with their menacing and often uncanny quality, and explains why Giuliana encounters them as traumatic and anxiety-provoking. Giuliana is unable to differentiate the two: self and world. She has no clear boundaries, but knows only a state of more or less pronounced continuity, experienced as alarming, even potentially annihilating. She is determined by a free-floating affect that colours the perception of her surroundings and openly penetrated by the flows, vibrations, and energies that emanate from her environment and easily contaminate the unbounded spaces of her psyche. Furthermore, Giuliana has profound difficulties with psychically distinguishing self from other, and as a result, her moments of isolation are experienced in the manner of a deeply painful, intolerable severance. Nevertheless, being with others fails to alleviate this sensation, as her awareness of physical separateness is only aggravated in their presence, and, indeed, togetherness comes with its own inherent danger: smothering suffocation, the total loss of any sense of individual identity, particularly in her sexual relationship.
What becomes apparent then is that *Red Desert* is about much more than a crisis of sensibility, that is, of how Giuliana perceives the world. It is not enough to say that she is an over-sensitive woman unable to come to terms with the passing of the old and the arrival of the new, in this case, a disenchanted world that is cold, alienating, and seemingly inhospitable. It is not enough to say that she simply needs to change her perspective—to see the beauty and possibilities that such a transformation holds. Rather, one must look deeper to see that, beyond the surface, what is really at stake is, in fact, a collective crisis of selfhood in a society which demands that we reinvent ourselves anew, without actually providing the coordinates to guide subjectivity formation and the supports for adequate psycho-sexual maturation. Lamentably, while the possibility of collectively reshaping our senses and learning to interact in and with the world in new ways appears to be a theoretical potentiality, given the right social resources and capacities, in reality, it remains a dream, or perhaps even becomes a nightmare— for while certain individuals manage to stay afloat, too many others flounder on their own.[What does ‘afloat’ mean here?] Giuliana is one of those who struggle with the inadequacy of the socio-symbolic order and her fragile inscription within it. She is unable to relate to others, to make sense of her world, and to find meaning in and through language and symbolic expression, and as such, suffers through the painful isolation of her afflicted soul.

As such, I would argue that the film poetically describes the devastating breakdown of both subjectivity and intersubjectivity in conditions of late modernity that Kristeva details through her own psychoanalytic account. Into Antonioni’s infamous statement ‘Eros is sick’, we can read Kristeva’s suggestion that Narcissus, our capacity for love and loss, separateness and idealization—the very foundation for our being with others—is in a state of serious affliction. As Sarah Beardsworth notes, it is from her extensive psychoanalytic experience with borderline patients that Kristeva has arrived at the conclusion that, collectively, we are faced with a narcissistic crisis that is tied to the breakdown of legitimacy, rationality, values, meaning, and authority that have accompanied the gradual disenchantment of world (2004, 11). The ‘tendential severance’ of the semiotic and the symbolic which Kristeva posits means that the non-verbal inscription of drives and affects have been cut off from ‘the life of signs’: in other words, language, and more generally, the symbolic, have been emptied of meaningful, affective registrations (Beardsworth 2004, 57). Institutions and discourses have failed to provide the subject with the adequate support and compensation required to fully individuate—to develop a clear sense of boundaries, of psychic containment. The developmental resources necessary for moving in and even beyond what Melanie Klein called the ‘depressive position’—that is, for learning to tolerate the loneliness of separation and an individual fate—are
lacking. Instead, the modern subject is beset by a melancholia, which has reached the level of a wide-spread social neurosis—one that impacts upon self-relation, other-relation, and world-relation, and poses grave difficulties for the constitution of subjectivity and the organization of agency, which 'depends upon a consciousness of its loss' (Beardsworth 2004, 10). We have, as Beardsworth suggests, lost the ability to lose— that capacity which sets in motion the metonymic movement of desire—and to creatively elaborate that loss in and through symbolization, that is, to name it, shape it, and give it meaning (2004, 96).

If, as Beardsworth argues, suffering is indeed 'the remnant of freedom' in a nihilistic modernity, this is because it is only in and through an act of resistance that subjectivity can be constituted 'out of otherness: a background of culture, language, and experience' (2004, 9). As William Arrowsmith so eloquently describes it:

At its simplest, Red Desert is ... a story of the emergence of the psyche in a time when individuation has become exceptionally difficult. This story is, for Antonioni, inherently tragic; any discrete gain in human awareness, any progress in becoming or remaining human, is won at the cost of considerable pain. Pain can kill individuals, or it can make them human ... [T]he protagonists ... must discover their humanity by improvising the courage to accept their necessary loneliness. (1995, 86)

As we shall see, the adaptation of which Antonioni speaks does not entail the seamless integration of the subject with his or her environment; it is, instead, a matter of coming to terms with our division in and through language and culture, what Jacques Lacan has called our fundamental mal-adaptation to reality, and of learning to bear the split, the alterity, that constitutes us as meaning-making beings. Ultimately, what this means is being present in the world, finding a way to participate that is not only meaningful, but also ethical.

Red Desert opens in a rather interesting manner. As the credits roll, the image in the background, an industrial scene, is conspicuously out-of-focus, strange mechanical noises mingle with the beautiful singing of an operatic voice, one that will return at a later point. For Peter Brunette, this initial sequence is highly suggestive of the 'profound crisis in vision that Antonioni is here exploring', as it functions 'to foreground the viewer's powerful hermeneutic desire to make coherent meaning out of a confused visual field' (1998, 92). Indeed, from the outset we are put in a position to identify with Giuliana: struggling to grasp the meaning of what is happening around us, to find a solid footing on unstable ground, to organise our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in a chaotic field. When the camera's focus sharpens, Giuliana comes into view, wandering with her young son,
Valerio, amongst piles of garbage, through what appears to be an industrial wasteland—dreary, grey, with towering smokestacks belching out a yellow smog. The air seems cold and atmosphereless, like a moonscape—a habitat unsuited to human livelihood. Giuliana's movements are animal-like, distracted, and frightened. We follow the protagonist as she enters the factory to see her husband, Ugo, a successful capitalist who, in contrast, is totally at ease in his surroundings, undisturbed when a large burst of steam envelops him or when a grating noise overpowers the sound of his own voice. He is well-adjusted, flat, inexpressive. There is clearly a distance between them, an impossible divide that separates their worlds, one from the other—he is unable to understand her, and she is unable to connect with him meaningfully. Ugo introduces his wife to another of the film's central characters, the handsome engineer, Corrado, who immediately takes an interest in her. Occupying a space somewhere between the two, his subjectivity is more borderline—not entirely unstable, not all that integrated. While he manages to cope fairly well with his environment, and to maintain a distinct sense of self, we will see later that he clearly questions the foundations of his action, searching for the bases of an ethical and meaningful subjecthood. As Giuliana leaves to return home, Ugo explains to Corrado that she is suffering from the shock from a car accident and is still not 'quite right' somehow. Yet, as Corrado seeks out her companionship, he gradually learns more from her about the incident—details which she has intentionally kept from Ugo—specifically that the collision with the truck was actually a suicide attempt, one that she will be tempted to repeat.

Giuliana begins to talk with Corrado only indirectly about her 'illness', her sense of angst, as she is unable to take up the first person in order to describe her feelings: 'Lacking a clear subject position, a fixed "I"—a structural necessity for narrating or even merely representing to herself her own life story—she must displace it onto another' (Brunette 1998, 106). She describes to him her sense of emotional confusion during the month she spent in the hospital ward following the accident through the use of the third person:

I met a girl ... A very sick girl ... who wanted everything. The doctor said, "You must learn to love. Love someone or something ... your husband, your son, a job, even a dog. But not husband, son, job, dog, tree, river." The floor seemed to give way. She had a feeling of sliding down an incline ... of going down ... of being always about to drown ... with no one to help.

From Giuliana's facial expressions and tone, it becomes clear that she is still grappling with these feelings of anxiety. She stands at the edge on an abyss at the bottom of which stretches a lethal ocean of affect. Her fragile
narcissistic defence—that indispensable ‘parry’ against emptiness and meaninglessness, of which Kristeva speaks—threatens to collapse under the pressure of instinctual energies. The structure of her subjectivity, her sense of individuality, of identity, is precarious; as she goes on to say, ‘By the time she left the hospital she was asking herself “Who am I?”’. Giuliana is unsure of her place within the social order, unsure of what she should do, say, or be. She is unable to choose between one thing or another, to commit herself to something, anything. Instead, she grasps toward a fullness that is always already lost. She wants everything to be a part of her, to hold the world inside. Yet her inability to lose, to accept the constitutional split that is the basis of differentiation, means that she is actually incapable of real love, feeling, desire in a world of particulars, of objects that are separate and distinct from the subject. At one point in the film, Giuliana, gazing out at the ocean, murmurs, ‘I can’t look at the sea for long and ... not lose interest in what happens on land’. She turns to Corrado to ask, desperately, ‘What should I use my eyes for?’, to which he responds, ‘You wonder what to look at. I wonder how to live. Same thing’. Giuliana is comforted by the sea’s lack of differentiation, its encompassing and enveloping qualities, while reality, by contrast, fills her with a sense of fear and sadness. She is paralysed, transfixed on a beyond, and therefore unable to organise her agency in everyday life as the precondition for a coherent and consistent sense of selfhood—the basis of an ethical subjectivity, pointed to by Corrado.

Giuliana is clearly psychologically troubled; yet, if she is beset by an illness, it is perhaps one that affects us all, at least to some degree. As already suggested, Giuliana is battling with the inner dramas of becoming, of learning to cope creatively with ‘the loneliness of an individual destiny’ (Arrowsmith 1995, 88). According to Kristeva, ‘psychoanalysis identifies and relates as an indispensable condition for autonomy a series of splittings...birth, weaning, separation, frustration, castration. Real, imaginary, or symbolic, those processes necessarily structure our individuation’ (1989, 132). The subject, whose ultimate longing is to return to a prelinguistic state of fusion with the (m)other, to a lost time before the painful divisions that have left her estranged from the world and alienated from herself, must nevertheless come to the realization that the fulfilment of such a desire is impossible. She must learn to accept the absolute and irreparable loss of the ‘Thing’, her archaic attachment to that “unnamable, supreme good” (Kristeva 1989, 14) of which she imagines she has been wrongfully deprived. It is around that emptiness that the earliest foundations of primary narcissism will be erected. Melancholia is, in some sense, an inevitable moment in the very constitution of selfhood; sadness, an outward, affective sign of severance from a state of continuity and non-differentiation which heralds the birth of the subject. In moving through the depressive...
position, interiority—the space of the imaginary—is demarcated: ‘Without a bent for melancholia there is no psyche’ (Kristeva 1989, 4). Ideally, it is within this space that signs will eventually spring forth, and the metonymic movement of desire—that drive toward others, toward objects—will be initiated. In consenting to give up a state of fullness, one acquires the gift of a proto-symbolization, and eventually attains an entire world of meaning. But, as Kristeva points out, there are some, particularly women, who remain in a suspended state of mourning for ‘the Thing’ whose loss they deny, a denial that ‘destroys meaning and leads the subject to commit suicide without anguish of disintegration, as a reuniting with archaic non-integration...“oceanic”’ (1989, 19).

Kristeva’s analysis of the melancholic, or what she sometimes refers to as ‘the depressed narcissist’ provides insight into Giuliana’s psychic disposition, and allows us to interpret some of her dreams and most intimate sentiments, to understand her oscillations between depression and anxiety. During an early sequence of the film, Giuliana awakens in the night, visibly distressed, as though from a nightmare. In a series of agitated gestures, she nervously surveys her surroundings, touches her face, reaches for a thermometer, as if seeking some kind of grounding or anchoring in reality. Still highly unsettled, flighty, she moves like a frightened animal through the home, an environment now perceived as having an uncanny character: architecturally, its lines and shapes take on an abstract quality, heightened by the ominous echo of strange and inhuman noises and the intense tonal quality of the scene. Her psychic state of extreme anxiety finds a visible expression in a shifting landscape that threatens to overwhelm and engulf her. The dimension of time is lost, dead, erased; we know not of its passing, of the minutes, the hours, that stretch on, before Ugo finds her, shaking, exhausted on a small bench on the landing, her eyes transfixed upon a distant and invisible horizon. Taking her in his arms, she recounts for him the disturbing vision: ‘I dreamt ... that I was in bed, and the bed moved. I looked. It was on quicksand ... and sinking ... deeper and deeper’. At the edge of this vision, the boundary of Giuliana’s subjectivity, the red desert looms, with its continuity of earth and sky, its dissolution of form—that non-demarcated, undifferentiated space-time from which each one came forth, and to which each one will return. [What is ‘each one’ here?] Indicative of both heaven and hell, it exudes the essence of a sacred devoid of any suggestion of transcendence, at once vital and devastating, exercising the fascinating appeal of the horrific to which Giuliana remains enthralled. The vision of the desert silently recalls the origins of interiority, of self-consciousness: on the level of the individual, the advent of psychic space, that moment when the primordial ego, the not yet ‘I’, is born out of a gap that interrupts the symbiotic continuity of the chora; while on the collective,
historical plane, the mythical emergence of humanity from the order of immanence, immediacy, and animality is invoked.

Kristeva suggests that the melancholic is 'riveted to the past ... the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience' (1989, 60). Her inner world is a desert in which time does not pass, as time is necessarily bound up with discourse and personal narration, with goal-oriented action: 'Massive, weighty, doubtless traumatic because laden with too much sorrow or too much joy, a moment blocks the horizon of depressive temporality or rather removes any horizon, any perspective' (Kristeva 1989, 60). The desert of which Giuliana dreams might be read as the 'real before the letter' of Lacanian thought: a primordial wilderness, before the advent of language, the institution of socio-symbolic order, and the inscription and demarcation of the body into zones. As Bruce Fink suggests,

the Lacanian real is without zones, subdivisions, localised highs and lows, or gaps and plentitudes: the real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric, woven in such a way as to be full everywhere ... smooth, seamless surface or space which applies as much to the child's body as to the whole universe. (1995, 24)

Symbolization, the precondition of self-consciousness, annihilates this real and creates a second order reality. It brings the world as we know it—the world as a product of language and thought—into existence. Still, though 'the letter kills', there is always a remainder—das Ding, 'the Thing' (Fink 1995, 24-5). This remainder is the gravitational centre around which the symbolic order orbits: yet, it is 'at the centre only in the sense that it is excluded' (Lacan 1986, 71). It is the primal narcissistic wound left by 'the prehistoric Other that is impossible to forget' (Lacan 1986, 46), but nevertheless, impossible to re-find, though we are doomed to try again and again. For Lacan, while this unsignifiable lack in/of the Other is necessary for the regulation of desire, an encounter with the kernel of the real is ultimately traumatic, anxiety-provoking: it 'functions to isolate the subject from reality' (1986, 46), to reveal the void at the foundation of subjectivity. Thus, for the subject, its appearance takes on the form of an uncanny signifier of death, of psychic annihilation and corporeal disintegration. Giuliana herself senses this menacing element of the real that lurks behind the surface of reality: 'There's something terrible about reality ... and I don't know what. Nobody tells me'.

Kristeva's observation on the psychic phenomena of 'borderline' subjects, perfectly epitomises Giuliana's experience of reality as dissociated, phantasmatic, dreamlike:

Dreams of borderline patients ... are often "abstract paintings" or cascades of sounds, intricacies of lines and fabrics, in which the analyst
deciphers the dissociation—or an non-integration—of psychic and somatic unity (Kristeva 1989: 27).

Hers is not a world of objects constituted for a subject—solid, material, permanent, stable; rather, it is an ephemeral constellation of mood and energy, vibration and intensity—a kaleidoscopic field comprised of patterns, shapes, and colours, in which temporary formations coalesce and disperse, in which boundaries blur, and the very ontological status of subject and object, the coordinates of everyday life, are questioned, even subverted. Giuliana fails to command her field of vision, as it is a stable subjectivation that guarantees the very appearance of things, their visibility, their meaning and coherence; instead, in the place of such a perceptual mastery, her sensory experience remains open to constant examination and doubt: the delineation of visual objects wavers, warps, fades, while often unidentifiable noises resonate without an apparent source. At times her eyes drift, her gaze gliding over the surface of the world, as though it were a non-demarcated, smooth, homogeneous surface, as though there were nothing to see; while at other moments, she is captivated by a particular image or sound that acquires an unwarranted gravity, a hyper-realization, that detaches it from any possible context and enables it to function as a floating signifier indicative of anxiety, of trauma. Much like the element of a dream, whose form is overdetermined by the primary processes of condensation and displacement, such visual or aural symptoms reveal the work of the unconscious not so well repressed, thereby offering a genuinely cinematic index of that which hovers at the limit place where fact becomes fiction, and vice versa.

As many film theorists have emphasised, Antonioni’s stylization is key to achieving this effect. He deliberately eschews realism in favour of an abstract expressionism able to articulate the vicissitudes of being-in-the-world, of being with others—the relational dimension of that which is formulated in the obscure space between bodies, subjects, and their environment. In Red Desert, it is colour, of course, which is central in this regard: it takes on a signifying function indicative of interaction, encounter, and catalytic transformation. It is featured throughout the film to render reality in ways not normally so accessible or direct—to make perceivable its more intangible aspects, such as qualities of feeling, mood, and sensation. 'Color', writes Arrowsmith, 'provides immediate psychic definition, which in turn guides and explains affinities, sympathy, antipathy, affection' (1995, 97)—affinities, like those between Giuliana and Corrado, who share certain questions, desires and doubts, and antipathies, like those between Ugo and his wife, whose worlds seem to be a whole spectrum apart. As Antonioni declares, the use of colour is not about providing a more realistic image of external reality—as objective, knowable, immediately given; rather, it is a
matter of capturing 'the feelings generated by the relationships between people and things', conveying that which emerges in-between the subject and its environment (1996, 283). He goes on to state: 'In Red Desert, I had to change the very face of reality, the color of the water, the roads, the landscapes, I had to paint them, with real paint and brush' (1996, 204). Colour is used artistically, to convey a sense of time and history, those subjective dimensions of experience that are often not sensible in the horizon of the present moment, nor on the surface of the visible.

What immediately comes to mind as the most clear example of the expressive quality of colour is the intense red that appears during Giuliana’s most heightened states of distress, and that gives the film its title. During and after emotionally charged situations—the sexually-suggestive cabin scene and the love scene that occurs in Corrado’s hotel room—the meaning-bearing capacity of the colour is highlighted; in its intensities, vibrations, rhythms, it is able to illustrate the threat for Giuliana of a passion tinged with danger, one which is equally the promise of pleasure and a harbinger of death: it comes to signify the flood of instinctual energies that threaten to overwhelm and temporarily annihilate her subjectivity. Red is anxiety-provoking, as are the strident, unnatural colours of her industrial environment, which, as Brunette points out, are 'abstractly beautiful and humanly alienating at the same time' (1998, 97). Giuliana seeks soft pastel tones, pale blues and earthy greens, with which she might have a harmonious relationship. In describing her choice of colours for her shop, she insists it is important that 'they should not disturb'. Likewise, in her fantasy scenario, the sandy pink flesh tones of the landscape suggest a seamless integration of body and world, in which she is completely contained—without opposition, alterity, or remainder. It is crucial to note, however, that colours are not unequivocal symbols, but must be read contextually, in reference to each other and to the subject: it is only in sharp contrast and through conversation that they signify. Red and pink, in this sense, exist dialectically, as light and shadow, proposition and negation: for if the latter bespeaks a state of continuity, fusion with the other, and unconditional love, it does so only in relation to a critical moment of negativity, that is, when effaced, eclipsed, by the eruption of the former, an intense blood colour that heralds the loss of self in the face of the desire of the other.

In Red Desert, things do not 'happen' as they might in a Hollywood film: what takes place are subtle changes, in tone, in intensity, in mood, and in perception itself, for what is really at stake cannot be represented directly. As Sam Rohdie emphasises, Antonioni is concerned with “what is unstable and at the 'interstices' of things, where things quiver and risk losing their identity ... and that equally wonderful moment when they come to take shape” (1990, 100). Indeed, it is in these in-between spaces that we
encounter points of crisis and angst, breakdowns, failed attempts at suicide and at love, and, at times, agonizing encounters with the eruption of a *real* that uncovers the yawning abyss at the very heart of the subject, a wound that resists suture—preventing her from becoming a closed system and leaving her gaping open toward the world.

The exigencies of this kind of artistic endeavour force Antonioni to invent suitable techniques to 'think and feel in genuinely cinematic terms' (Arrowsmith 1995, 86). In particular, commentators on *Red Desert* have highlighted his near total disregard for the established conventions of neorealism: Brunette, for instance, draws attention to Antonioni's use of shots that pan out and away from the characters to take in the landscape, the sky, and the contour of factories against the horizon. She also notes camera movements that, at times, linger almost too long, and in doing so, lose the narrative impulse, allowing the action and dialogue to deteriorate into a kind of *temps mort* that seems to stretch beyond the cinematic frame. Similarly, for Rohdie, it is in the instances in which the image loosens its attachment to the narrative and acquires an autonomy from its function within the text, that the fictional world is suspended: the spell of fantasy is broken (1990, 127-8). Decontextualised in this manner, familiar objects and things acquire a presence that is unsettling, uncanny: they seem to "*stare back at us*" (Rohdie 1990, 127, my emphasis). This recalls Lacan's notion of the gaze as signifier of the abyss: a momentary intervention of the traumatic Real that disrupts fantasy and 'reflects our own nothingness' (1981, 92). As Slavoj Žižek suggests, it is in the oscillation between lack and surplus of meaning, produced here by the framing of blank space, that the image is subjectivised, dispelling the veil of our narcissistic projections (1992, 91).

With disappearance there is a heightening of anxiety, and Antonioni's film, in holding presence and absence in an unresolved tension, constantly negotiates the ethereal zone between being and non-being, between collectivity, intersubjectivity and loss—the loss of meaning, of the subject, of the other, of the past. He captures the world in a state of dissolution—terrifying and sad. At various moments, human figures are completely enveloped by a cloud of steam, or disappear into a fog, endowing the sequence with a phantasmagoric quality that points to another dimension of reality, one fleeting, always in excess of symbolic representation:

By absorbing reality into images, by involving it in its fabric and patterns, reality begins to take on the same lightness of consistency, the weightlessness, the fragility and the rhythms of the images. (Rohdie 1990, 125)

Rohdie suggests that this framing produces the experience of a loss of perspective and of identity—perhaps even of desire—on the part of the
viewing audience, which functions to bring us in contact with nothingness, or, to use Lacanian terms, with that essential void, the lack-of-being, or groundlessness, around which our subjectivity is structured.

Abstraction, for Antonioni, is a process of trying to see and understand the world in new ways, and of dealing with characters who are likewise struggling to locate themselves in a changing environment. Above and beyond the questioning of identity, of the meaning of femininity and masculinity, of the traditional definitions of such roles as wife, mother, and lover, of the breakdown of hopes, dreams, goals and behavioural expectations attached to certain pre-constituted social subject positions in a modern capitalist society that we see in Red Desert, this film speaks to a much deeper, more profound, and 'general crisis in selfhood, or subjectivity' (Brunette 1998, 102). Giuliana, and to a lesser extent, Corrado, come up against the challenges of defining a psychic space, an interior that is stable and bounded, with the limited resources and capacities at their disposal. Individually, they each shoulder the responsibility of fashioning a subjectivity in a society that, as Kristeva describes it, fails to accompany the individual on that journey. They must, each in his or her own manner, find a way to organise agency in the face of irreconcilable otherness and alienation, at a time when there is no longer any faith that 'there is or can be such a thing as a more or less fixed self ... a core being around which temporary mood or attitudinal changes can come and go' (Brunette 1998, 103). For Brunette, the tragedy is not so much that Giuliana lacks an inner gyroscope, that centring and orientating device whose mechanisms Ugo proficiently demonstrates to their son, but rather that she ardently believes that it is possible to 'achieve the fixed and untroubled selfhood that everyone else around her seems to enjoy' (1998, 104), when at best she might hope to find a temporary balance and some points of consistency. Thus, in Giuliana's trials of individuation, we catch a glimpse of the crisis of the imaginary that Beardsworth highlights in Kristeva's work, a crisis which touches upon the narcissistic foundations of the subject in its most primal state, impacting its ability to recognise itself in the world and make genuine connections with others.

Antonioni challenges our capacities as meaning-making beings by taking us to the frayed edges where sense begins to deteriorate into nonsense, to that point at which the order of things, as ordained by the symbolic, and their very significance, as given by words and language, become subject to uncertainty. In doing so, we, as viewers, are able to identify with Giuliana's precarious subject position, one in which the intra-symbolic world falters, meaning verges on collapse, and existence itself becomes tenuous. Giuliana is faced with the existential dimension of the human condition: she must come to the painful realization that not only is each alone, but that
each is forever severed from nature, from her own nature, by virtue of her very humanity itself. Her story is a reminder that each of us, on the painful journey toward selfhood, must relinquish our attachment to that dream of a lost time, a state of oneness and non-differentiation, 'before being expelled from the garden and entering time and history, that is, before becoming human' (Arrowsmith 1995, 88). As Arrowsmith has emphasised:

The crucial task, for individuals and cultures alike, is to transform fantasy into myth ... The alternative is bad faith: to remain less than human, to deny responsibility for oneself and the world. (1995, 89)

It is only by affirming our being-in-the-world that we can become ethical subjects, that we can begin to address the question of how to live with others.

Giuliana’s story is hopeful, because in her we witness this subtle inner movement toward the dawning of selfhood. She makes a tiny, but nevertheless momentous, step forward, from a utopian vision of fullness and oceanic harmony toward the world, imperfect and incomplete as it is. We most clearly glimpse this movement in two key scenes of the film, which as of yet have not been discussed: her island fantasy, and the love scene with Corrado—two scenes so deeply interrelated that I would argue they can be adequately discussed only in conjunction with one another. The first is Giuliana's vision of paradise, told in her own words to her son whose demand for stories has exhausted her repertoire of conventional narratives: ‘Once there is a girl on an island, alone ...

Nature’s colours were so lovely, and there was no sound’. As she begins, the camera pans out and away to this mythical place, of blue sky and clear water, where we see a young girl living happily in tune with her surroundings—contained, sheltered, at peace. It is both an image of humanity on the verge of self-consciousness, before language and culture, and of the individual before her distinction from the (m)other. And yet, even within this dream, an image enters to rupture the self-contained harmony—a sailing ship on the horizon, 'one of those that braved the seas and the storms of this world', as she describes. It signifies that first encounter with outside, with the 'not I'—the unmanageable symbolic being of an other' (Beardsworth 2004, 68). This introduction of differentiation, of alterity, with its enigmatic allure, exercises a magnetic drawing and withdrawing presence that Kristeva calls 'primary idealization' (1983, 37). Here we see the narrative figuration of Corrado's unsettling arrival in Giuliana’s life, which, although the source of emotional confusion, thankfully sparks in her an interest in the outside world, and stirs up feelings of desire. Yet, as the girl tentatively swims out to meet the vessel, it withdraws, just as Corrado will inevitably leave to go to Patagonia, introducing presence and absence, loss and the capacity for letting go, into
her world. When the girl returns to the shore, slightly distressed, a mysterious, beautiful singing, without a source, becomes audible, and we recognise the haunting melody from the opening of the film. The girl wanders in search of it:

the voice was there ... Now near. Now far. Then it seemed to come from the sea, an inlet among the rocks, many rocks that ... she had never realised, looked like flesh. And the voice ... at that point ... was so sweet.

Valerio at this point intervenes, and the camera returns to the bedroom. 'Who was singing?' he asks, 'Everybody ... Everything', answers Giuliana, who is staring absent-mindedly out the window at a ship pulling out of the dock.

The flesh tones and rounded human form of the rocks are an anticipation of what is to come in the next scene. Giuliana, upon discovering that Valerio has been faking his illness, flees her home to find Corrado at his hotel room. 'Your son?' he asks. 'He doesn't need me. I need him', responds Giuliana, in a visible state of distress provoked by the painful awareness of her dependency on others, her fear of separation, and her inability to be alone. 'You don't love me do you?', she continues, 'I never get enough. Why do I always need other people? ... I'd like ... all the people who ever loved me ... here, around me ... like a wall'. She seeks out this protective wrapping within which she might dissolve, and yet at the same time resists it. Choking, gasping in anguish, Giuliana reaches for Corrado just as, with equal force and indecision, she pushes him away, trying to negotiate the conflict between her desire to fuse with him, to seek an erotic containment, and the annihilating threat that his desire poses to her fragile sense of subjectivity. As they make love, the image blurs ... the two become indistinguishable, and abstract angles of the bodies take on the appearance of the pink, speckled rocks of her fantasy. All goes quiet and the faint sound of waves becomes barely audible. When the camera's perspective returns, there is a still shot of the room awash in pink tones as though everything were coated in a thin layer of sand. However, this bliss is inevitably short lived. Giuliana's intuition that sexual union with Corrado will not save her has been confirmed. The real continues to intervene, to violently burst through her screens. She breaks from him, fleeing once again into the night. Yet, as she wanders the dark streets of Ravenna alone, the reality of the discontinuity of her life, of her pain and suffering, acts as an awakening. From wanting to remain 'a natural, unthinking, passive part of the seasons, the winds, the waters, "to be" and not "to know"' (Arrowsmith 1995, 87-8), she arrives at a fledgling sense of responsibility for herself. Standing before a large ship, with its temptation of escape to another land where she might 'be better off',
she resists such idealistic thoughts, and describes, more to herself than to the Turkish sailor who does not understand the Italian language, her new found realization: 'I'm not a single woman ... But, at times, I feel ... separated. The bodies ... are ... separated ... I have to think that all that happens to me ... is my life. That's it!'

Antonioni, in the end, brings us full circle. The last shot of Red Desert is a repetition of the first: Giuliana and Valerio wandering amidst factories and industrial refuse. This circularity, however, is beyond fixation and the eternal recurrence of the same. Everyday life has been restored to its dreary, yet quotidian proportions: there is any ordinary quality to it, nothing remarkable. The smokestacks no longer seem so immense, oppressive, and foreboding as they did in the opening sequence. The final piece of dialogue captures this subtle shift: pointing to the horizon, Valerio asks, 'Why is that smoke yellow? 'Because it's poisonous', answers his mother. 'Then, if a little bird flies through there, it dies!' he exclaims, to which Giuliana replies, 'By now the little birds know. They don't fly through there any more'. While, objectively speaking, the landscape is unaltered, something has definitively changed. Giuliana seems able to maintain a critical distance from her surroundings rather than being overwhelmed by them. She is able to interact in and with her world in a different way: as an individuated subject able to affirm her subjectivity and, to some extent, resist her conditions—that barrage of noises, colours, smells that once wore her down and utterly exhausted her sensory capacities. She maintains her ability to function, to act, to look after both her son and herself in the face of rapid transformations to both her landscape and her everyday life, in the midst of the passing of the old and the arrival of the unknown. The notion of adaptation here remains ambiguous, as the search for a harmonious re-integration between humans and their environment, between 'nature' and 'culture', is clearly dead-ended. Phillipe Van Haute emphasises the ontological dualism between the order of subjectivity, inscribed as it is within the symbolic order, and that of the body: the 'primordial Discord' which severs us from nature is also that which constitutes our humanity (2002, 288-9). Nevertheless, as he also hints at, the two are not entirely distinct orders, as embodiment and being-in-the-world are boundary concepts—the meeting place between psyche and soma, instinct and intellect, culture and nature, self and other. The important point, as Kristeva teaches us, is to find the right balance between the two, to reconnect the semiotic and symbolic, but not to collapse them, to maintain their dynamic state of tension rather than allowing one to be effaced by the other. Existence, beyond mere survival, becomes a matter of responding to and actively shaping one's inner and outer worlds, a process of affirmation and becoming. It is our self-formation in and through a transformation of the world. Such a re-making
of ourselves, including our sensory and perceptual capacities, and our environment is possible only when we remain open to the experience of otherness, of alterity, and even of alienation. Learning to accept and bear our humanity, and to take that extra step toward the creative elaboration of loss and separation, becomes the foundations of an ethical subjectivity—one fervently committed to others and to the world.
Bibliography

Antonioni, Michelangelo (1996) *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*. Eds. Carlo di Carlo and Giorgio Tinazzi. New York: Marsilio Publishers.

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

Beardsworth, Sara (2004) *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*. New York: SUNY Press.

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

Fink, Bruce (1995) *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kristeva, Julia (1983) *Tales of Love*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, Julia (1989) *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lacan, Jacques (1981) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton & Co

Lacan, Jacques (1986) *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Dennis Porter. London: Routledge.

Rohdie, Sam (1990) *Antonioni*. London: BFI Publishing.

Van Haute, Phillipe (2002) *Against Adaptation: Lacan’s “Subversion” of the Subject*. Trans. Paul Crowe and Miranda Vankerk. New York: Other Press.

Žižek, Slavoj (1992) *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Filmography

Antonioni, Michelangelo (1964) *Red Desert (Il Deserto Rosso)*. Italy.