

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SEMINAR ON FILM

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April 1–7, 1977

FUNCTION OF COLOR AND COMPOSITION IN ANTONIONI'S *RED DESERT*

Since my presentation will be based on a methodology known as Close Cinematic Analysis, it would be useful for the participants of the Seminar to obtain at least general information about this method of analyzing films.

Close Cinematic Analysis is a methodology primarily concerned with the specific cinematic structure of each separate film. The film structure, of course, consists of both formal and contextual elements. The „ingrediants“ of a film's structure must be the *sole* material and the *only* source of „reading“ the film's meaning and judging its aesthetic value. The analyst's previous knowledge of other information related to the film is something which varies from one individual to another and, though such a knowledge may have considerable impact on each person's final interpretation and evaluation of a film, it definitely ought not to be consciously considered as an intrinsic components of the film's own structure. We must admit that the film structure exists *per se* and therefore has to be analyzed in a scholarly way and *on its own terms*, apart from any historical, ideological, thematic or semiological study of the film. These extra-cinematic approaches, of course, can be executed for their own purposes and may be useful for various disciplines outside of cinematic analysis.

The film structure, in general, consists of many and various elements and components, including specific *filmic devices* (such as zoom, mise-en-shot, traveling, depth of focus, montage, change of points of view, sync-sound, etc.), *devices borrowed from other arts* (such as acting, mise-en-scene, decor, music, color composition, etc.) and *narrative devices* (such as plot development, characters, dialogue, commentary, etc.). From this one concludes that if a film contains ore specifically cinematic devices it must be more cinematic in its overall impact. But, this often is not so, because of the crucial point is *how* these devices are related to others and integrated among themselves. Hence, perfect dialogue and impeccable story line, it can be successful as such, but still not be cinematic. Clearly, the greatest cinematic achievements include and integrate all of these elements and components in the most appropriate manner, creating a new specific cinematic whole.

In practice, Close Cinematic Analysis anatomizes a film or its sequences into basic units, that is, into shots or autonomous segments. This is intended to facilitate the scrutiny of every aspect of these units in the most munute way. The notification of all the data discovered in the unit is done in the form of a shot-by-shot or foot-by-foot breakdown, accompanied by frame enlargements (stills)

taken from each shot or located in the long take whenever the shot composition changes sufficiently to form another unit. The execution of such a breakdown is not merely the academic procedure of a systematic research. The notification forces the students to clearly (closely) see all the details of a shot composition and to become aware of the way in which they function in the process of the narrative development. All these details are impossible to perceive in the course of a regular screening since some of the units last less than a second (composed of only few frames) or are hidden by other components and often affect the viewer on a subliminal level. Therefore, it is important that the breakdown closely describe all the cinematic devices and structural elements of the film as the filmmaker used them in constructing his work. Once having described and systematized them on paper and accompanied by frame enlargements, the analyst may begin to study their interrelationship in order to determine how all the elements are related among themselves and why they are put into such a specific order, unity or disunity thus creating a particular rhythm, space, time, transitions, and, of course, contextual continuity. This lead him to the most important stage of Close Cinematic Analysis, called CINEMATIC INTEGRATION, aimed at discovering the *degree* and *type* to which all the existent components are integrated on all levels to form a specific structure conveying a certain meaning.

Bearing in mind that no other medium of expression involves so many and so divergent elements and components, CINEMATIC INTEGRATION becomes the most essential step in establishing the criterion according to which the analyst can make his own judgements about the aesthetic value of a film or a sequence. Understanding and defining the level and type of cinematic integration is the cognitive process by which it is possible to discern the strategy of a filmmaker and define the style of a film. After all these stages of close cinematic analysis are executed, the analyst can formulate his personal interpretation or „reading“ and state his own aesthetic evaluation of a film or sequence. Thus, his interpretation and aesthetic judgement will be justified and documented systematically, which, at the same time, will reduce the impressionistic and subjective aspects of his analysis.

It goes about without saying that the Close Cinematic Analysis can be successfully done only if one possesses prints of good quality available for long periods of study, together with the necessary technical equipment, such as an „Athena“ analyst projector, a „Steenback“ editing table, and a special camera which permits the making of frame enlargements and slides. It is also understood that the films should be seen many times in their entirety before any stage of close analysis begins.

If used properly and systematically, this methodology can help students of both film theory/criticism and filmmaking to understand the inner structure of a film and discern the creative

process of the director by which he conceived and realized his work. By close cinematic analysis students become aware of all the stylistic features which make a film significant as a work of cinema.

Finally, I want to emphasize, that – due to time limitations – my discussion of *Red Desert* will embrace only two aspects of the film's complex cinematic structure, i.e. it will focus on the problem of shot-composition and the relationship of colors which Antonioni used to convey the content as well as his comment on the subject treated in his film.