

***Cinema – Painting: Antonioni,
Turner, Rothko, de Chirico***

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Statement

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled "Cinema – Painting: Antonioni, Turner, Rothko, de Chirico" has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and that it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Cinema – Painting: Antonioni, Turner, Rothko, de Chirico

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore Antonioni's artistic process and the ways in which his visual vocabulary has been inspired by particular paintings of Turner, Rothko and de Chirico. Although Antonioni expressed himself through the medium of cinema, and these three artists were painters, their philosophical, visual and symbolic languages are strikingly similar. It is the purpose of this study to explore the very close connections between Antonioni's filmmaking and the artworks of these three painters.

Antonioni's visual expression relies on themes, designs, colours and motifs that are similar to those found in specific paintings by Turner, Rothko and de Chirico. This thesis links three of Antonioni's films: *The Eclipse* (1962), *Red Desert* (1964) and *The Adventure* (1960) to the work of these three painters, for whom Antonioni had great admiration. The thesis also explores the similarities between Antonioni's own paintings, collected in *The Enchanted Mountains* and *Silence in Color* and his film *Blow-Up* (1966).

Comparing Turner's, Rothko's and de Chirico's paintings with Antonioni's filmmaking serves to reveal a similarity in compositional style, themes, framing and the use of colours, although in his films Antonioni never cited or replicated any specific art works of these three painters. In the film *The Eclipse*, there are many scenes reminiscent of de Chirico's paintings, while in *Red Desert* and in *The Adventure*, some shots and scenes resemble Rothko's and Turner's pictorial images. This thesis' analyses of the paintings

presented in *The Enchanted Mountains* and the *Silence in Color* show how Antonioni's own pictorial style and compositions in these artworks herald those he used in the film *Blow-Up*.

The significance of this research stems from applying the reading of paintings to cinema and vice versa. The thesis treats painting as an art that both complements and becomes an integral part of cinema, an art that creates a new visual textual territory that needs to be analysed and explored. This dissertation demonstrates that cinema and painting should not be regarded as separate entities but rather as an example of continuity and exchange between two media forms, a fusion that leads us to explore and better understand a crucial dimension of Antonioni's artistry.

Contents

<i>Statement</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter I – Critical Accounts of Antonioni’s Cinema and Painting</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Chapter II – The Adventure and Turner’s Art</i>	<i>80</i>
• <i>Light</i>	<i>84</i>
• <i>Water</i>	<i>98</i>
• <i>Time</i>	<i>106</i>
• <i>Geometry/Architecture</i>	<i>125</i>
• <i>Abstraction</i>	<i>140</i>
• <i>Myth</i>	<i>155</i>
• <i>The Sublime</i>	<i>175</i>
<i>Chapter III – Red Desert and Rothko’s Art</i>	<i>203</i>
• <i>Light and Colour</i>	<i>212</i>
• <i>Abstract Reality</i>	<i>230</i>
• <i>Myth</i>	<i>247</i>
• <i>The Tragic Notion of the Image</i>	<i>268</i>
• <i>Drama/De-dramatisation</i>	<i>290</i>
• <i>Architecture</i>	<i>302</i>
<i>Chapter IV – The Enigma of the Hour: The Eclipse and de Chirico’s Art</i>	<i>325</i>
• <i>Human Tragedy</i>	<i>342</i>
• <i>Still Life</i>	<i>357</i>
• <i>Time</i>	<i>372</i>

• <i>Myth</i>	385
• <i>Architecture</i>	393
• <i>Geometry</i>	405
• <i>Framing</i>	412
<i>Chapter V – Blow-Up and Antonioni’s Paintings</i>	420
<i>Conclusion</i>	504
<i>Appendix I – Rothko’s Houston Chapel</i>	512
<i>Appendix II – Coda: Putting Myself in the Picture: Cultural Tourism and Antonioni’s Art</i>	536
<i>Filmography</i>	556
<i>List of Figures</i>	557
<i>Works Consulted and Cited</i>	575
<i>Works Consulted but not Cited</i>	587

Acknowledgements

In the *London Review of Books*, T.J. Clark's article, 'The Chill of Disillusion' (5 January 2012, p. 6), concerning a Leonardo Da Vinci exhibition on at the National Gallery in London, begins:

In the middle room of the Leonardo show at the National Gallery you can swivel on one heel and see, almost simultaneously, the two versions of his *Virgin of the Rocks*. They face one another across 15 yards or so. There is no reason to think the two paintings will ever share the same space again, at least in my lifetime, and maybe they never have before. For the longer one looks at the pictures and puzzles over what scholars have to say about the scrappy documents that mention them, the less likely it seems that Leonardo painted the one in sight of the other.

Clark's book, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006) recorded the circumstances under which, in early 2000, he had repeatedly visited the Getty Museum in California to look closely at two Poussin paintings hung in one room, returning at different times of the day to see what effect those changes in light had on his experience of the paintings. The paintings were 'Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake' (National Gallery, London) and 'Landscape with a Calm' and, as amazonbooks explains,

Clark found himself returning to the gallery to look at these paintings morning after morning, and almost involuntarily he began to record his shifting responses in a notebook. The result is a riveting analysis of the two landscapes and their different views of life and death, but more, a chronicle of an investigation into the very nature of visual complexity. Clark's meditations – sometimes directly personal, sometimes speaking to the wider politics of our present image-world – track the experience of viewing art through all its real-life twists and turns.

The contexts described in these two situations (one in 2000, the other in 2012) recall some of John Berger's meticulous, and poetic, descriptions of his encounters with specific artworks in specific gallery contexts. The following quotations give some indication of Berger's long-established method of examining, understanding and explaining artworks, "Paintings are static. The uniqueness of the experience of looking at a painting repeatedly – over a period of days or years – is that, in the midst of flux, the

image remains changeless. Of course the significance of the image may change, as a result of either historical or personal events, but what is depicted is unchanging.”¹

In an essay collected in Berger’s *The Shape of a Pocket*, we find him writing about the paradox embodied in the late Rembrandt self-portraits: “they are clearly about old age, yet they address the future. They assume something coming toward them apart from Death.”² This prompts his recollection of twenty years earlier finding himself in front of one of them in the Frick Gallery in New York and writing a poem. On another occasion in this collection he is in the church of St Eustace in Paris - “Visiting the church today you find in one of its chapels something between a sculpture, a fresco, and a high relief”³ - and proceeds to discuss it. In *About Looking*, one chapter tells of Berger’s encounter with Seker Ahmet Pasa’s *Woodcutter in the Forest*: “After going back to the museum in Besiktas, several times to look at the picture, I began to understand more fully why it interested me. Why it haunts me I only understood later.”⁴ Berger then relates the “colours, the paint texture, the tonality”⁵ of this painting to works by Rousseau, Courbet and Diaz.

Well, we can say (while noting also in passing that Berger refers to the “percipient and subtle research on Courbet” by “Timothy” Clark, known to us here as “T. J. Clark”)⁶ that both Berger and Clark take for granted that artworks should be seen in person and in situ. The wonderful writing of these two men, and the writing of all art history scholars, works from this assumption.

¹ J. Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, Vintage, New York, 1991, p. 25.

² J. Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 2003, p. 115.

³ Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, p. 149.

⁴ J. Berger, *About Looking*, Writers and Readers, London, and Pantheon, New York, 1980, pp. 79-80.

⁵ Berger, *About Looking*, p. 80.

⁶ Berger, *About Looking*, p. 145.

In 2008, Macquarie University funded a research trip that enabled me to see the exhibition “Turner to Monet” at the National Gallery in Canberra. I also travelled to New York and Washington to see Rothko’s paintings (and those of many other artists). I am especially grateful to Sue Jennings, a friend of mine, who helped fund this crucial research trip after Macquarie University declined to do so. As indicated above in the comments from Clark and Berger, I cannot stress enough the importance of viewing artworks in situ and the importance of universities providing funding to students to enable them to engage in such research, especially after the University has agreed to the thesis topic in question.

I have always loved visual arts, cinema certainly but painting even more, and this thesis has provided me with the opportunity to link both of these art forms. Through the years of this doctoral study I have been able to express my passion for painting and cinema and I have learned a great deal about research and writing.

This thesis represents a milestone in my personal achievements. When I enrolled in 2007 as a part-time PhD student I was given eight years to complete; it sounded like an eternity. Working full time and writing a doctorate by night in a second language have been enormous challenges but ones I think I have conquered.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the support of Macquarie University library, in particular their Document Delivery service, which helped me to find research materials (books and journal articles) both nationally and internationally. Several people have helped me in many different ways throughout this doctoral journey. They have provided me with insights that have influenced the idea and organisation of this thesis.

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