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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | CRITICAL ESSAY

L'Avventura: Emotions, engagement and inconclusiveness of an experimental plot

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Abstract: This article examines Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* offering a new discussion of its narrative value, exploring the role of emotions and cognition in narrative, and their interaction. We believe the results of this study could reshape the current understanding of the film's main aesthetic properties. We agree with some of the main characteristics outlined previously by scholars and critics, regarding not only the film's plot structure but also its main stylistic features. In our view, the different hypotheses that spectators may be encouraged to formulate while watching the film are central to their aesthetic and critical experience. Our analysis of the whole set of narrative disruptions points to the conclusion that films achieves a convergence and interaction between the elicitation of active aesthetic reflection and the elicitation of active social reflection in a way that had never been done before.

Subjects: Philosophy of Art & Aesthetics; Cinematography; Visual Arts

Keywords: Antonioni; *Sventura*; emotions; aesthetics; narration

1. Introduction

One of the most influential Italian essays of the last century, Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta (The Open Work)*, appeared in 1962, months after the premiere of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

L'Avventura is one of the most acclaimed works of Italian cinema, both for its innovative qualities and for its ability to captivate the spectator with beautiful images of Mediterranean natural landscapes and highly original dramatic moments.

This article draws on the latest concepts in contemporary film theory to offer a new explanation of the film's emotional impact and provocation of cognitive activity as aesthetic features that enable the spectator to better evaluate and appreciate it. Special attention is given to a precise understanding of the narrative role of nature in the film on the one hand, and, on the other, how the narrative structure is constructed in a manner that takes into account that the spectator will be emotionally and morally assessing the two protagonists through a subtle game of nuances.

Eco interpreted Antonioni's film as a groundbreaking and at the same time highly expressive work of art of that time, focusing on its innovative main plotline:

If it lacks a plot, it is because the director wanted to provoke a feeling of suspension, of indeterminateness, in his audience—because he wanted to frustrate their 'romantic' expectations and plunge them into a fiction (in itself, already a filtered life) that would force them to find their way amid all sorts of intellectual and moral dilemmas. (Eco, 1989, pp. 116)

In 1985, Seymour Chatman devoted a significant part of his book *Antonioni, or, The Surface of the World* to *L'avventura*. According to Chatman (1985), the central opposition between a contingent and a causal plot is what defines Antonioni's narrative style in this film. Eco and Chatman each hit upon a highly interesting insight, pursued by Cuccu (1973) and other scholars such as Nowell-Smith (1997), who have used the plot as a key aspect for defining the film's innovative nature, although in our opinion this idea has not been sufficiently explored.

This article will propose a plot-oriented study too, offering a new discussion of its narrative nature, exploring the role of emotions and cognition in narrative, and their interaction, in the sense David Bordwell uses to define it: "[s]torytelling—or, more technically, 'narration'—is the process by which an artwork selects, arranges, and renders its narrative information in order to stimulate the perceiver to perform cognitive activities" (Bordwell, 1985, p. xi). But why adopt such a perspective now, more than half a century after *L'Avventura* was first released? What kind of benefits could it offer, after so many studies of the film?

The objective of this study is to reshape the current understanding of the film's main aesthetic properties. We agree with some of the main characteristics outlined previously by scholars and critics, regarding not only the film's plot structure but also its main stylistic features: "rupture of the balance between the human figure and the landscape in the framing, imbalance between the speech and the noise level on the soundtrack, the break in continuity of space, time and action in the sequence" (Vitella, 2010, p. 221)¹; its refined social criticism: "And as social framing, *L'Avventura* is flawless. There is also a South, an inferno of underdevelopment in comparison with the inferno of wellbeing, which is the more 'real' and impressive South than has been shown up to now on the screen, without a hint of populist collusion" (Calvino, 1961, pp. 33–34)²; and its capacity to anticipate changes in society: "[b]y breaking the oppressive rule of established *langue*, deception, and indoctrination over the minds and bodies of human subjects through a revolution in perception, Antonioni's rupture with the continuum of domination and dominant forms may mark it as a discourse that can anticipate socio-sexual transformation" (Tomasulo & Grant, 2009, p. 18).

Indeed, the main reason for taking this approach is the opportunity it offers to explore the mechanisms underlying some of the main innovative features, some of which have been detected and mentioned by other scholars, but not explored in detail, while others have not yet been addressed at all. We will provide a more detailed image of what narrative implies, and therefore we will offer new perspectives that may be understood at not only complementary but also alternative ways to appreciate the film's aesthetic qualities. For example, Ana Melendo, has provided one of the most extensive analyses of the original features of the film, refers to criteria identified by Bordwell like order and temporality, to define the absence of flashbacks as a non-classical trait (Melendo, 2010, p. 92); and primal effect, to highlight that the film's lack of explanation for Anna's disappearance is a non-classical effect (Melendo, 2010, p. 12), or to explain how Antonioni subverts the concept of filmic space as narrative space (Melendo, 2010, p. 23), or that the psychological causality of the actions of characters is a main driving force behind the evolution of narratives (Melendo, 2010, p. 60).³ The perspective offered here won't contradict these ideas, but will explain more precisely how the film can be considered innovative and disruptive.

The main hypothesis we will test in this article is that there are two key aspects which, if examined from a cognitive perspective, may result in a new aesthetic understanding of the film.

The first of such central question is the film's way of understanding nature, portrayed in the movie in sequences VI–XIII filmed in Lisca Bianca, which many critics and scholars of Antonioni's work, as for example Tinazzi, Melendo and Font consider a key element of the film's value. Images of nature have a fascinating visual power and can lead viewers to a reflective attitude that may separate them even from the flow of the narrative. However, we would not conclude from this that there is an opposition between nature as it has been filmed in *L'Avventura* and narration, as has been suggested by Tinazzi and other authors (Tinazzi, 2002, p. 130; Melendo, 2010, p. 180 ss.). For example, Rosalind Galt (2012) relates the Lisca Bianca landscapes to the picturesque tradition, thus highlighting the political value of Antonioni's aesthetics with her suggestion that the film presents class tensions in the manner of British and Italian pictorial traditions. As an alternative to such approaches, our particular interest is to show how Antonioni makes use of nature narratively in a range of ways that may constitute one of the main aesthetic traits of the film.

The second key aspect we introduce is the relationship between character engagement and plot development of the film. We will describe specifically how the basic strategy employed by Antonioni relates to the core narrative feature of character engagement, and that this needs to be considered among the most innovative aspects of the film, the one that allows us to describe precisely its most characteristic narrational feature: the creation of a new form of plot twist. We will follow Font's suggestion, when he pointed to this as an aspect worthy of further study (Font, 2003, p. 136).

The two main results are as follows: firstly, the description of the use of nature on a profoundly narrative level to dramatically express the first major hypothesis related to the main event in the first part of the film, Anna's disappearance; and secondly, the detection of a strategy of gradually introducing the plot twist in a meticulous process that seeks to naturalize it. The key to this unique narrative development is a set of nuanced variations in the emotional cues that define the spectator's relationship with Sandro and Claudia during the second part of the film.

2. Methodology

The main methodological strategy used in this article is a close text analysis of the film's narrative structures. Following the segmentation of the film proposed by F. Vitella, we have analysed each of the 28 sequences of *L'Avventura* using a specific set of tools selected for their efficiency to serve for the detection of the emotions and cognitive activity elicited by the film. First of all, the concepts that relate the experience of watching a film with cognitive activity that may be pertinent in the context of art films; secondly, the concepts provided by the theory of sympathy. After analysing the whole film, we selected the group of fragments that serve best to understand its specific aesthetic properties. We describe the content of various selected moments of the narrative and offer a concise presentation of the emotional and cognitive effect we ascribe to each one, following the model of film narrative analysis proposed by David Bordwell and developed by other authors cited in the following section. This approach served to formulate the first version of the hypothesis mentioned above. Finally, we refined our hypothesis by means of an extensive review of the scientific literature on the topic studied here.

3. Theoretical background

Although relevant scholars of the first and second generations of cognitive film studies, such as David Bordwell, Noël Carroll and Torben Grodal, or Gregg M. Smith, Carl Plantinga and Murray Smith, have demonstrated a knowledge of and an interest in non-classical and experimental film narratives, Hollywood cinema has provided the main field of research for identifying and analysing the basic catalogue of emotional and cognitive responses related to narration.⁴ In contrast, it would seem that "art cinema" and experimental films produce distanced narratives, in which appealing emotionally to spectators is far from a priority, or that the key mechanisms of cognitive

film theory are not sufficient to describe such narratives. This perspective has been supported by different film theorists, who have even criticized some cognitive attempts to explore “art films”. Take, for example, Daniel Frampton on Bordwell’s concept of “parametric narration”.⁵

However, art cinema is a vast and heterogeneous field, in which counterexamples to the prejudices of intellectualism are easy to find. Consider, for example, Alexander Sokurov, one of the more experimental filmmakers, and one of his most remarkable films, *Mother and Son*, where the role of emotional engagement cannot be separated from the film’s experimental and poetical features. It is true that because of this great diversity it will be impossible to identify overarching regularities in the ways emotions are elicited in art cinema like those detected, for example, in Plantinga’s or Berliner’s explorations of Hollywood products (2009 and 2010 respectively). But this does not mean that these films are any less successful in orienting the responses of spectators than Hollywood productions. After all, cannot elaborate rational outcomes be related to emotions? It is our view that many art films are very good at orienting a sequence of responses in spectators, many times with critical purposes, and this happens not only in the cognitive sense, but emotionally too. In fact, it seems that this point of view is redirecting the interest towards more complex narratives, and recent studies show a new sensibility for art films and their capacity to contribute to the formulation of new theoretical schemes, as we will see below.⁶

In different studies of Antonioni’s films, especially those devoted to his “trilogy on modernity”, his work is viewed as a sharp image of human feeling in the age of modernity (Tomasulo, 1986; Vitella, 2010). However, no study to date has placed the focus on the relationship between Antonioni’s critical depiction of character emotions and the strategies he uses to elicit viewer emotions in his films. We will focus on exploring Antonioni’s innovative way of structuring emotional responses and how this is linked to the ways the film stimulates evaluative and critical perspectives on social issues that are very clearly defined in critical approaches to the film. First of all, because our analysis here is a “plot-oriented” analysis, it will focus above all on exploring how plot and character engagement are intertwined. To support this task, we will rely mainly on the concept of the “structure of sympathy” outlined by Murray Smith in his seminal book *Engaging Characters*, a system for analysis of characters to better define the relationship between on screen characters and audiences. Secondly, our analysis has been inspired on the one hand by Keith Oatley’s proposal of a third way of eliciting emotions, which goes beyond the more conventional plot-dependent structuring of spectator responses: “Film, then, in the mode of identification and empathy, is no longer carried just by temporal sequences of events: This happened and then that. It can be carried by a suggested progression through a series of the audience member’s emotions. It’s in this way that the emotional progression of the audience member can overcome the plot in the dialectical relation between them” (Oatley, 2013, p. 279). Indeed, we believe that the processes related to empathy are key to defining the narrative challenges that *L’Avventura* poses for the spectator, particularly with regard to Sandro and Claudia’s narrative evolution, and Oatley’s suggestion of a “third narrative mode” offers a theoretical background of special value for our study, as emotions are not viewed only as resulting from the plot but also as cues that can guide the spectator out of that plot. We will explore all this in depth in sequences V, VII, VIII, IX, X and XII.

Finally, another important point of reference for us has been the recent development of Todd Berliner’s theory, outlined some years ago in *Hollywood Incoherent*. In this book, which was devoted to the films of the 1970s, Berliner focused on incoherence as an aesthetic problem. In a more recent essay, this emerges as a necessary concept in order to fully explain the complexity and incoherence of the films of the last two decades, by directors like Nolan, Scorsese or Amenabar. Thus, he defends the plot twist and other substantial incoherencies as cognitive challenges that in most cases enhance the aesthetic value of the film: “Hollywood narration, however, employs disunifying elements that heighten aesthetic pleasure. Artworks that merely present stories—without stimulating perceivers to construct stories—give perceivers nothing to do. Elements that interfere with narrative unity intensify the story construction process by making the

effort more athletic: the more interference, the more mental activity required to unify a story. Such elements make an artwork more challenging and also, as we shall see, increase its potential to exhilarate our aesthetic response” (Berliner, 2013, p. 199). The main part of our narrative analysis, from the exploration of the cues associated with nature in sequence VII up to the characterization of the plot divergence through its winding and complex development, involves the identification of passages where the film can be characterized as eliciting a major cognitive response from spectators. In our view, the different hypotheses that spectators may be encouraged to formulate while watching the film are central to their aesthetic and critical experience.

4. Contrasts: or how a plot emerges on *Lisca Bianca*

One of the most common perspectives on the specific narrative form of *L'avventura* was introduced by Antonioni himself, when he remarked that “*L'avventura* è un film giallo fatto a rovescio”, a view subsequently disseminated by Fink (1963). Federico Vitella has pointed out the meaning and main consequences of this view during the production of the film:

What an Italian producer in the late 1950s obviously could not approve was the disappearance of the female lead in the middle of the story: an insane idea, in fact. But the truth is that the problem was not so much the fact that the protagonist disappears, but that after her disappearance the narrative should turn its attention away from her to other events and other characters, leaving the spectator without a conclusive explanation. Thus, the problem is not the mystery itself, but the fact that the mystery is never solved. (Vitella, 2010, p. 82)⁷

Vitella reveals Antonioni’s main artistic strategy: he departs from a classical structure by changing its central mechanism. Obviously, the *giallo* structure corresponds to the initial main plot of the film: Anna’s disappearance on *Lisca Bianca* and the subsequent search for her. A classical thriller structure like this usually introduces a clear focalization of the spectator’s attention and intensifies the emotional attachment to the story. In fact, Antonioni captures the attention of the spectator through an event typical of classical cinema: Anna’s unpredictable and mysterious disappearance. Subsequently, there are different cues which, in a not unclassical way, structure and determine the emotional power of the plot, guiding the attention of the spectator to the different activities undertaken by characters in search of Anna. At the same time, however, there are processes conceived in order to create a contrast with the cues related to the search for Anna. Antonioni combines the cues that structure the emotional search for Anna with moments of incongruity. In this section, we will describe the first act of the film as a complex system of contrasts, based on incongruences related to the emotions brought into play in a classical narrative structure.

First of all, almost the whole group involved in the search for Anna is introduced in an unusual way, at least for a *giallo* structure. In the conventional thriller narrative, the spectator is prepared for the main event by means of a double sympathy/empathy structure, induced to feel sympathy for the missing character, elicited through her positive traits, as happens in *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) or *Gone Girl* (David Fincher, 2014), while also led to an empathetic engagement with the characters searching for her, whereby spectators follow the search from the perspectives of those characters, increasing their emotional participation in it, as happens in *Frantic* (Roman Polansky, 1988).

However, on the one hand, Anna is not characterized positively, and on the other (and this is the most important aspect here due to the presence of the group), the search for her is not given a narrative shape that could stimulate the adoption of more engaged attitudes towards the central event of Anna’s disappearance. Right after the film’s introduction, a group of rich people travel by boat to the island of *Lisca Bianca*. This group constitutes a sort of chorus of similar characterizations: the capricious and obnoxious attitude with which Raymond, waking from his nap, pushes the dog away and curses it; Patrizia’s smug and silly comment, “I’ve never understood the islands, with all that sea surrounding them, poor things”; the shallow outlook expressed in Giulia’s comments, and the cruelty with which Corrado responds to his wife whenever she speaks. Practically all

characters are depicted negatively as capricious, unreasonable, inconsistent, or superficial. This homogeneous introduction of characters may be considered as a means of arousing rejection or antipathy in the viewer.

Antonioni, however, not only initiates this negative characterization as an unorthodox introduction to the dramatic development that is to follow but also develops it in a very singular way: there is an extended strategy of shots where characters appear surrounded by the stunning natural beauty of the Aeolian Islands, presented mainly during the sequences V–VII. On the one hand, the viewer cannot ignore the exhilaration of the natural setting. On the other, the constant presence of nature acts as an emotional counterpoint that increases the negative evaluation of these characters, insofar as it provokes a further reflection on their banality. In this way, Antonioni develops the aesthetic contrast as an original narrative feature capable of arousing conflicting emotions in the viewer and prompting reflection, since it is difficult to escape the idea that the characters are out of place in this mysterious volcanic landscape.⁸ Thus, our hypothesis is that the spectator is being encouraged to make a social critique by means of a unique structure supported by the contrast between nature and the human figures, quite distinct from the idea posited by Font that characters and landscape form a kind of dark unity (2003, p. 136). How does this kind of cognitive process take place? Film scholars have not yet explored much about the way in which films elicit reflective responses. One of the few articles on this question, even if it focuses on the production of self-reflection, points out a kind of phenomenon we can also detect here (Bruun Vaage, 2009): the so-called “arresting images”, images that occur when the film seems to stop to offer a singular shot (Klinger, 2006, p. 24). A new type of shot is presented with the arrival of the boat at the island: first, nature appears isolated for few seconds, and then a character enters the frame. In this way, the spectator’s attention is focused on nature long enough to reflect on it, then suddenly relate that reflection to a character, who usually appears far from the conventional scale of shots.⁹

Our analysis of the inverted *giallo* structure now comes to the main event, in which Anna disappears and the group members who arrived together on Lisca Bianca start the search for her. Here, as the backdrop to her disappearance, nature takes on a new role associated with the development of the main plot. The complexity of this experimental combination creates an extraordinarily original dual interaction between nature and plot engagement. Of importance here is the role played by alignment with the characters of Sandro and Claudia during the main event. Murray Smith defines this concept as a process conveyed by “... two interlocking functions, spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access ...” (Smith, 1995, p. 83). As we will see, at this point, Sandro and Claudia take on prominent narrative roles, for the spectator follows them during the search for Anna. Sandro and Claudia are also the most accessible characters in terms of the expression of their personalities and their different ways of dealing with Anna’s disappearance and possible death. The first character to invade an image of undisturbed nature is Sandro, who appears suddenly against a sea of dark stone in shot 101 (Sequence VIc). This is the beginning of the search for Anna and it is followed by another image of Sandro looking for Anna, which quickly places the narrative on a clearer level: a beautiful top shot of a dark precipice with waves breaking in the background. The natural beauty of the scene introduces not only excitement but also an element of tension to the narrative, heightening the suspense, since one of the first points of reference in the search for Anna is a place where she might be found dead.¹⁰ This new expectation is immediately associated with Sandro, whose appearance in this landscape looking out into the abyss directs our attention to it. The slow camera movement from the depths to the surface of the island showing the dark cliffs has the effect of underscoring the mystery. This becomes reinforced shortly afterwards by another top shot (105) almost identical to the previous one, but that focuses even more closely on Sandro’s gaze into the abyss, as the frame is situated right behind Sandro and the spectators share his view.¹¹

However, after the spectator is introduced to the potential focal point of suspense—Anna’s possible death—the tension that seemed to be foreshadowed in Sandro’s gaze is given a highly original counterpoint in the sequences that follow. First there is a short close-up that shows Corrado

examining a piece of pottery in sequence VI_d (shot 109). This is followed by the medium close-up of Giulia, his wife, who seems to be watching from afar, with an expressionless gaze. There is a kind of emotional layer here that overlaps with the main plot: in the middle of a circumstance as serious as Anna's disappearance, the other characters seem to be caught up in an enclosed foreground of egocentric feelings. The most evident case is that of Giulia, who is trivially concerned with the attention of a distant and hurtful Corrado. All of this unfolds in the foreground, providing a layer of information on the emotional attitudes of chorus characters, in full keeping with their negative depiction during the trip on the boat. Finally, we come to a low-angle close-up of Claudia, sitting as if oblivious to the search, contemplating the dry branch of a bush. The variety of character attitudes revealed in sequence VI contrasts with the expectations established earlier by Sandro's gaze. The rest of the group seems to be detached from the tragic possibility of Anna's death.

In sequence VII, Antonioni then introduces Claudia into the search on the same terms as Sandro, posing the same aesthetic contrast that encourages us to associate nature with the main plot: Anna's possible death in one of the many hazardous scenarios posed by the natural setting. This time Claudia appears beside the cliffs, and when she speaks Anna's name the camera travels down to the dark low base of the cliffs until it reaches the dark sea, in shot 119. Both scenes evoke these expectations through a parallel alignment of the viewer with the two characters. The expectation is reinforced by another shot showing an enormous boulder falling down the cliff into the sea; as we follow its trajectory, we see Claudia reclining, practically glued to the rock at the edge of the precipice (shot 125).

This subtle technique of linking Anna's fate to Sandro and Claudia's gazes, to the extent that this creates expectations about the resolution of the dramatic episode, once again finds a contrast in the presentation of events in the following sequence. Thus, after Corrado has declared that Anna is nowhere to be found, there is a shot in which he appears looking blankly out to sea (135). The camera moves slowly and we then see the faces of the rest of the group, which likewise do not seem to express anything for several long seconds. There is no hint of the weariness resulting from the tireless search, or of the nerves it might entail. It is a kind of family photo that definitively freezes the characters outside the narrative value that the landscape has begun to assume in relation to Anna's disappearance. The strangeness of these characters against the natural landscape, already created in the sequence of the voyage, thus marks a conclusive point of extraordinary precision and coherence.

5. Twist: or how two plots lead to inconclusiveness

After having explored the articulation of the *giallo* structure, we will continue now by showing how the narrative becomes, as Antonioni himself suggested, a *Giallo alla rovescia* (Inverted thriller). The process of inversion could be described in emotional terms, and similarly in cognitive terms, as a deviation from the trajectory of the film thus far. The main difference is that the emotional cues related to the *giallo* plot are reduced in order to shift the emotional intensity to the second plot: Sandro and Claudia's affair. At the same time, the cognitive dimension is not reduced, as the move from the first plot to the second demands considerable attention and cognitive activity from the viewer.

We might be tempted to describe such a narrative structure as a classical plot twist, similar to that of *Psycho*, where the film's main plot is unexpectedly interrupted to introduce another, as Font points out (136). In both films, there is a radical change of plot, but while the twist occurs with the main character's death in *Psycho*, the main plot in *L'Avventura* is never completely concluded, and as a result the twist loses one of its main sources of power: its suddenness. Indeed, while a plot twist normally takes place in order to increase the emotional and cognitive engagement of the spectator, as is brilliantly executed in *Psycho*, in *L'Avventura* the change plays a much more complex role that is worthy of analysis.

The group's departure from the island precedes a new connection between Sandro and Anna. In sequence IX, Claudia's revelation that Anna had faked the shark sighting suggests that Sandro may

have mistreated Anna and been responsible for her disappearance. In the ensuing conversation, Claudia speaks to Sandro in a reproachful tone, which suggests that she blames him for something. However, at the same time, the earlier pretence of the shark sighting suggests that Anna may, in fact, be faking her own disappearance. With the introduction of this element, the viewer is given a new expectation, just when it seems that everything points to the closure of the original plot. This expectation is reinforced by the arrival of a shepherd; Corrado, Sandro and Claudia see his shadow behind the door, causing a suspenseful moment of remarkable emotional intensity.

Returning to the emotional dimension of Sandro and Claudia's relationship, we could also characterize Claudia's suspicion of Sandro as an element that heightens the spectator's interest, drawing attention to what happened between Sandro and Anna. It is a subtle device that sets up the conditions for the plot twist. Indeed, this process takes shape as Claudia's suspicions are dissipated. This process also posits Claudia, in the midst of the dramatic situation, as the only woman of moral integrity. Claudia earns this reputation because she is the only woman who appears to have a genuine friendship with Anna; a friendship that is, incidentally, given an erotic dimension in the last scene in which the women appear together. Antonioni's mastery of narrative turns the shift from the search to the love story into an extraordinarily delicate process whose development prevents the plot twist from becoming too obvious an evocation of classical narrative codes. We will now try to explain how Antonioni achieves what has been called the naturalized way in which the film depicts the monstrous sentimental metamorphosis of the two main characters (Tassone, 2002, p. 99).

Before we continue our analysis of this process, it should be made clear that besides being a narrative disruption, a main problem posed by the plot twist is moral in nature. How can a viewer accept the attitude of Sandro, a man who tries to start a new relationship with his missing fiancée's best friend? To answer this question, we will offer an analysis that will clarify the mechanisms underlying one of the most widely praised aspects of Antonioni's approach to character development: his way of avoiding a moralist perspective (Font, 2003, p. 145). An important aspect to consider here is Gabriele Ferzetti's interpretation of Sandro, which identifies a sufficient dose of ambiguity in the way that his emotional relationship with Anna is depicted, in a very restrained way, through expressions and gestures. Early on in the film, the viewer is encouraged to form a kind of attachment to Sandro, which could better explain why he changes his sentiments so suddenly as the story unfolds. From the moment Sandro welcomes Anna into his home during sequence III, he never says anything passionate to her; on his face there is a kind of natural smiling expression and his attitude suggests a permissive capacity to adapt to her wishes. Sandro always shows Anna a kind of automatic obedience, exemplified by the scene of the newspaper, which may seem inconsequential but which makes a clear statement about their relationship. In sequence V, Sandro comes out on deck and approaches Anna while looking at her, but when he reaches her, what had appeared to be a trajectory leading to a kiss or an embrace ends up with him lying down for a quick read of the newspaper (shot 45). She tells him that he would be better off sunbathing and he responds by tossing the paper into the sea and giving her his attention again. He kisses her for a few moments and just when the emotional intensity of the scene seems to be increasing, he turns his head and says to his companions: "How about taking a dip?" He seems to want her by his side, but is not willing to show her anything resembling real passion. Anna's attitude to Sandro does not suggest absolute indifference, but a certain ambiguity; a key moment is her decision to dive into the sea after Claudia has warned that there is a shark in the water. The dialogue between them could also be significant in that Sandro's facial expressions are all carefully controlled and there is hardly any variation when Anna expresses her ambiguous feelings towards him. There is no causal link between all this, but it could be argued that it is a procedure for creating fluidity in emotional terms, for Sandro is willing to change with the main plot of the film. Everything, in the end, seems to be leading up to a twist that, rather than encouraging the spectator to dismiss Sandro as morally reprehensible, fosters the idea that he is lacking in emotional consistency from the outset. This prevents of the effects of a growing antipathy towards Sandro at the moment of the changing plot.

In contrast with this characterization of Sandro, another very important aspect is the allegiance that spectators develop to Claudia, which comes close to a sympathetic and morally favourable view of her. Here again we employ Murray Smith's structure of sympathy, which we consider preferable to other concepts used to refer to Antonioni's strategies for giving a character a particular weight, such as Lorenzo Cuccu's idea of "female character, bearer of the gaze" (Cuccu, 2014, p. 85).¹² The concept of allegiance refers to the sympathy and other emotions that spectators feel for characters, which depend mainly on the moral evaluations they make about the character's actions and personality (Smith, 1995, p. 84). Thus, before anything happens between Sandro and Claudia, in sequence X, the narrative offers one of the moments of greatest emotional intensity in Claudia's reaction to Anna's disappearance, which decisively influences the viewer's emotional reaction to Claudia. This is the scene where, before dressing, she removes from her bag the shirt Anna had given her. A kind of rising camera movement first shows the gesture of her hands picking up the garment and then moves up to her face, which wears a contemplative expression. This shot (163) is designed to trigger an empathetic reaction in the viewer: it invites us to imagine the nostalgia that enables us to project our recollections of people onto their belongings, and thus we are reminded again of Anna's disappearance. Sandro's and Claudia's belief that behind the disappearance lies a tragedy is implied in the scene. Sandro makes a comment suggesting she has committed suicide, and Claudia also suggests as much when she reproaches herself over whether she could have done more for Anna. At this point, the suggestion of the suicide hypothesis is crucial. If we conclude that Anna is dead, it becomes hard to accept, without feeling moral outrage, that Sandro should give up the search in favour of a fresh new romance. Antonioni prevents the viewer from being confronted with these ideas abruptly and avoids, through subtle emotional treatment, any moralization of the issue that might immediately inspire antipathy for this character. Thus, Sandro and Claudia's relationship develops as a very carefully designed and gradual process. Their first contact is of a very emotional nature when they are brought together by nostalgia, and not without ambiguity. A curious combination of low-angle and high-angle shots of Sandro and Claudia at the end of sequence X (177) shows his most expressive and sincere gaze directed at Claudia, and how she reacts when she looks at him. If the objective is to discern Sandro's feelings, to achieve this the viewer must essentially piece together a jigsaw puzzle.¹³ After this, the next meeting is more explicit. It goes no further than an exchange of looks, but Claudia immediately interprets this as an approach and a sign of Sandro's desire, which she in turn rejects. Claudia's attitude may be read as a lack of interest in Sandro. In any case, up to this point the narrative twist cannot be interpreted as having occurred, since the expectation that they will take the relationship further is not clearly established, and Anna's disappearance continues to hold the viewer's attention. Even after their relationship begins to develop, when Sandro traps Claudia on the boat and kisses her in sequence XII, the viewer still cannot be said to identify "love betrayal" as the new plot. It may well be read as a last kiss goodbye, an element that only serves to increase the interest in the plot of Anna's disappearance.

Furthermore, an element suddenly appears that softens the supposed moral gravity of the betrayal: the prospect that Anna is still alive. Antonioni suggests this by increasing the uncertainty with a situation that is very subtle in dramatic terms. During the interrogation of the smugglers in sequence XIII, there is a moment when one of them refuses to confess. This leads the viewer to suspect he has something to do with Anna's disappearance. It is a time for focusing so that the viewer absorbs Sandro's apparent suspicions, which emerge at the same time—again—that Anna is not dead. In any case, Sandro's actions reduce any likelihood of attributing to him the hope that Anna might be dead, which would potentially result in his being held in moral contempt by the viewer.

From the above we can glean a sort of symmetry between Sandro and Claudia, based on the emergence of the second plot that gives them a similar status in terms of alignment. We have already noted the important role that Sandro plays in the unique twist structure of this *Giallo all rovescia*. But what about Claudia?

Her position throughout the film always differs from Sandro's, firstly because she rejects the possibility of the love affair, and subsequently because she desires it as a true relationship much more than Sandro. While Sandro's character design manages to avoid inspiring antipathy, he nevertheless remains emotionally opaque, always too distant to allow spectators to fully engage with him: they may well feel imaginative empathy for him, but it would be difficult to have any real feeling for him. Claudia, however, always shows her conflicting emotions directly and seems conceived to elicit a kind of empathy in spectators that often equates to a genuine feeling for her. One of the most expressive of examples of this, which clearly reveals her inner struggle, is the scene where she discovers Giulia *in flagrante delicto*, betraying her husband with a young painter in sequence XVIIId. Her first reaction is to laugh, but she quickly changes her demeanour and scolds Giulia, as it seems she identifies herself in Giulia's impulsive behaviour.

With her reluctance at the beginning and finally her expressions of sincere desire for love, Claudia obviously also plays a role in the plot transition because she delays the start of their relationship and then turns it into a sort of process without conclusion because her desire for love cannot find an answer in Sandro.

The engagement possibilities offered by Sandro and Claudia determine the particular structure of the delayed plot twist, sealing it with a twofold inconclusiveness. Finally, at a certain point, the lack of resolution of the search for Anna and of Sandro and Claudia's affair converges. The dialectic of mismatch between Sandro and Claudia is expressed in the fact that he never agrees to say "I love you". It is when he finally agrees—the very same night—that Sandro disappears with Gloria Perkins and betrays her. But before Claudia discovers his betrayal, Anna's ghost reappears in her suspicion that Sandro's absence means that he has found Anna and has returned to her. One of the most interesting aspects revealed by Federico Vitella, after having examined the original script of the film, is that scene 83, which Antonioni decided not to film, would have made this suspicion of Claudia's impossible.¹⁴ In that scene, Patrizia tells Claudia that Anna's corpse has been found. But Antonioni replaced scene 83 with that in which Claudia expresses her suspicion of Anna's return, thereby leaving both plots simultaneously unresolved. We agree with Vitella's view that the idea of closing the plot of Anna's disappearance, desired by the producers, was decisively rejected by Antonioni with its elimination of this scene, as a strategic narrative decision.

6. Concluding remarks

Our approach to plot and character engagement has allowed us to identify various innovative narrative processes that elicit a cognitively rich response from viewers. The first of these are the cues that develop the contrast between nature and the characters; in addition, nature is used on a deep narrative level to dramatically express the first major hypothesis related to Anna's disappearance, when Sandro and Claudia search around the cliffs, always followed by slow camera movements, suggesting to the spectator the possibility that she has come to a tragic end. Then, based on this hypothesis, various possible explanations for Anna's disappearance emerge: accident, suicide, murder, rape, running away, etc. Few real thrillers have provoked such a diverse array of possibilities.

The second part of our analysis has focused on the strategy of gradual conversion of the plot twist in a meticulous process that seeks to naturalize it. First of all, we have explored how the whole process seems to be designed to mitigate an excessively critical evaluation of Sandro's emotional response to Anna's disappearance. This opens up an opportunity to explore Sandro's inner world and feelings in a more nuanced and reflective manner. In a different but complementary way, Claudia's evolution would inevitably prompt viewers to infer their own hypotheses about her inner emotional life through a strategy of eliciting empathy at key moments. We consider this kind of cognitive engagement is an important component of the aesthetic experience of watching this film. However, it seems less obvious that such cognitive productivity could be the only element of that aesthetic experience. A rich cognitive experience may very well be the main and only result of watching a thriller, but here, where we have been dealing with an "inverted thriller", the

structure of cognitive responses determined by the narrative structure may in itself be considered a constitutive part of the aesthetic experience. The whole set of narrative singularities described here exhibits an extraordinary coherence, and there is an aspect that seems to invite us to reflect on them as a whole. When Antonioni, rejecting the pressure from producers, decided to leave the question of Anna's disappearance unresolved, the intention seems to have been to leave a cue for a kind of reflection on the artistic nature of the film. Might it thus be interpreted as a sign of Antonioni's desire to make the spectator aware of the correlation between artistic features and critical content?

In our view, the above question should be answered in the affirmative. The main narrative singularities at play are capable of provoking, on the one hand, important reflections on the moral and emotional nature of Sandro, Claudia and the rest of the upper middle-class protagonists and, on the other, aesthetic reflections on the film itself as a narrative mechanism, on its nature as an original device. Our analysis of the whole set of narrative disruptions points to the conclusion that Antonioni incites spectators not only to reflect on Sandro as an individual, but on the social class he represents as a whole, establishing a coherent invitation to active reflection on the emotional world he inhabits, which is perhaps not so different from our own. The films thus achieve a convergence and interaction between the elicitation of active aesthetic reflection and the elicitation of active social reflection in a way that had never been done before.

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Notes

1. "rottura dell'equilibrio tra figura umana e paesaggio a livello di inquadratura, rottura dell'equilibrio tra parola e rumore a livello di colonna sonora, rottura della continuità di spazio, tempo e azione a livello di sequenza" (Translated by Martin Boyd).
2. "E come quadro sociale *L'avventura* non fa una grinza. C'è anche un Sud, un inferno sottosviluppato messo a confronto con l'inferno del benessere, che è il Sud più 'vero' e impressionante che sia visto finora sullo schermo, senza la minima sbavatura di complicità populista" (Translated by Martin Boyd).
3. See also Bou (2002).
4. See for example Greg M. Smith's comments on "*Stranger than Paradise*" (2003, pp. 58–63).
5. "And seen through the idea of 'parametric narration', *An Autumn Afternoon* becomes sort of mechanical tease, adding and subtracting expected shots and 'normal' editing in 'constantly self-correcting shot combinations'." Frampton (2006, pp. 108–09).

6. A couple of recent examples focusing on Italian films are Joshua Landy's analysis of the self-reflective structure in Fellini's *8 1/2* (2015), or Karin Luisa Badt's analysis of *The Bicycle Thief* and *Stalker* (2015).
7. Ciò che un produttore italiano della seconda metà degli anni '50 non avrebbe potuto assolutamente approvare era ovviamente l'uscita di scena della protagonista nel bel mezzo del racconto: una trovata da pazzi, appunto. Ma si badi bene, il problema non era tanto la sparizione della protagonista, quanto il fatto che dopo la sua sparizione l'istanza narrante se ne disinteressasse a vantaggio di altri eventi e di altri personaggi, lasciando lo spettatore senza alcuna spiegazione risolutiva. Dunque non il mistero in sé, ma il fatto che il mistero non venisse sciolto. (Translated by Martin Boyd).
8. Federico Vitella has identified this very singular role of the landscape: 'Antonioni ha infatti più volte sottolineato il ruolo strategico assunto dal paesaggio siciliano nel "disorientare" i suoi personaggi: "Il film è ambientato in Sicilia perché volevo che i personaggi si muovessero liberamente in un paesaggio che era loro estraneo, che essi non vedevano."' (2010, p. 99).
9. See for example the unique statistical work on shot scales produced by Kovacs.
10. As noted previously, our analysis highlights a variety of ways in which nature is used, in contrast with perspectives that consider a main non-narrative function of landscape; for example: "In the 'classical' narrative film the image is seldom disjoined from the drama of events or the action of characters; it has no independence from these, or if it does it is as the merely decorative, at the periphery of narrative. Antonioni has shifted this periphery to the centre of things, has made the image a 'subject' in its own right: its shape, its color, its movement, its time and the time of regarding it." Rodhie (1990), *Antonioni*, London: BFI Publishing, p. 66.
11. This kind of shot could be associated with the *semisoggettive*, based on Federico Vitella's classification: "Senza alcuna pretesa di trattare la complessa questione, propongo di distinguere qui le *semisoggettive* dalle false *soggettive* in

rapporto alle modalità di perturbazione della costruzione classica. Le prime sono soggettive imprecise in ordine alla dimensione spaziale: il guardato non viene cioè proposto esattamente dal punto di vista del guardante ma con uno spiazamento più o meno importante di asse, angolazione o distanza rispetto alla sua posizione ortodossa” (Vitella, 218).

12. “personaggio femminile, portatore di sguardo” (Translated by Martin Boyd).
13. Among the activities that Plantinga proposes as sources of aesthetic pleasure in film is constructive activity. In this case, the creative activity of a director who makes a camera shift to disorient the viewer and seeming to require the engagement of his imagination can be interpreted as an example related to a process of artistic innovation. See Plantinga, pp. 21–22.
14. This whole scene 83 may be found reproduced in Vitella’s book, pp. 231–33.

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