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Molding a Modern Star: Monica Vitti in Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960)

For me, actors are “material,” in the fullest sense of the word. It might seem, during pre-production or even during the shooting of the movie itself, that I never talk to the actors, that I don't explain to them what their roles, or basically that I don't reveal the hidden side of the characters they have to play. If this really is true, it stems from the fact that I see acting as just one of the means available to the director for expressing an idea, be it figurative or strictly conceptual. I try to bring out an actor's instinct more than his intellect. Then later I can take what I want from the performance. (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960).¹

The way Antonioni works with actors doesn't allow for any laziness. For him, actors are “objects,” to be used. It's useless to ask him the meaning of a scene, a line, or an action: he won't answer you, and it even seems like he doesn't want to explain. In reality, he firmly believes that a line doesn't have any meaning in itself, but only within a context that only he, in that moment, clearly grasps. It's an ensemble of poetics, culture, reasons and emotions that the actor merely plays a part in as would a landscape or a sound. It took me a while to realize that I was only there to provide a service. (Monica Vitti, 1960).²

Introduction

Film historians have rarely examined the way in which Michelangelo Antonioni worked with actors and his involvement in the star-making process. There are two reasons for this: on the one hand, he has the reputation for being a tyrant, constantly criticizing the actors for interfering with his creative process. This has masked his particular talent for harmonizing the actors' performances with the other elements of movie-making. On the other hand, his reputation as an “auteur-director,” stemming from the European debate on post-war cinema as art, has overshadowed his clever negotiating with producers and distributors about casting and advertising.

Antonioni was no less aware than other directors of the importance of acting to the filmmaking process and the importance of stars to commercial success. Indeed, he was perhaps even more aware than his contemporaries were.³ Not surprisingly, his own filmography is full of show-business themes which examine the key director-actor-audience relationship. His

¹ Tommaso Chiaretti (ed.), *L'avventura di Michelangelo Antonioni*. Bologna: Cappelli, 1960, p. 147.

² Ivi, pp. 151-152.

³ For an introductory discussion of Antonioni's work with actors, see “Michelangelo Antonioni,” in Paolo Bertetto (ed.), *Action! How Great Filmmakers Direct Actors*. Rome: Minimum Fax, 2007, pp. 201-213.

documentary *L'Amorosa menzogna* (1949), for example, examines the enormous popularity of *fotoromanzo* actors, and *La Signora senza camelie* (1952) is a bitter reflection on the representation of the female body in Italian popular cinema.

In this paper I turn my sights to this gap in scholarship and examine the star power of Monica Vitti in *L'Avventura*. By looking at paratextual elements (trailers, posters, the media), production documents (actual spending and contracts), and especially the film itself (the implicit and explicit meta-cinematic connotations), I aim to do the following: 1) explain the star-building process carried out on Monica Vitti; 2) interpret the plot of the film as an allegory for the publicizing of Monica Vitti herself; and 3) establish the stardom of Monica Vitti as a paradigm of modern European stardom.

1. Monica Vitti as Film Star

I begin with the “creation” of Monica Vitti, the Star. The first step took place in the obvious gap between the weakness of her contractual power and the central role that she played both in the film and outside of it: she was paid the same as two supporting actors, Dominique Blanchard and Lelio Luttazzi (60,000 Italian lire per take), while Renzo Ricci got more (90,000 lire per take), as did Lea Massari (120,000 lire per take) and Gabriele Ferzetti (300,000 lire per take).⁴ Until then Vitti had played only small parts in rather forgettable films by mainstream commercial directors, so her key role in *L'Avventura*, in its advertisement campaign, and even in the explicit meta-cinematic references are all proof of the energy invested in her.

Her on-screen presence is impressive, in both quantity and quality. Her image dominates most of the sequences, along with the leading male actor Gabriele Ferzetti. Lea Massari is present only in the first five, while Vitti is in 25 of the 28 total sequences in the film⁵ (all except nos. XIII, XV, and XXV). This is one more than Ferzetti (all except nos. I, II, XVI, and XVII). Alone or with other characters, Vitti and Ferzetti share a total of 21 sequences (all except nos. I, II, XIII, XV, XVI, XVII, and XXV). More importantly, either one or the other is present in every narrative segment. Visually, Vitti is quite often seen in close framings, in both close-up and extreme close-up. Her character, Claudia, is shown without close framing in only 8 of 24 sequences, including the 4 one-shot connecting sequences in which the main characters are travelling by car (nos. I, II, IV, VIII, XVI, XIX, XX, and XVII). Of the 16 sequences in which Claudia is filmed in close-up, 7 of

⁴ This information can be found in the original payment sources in file CF 3046 of the “Ministero del turismo e dello spettacolo” in the Archivio centrale dello Stato. For the actor’s contract as historiographical source, see Marco Luceri, “I contratti degli attori nel cinema italiano degli anni Cinquanta,” in *Arte, Musica, Spettacolo. Annali del Dipartimento di Storia delle Arti e dello Spettacolo*, a. X, 2009, pp. 279-293.

⁵ An analysis of the film’s structure can be found in Federico Vitella, *Michelangelo Antonioni. L'avventura*. Torino: Lindau, 2010, pp. 31-47.

those are in extreme close-up (nos. III, IX, XII, XXI, XXIV, XXVI, and XXVIII), most importantly the episode filmed in Santa Panagia, in which 4 of 9 shots are extreme close-ups of Claudia and Sandro making love in the grass.

She was also given prominent billing in the film's credits and in the promotional campaign. In the opening credits, her name stands alone in fourth place, after Antonioni's ("a film by Michelangelo Antonioni"), the film's title ("L'Avventura") and the leading male actor ("Gabriele Ferzetti"). She not only comes before the supporting actors, who are all grouped in sixth place (Dominique Blanchard, Renzo Ricci, James Addams, Dorothy De Poliolo, Lelio Luttazzi, Giovanni Petrucci and Esmeralda Ruspoli), but also before the "leading actress," Lea Massari, whose name follows Vitti's.⁶ In the original posters her image is always a prominent. She is at the centre of one of the first official advertisements, seen from the side against a red background, receiving a passionate kiss by Ferzetti. In the second, she shares the scene with both Ferzetti and Massari, but she is not only much bigger than Massari, she is again paired with Ferzetti, who is still kissing her. And in the Italian trailer, unlike the international one (which presents all the characters, one by one, with a strong and impersonal voice-over), it is Vitti/Claudia herself who introduces the film's plot and context in the first person, although dubbed by a professional actress.⁷

Finally, there is the obvious meta-cinematic reference of shot 427, in the final sequence (seq. 28). Claudia can't sleep so is reading some magazines at the coffee table in her hotel room in Taormina: first, Vitti's blond hair hides most of the magazine; then, as she raises her head, she gradually reveals the title of the article, which turns out to be a piece on a promising young actress who "will be the new Jean Harlow." This is one of Antonioni's most typical "encrypted" shots, in which words and images are combined in an enigmatic way, often through the reshaping of actual graffiti or advertisements.⁸ There are many shots like this in the film, from the episode in Noto (where Sandro and Claudia lean against a wall covered with scraps from an election poster) to the shot in Messina (where huge letters from a sign stand out clearly in the foreground). But in the movie's final scene the meaning is quite obvious: the title of the article can only refer to the rising-star status of Monica Vitti. She will be "the new Jean Harlow." In fact, Claudia's movements seem to mimic the posture of the actress in the magazine. They both have blond hair, they are both sitting in front of a window, they both have their hands raised to their face, etc. And the association is

⁶ See again to the original document regarding payment in CF 3046.

⁷ For Cino Del Duca's Italian trailer, see "Dissidio fra Antonioni e i produttori del film," in *Corriere della Sera*, September 28, 1960. The international English-language trailer can be found in the home video version of *L'Avventura*, released by the Criterion Collection in 2001.

⁸ See Antonio Costa, "Lo sguardo del 'flâneur' e il magazzino culturale," in Tinazzi (ed.), *Michelangelo Antonioni. Identificazione di un autore*, vol. II. Parma: Pratiche, 1985, pp. 67-76.

further reinforced by the fact that Claudia is counting off numbers out loud, as if she were playing in a movie, only to be dubbed.

2. *L'Avventura* as Meta-Cinema

I move now to a meta-cinematic reading of the story. Antonioni's "star-writing" is clearly noticeable if we consider the main characters as representing the non-diegetic status of the actors who play them. In this sense, the character of Anna echoes Massari's role of leading lady. Sandro thus doubles Ferzetti's leading man, and above all, Claudia bears within her Monica Vitti's status of budding actress. The development of the romantic subplot, in which Claudia replaces Anna as Sandro's lover after Anna disappears, foreshadows the rise of Monica Vitti from supporting actress to leading lady, as a first step in the construction of her star image.

L'Avventura was defined by Antonioni himself as a detective story in reverse. Indeed, the film can be seen as an unusual detective story, altering the traditional conventions of the genre.⁹ Far from leading inexorably to a solution to the enigma – Anna's mysterious disappearance – the investigation is slow and chaotic due to a series of digressions. These digressions are used both to dilute the "noir" feeling of the most important episodes of the investigation, and to break them up chronologically. In the former instance, for example, Claudia's presence at the Milazzo train station changes the meaning of the interrogation of the Sicilian smugglers witnessed by Sandro; and in the latter case, the episode in the Montaldo villa breaks the connection between the testimony of the journalist Zuria in Messina and that of the pharmacist in Troina. But the digressions are not an end in themselves. Although they introduce a discussion of social issues, like the unregulated construction boom or the problems in the South, they mainly reveal the relationship between Sandro and Claudia, as an emblematic case of the *malattia dei sentimenti* (the sickness of the emotions).¹⁰ Done in this way, the chronology of the story clearly shows how their relationship evolved to the detriment of Anna. So, as far as the couple Sandro-Claudia is concerned, the first day could be described in terms of mutual estrangement (they had never met before), the second of mistrust (they blame each other for Anna's death), the third of need (they are drawn together out of loneliness), the fourth of contrition (they feel guilty for their attraction), the fifth of idyll (they make love for the first time), the sixth of eroticism (Sandro betrays Claudia), the seventh of compassion (Claudia forgives Sandro).

⁹ For Antonioni's statement, see Vittorio Bonicelli, "Michelangelo Antonioni," in *Tempo*, March 23, 1960, p. 53. The first analyses of the influence of the "noir" genre on Antonioni's production is the classic work by Guido Fink, "Antonioni e il giallo alla rovescia," in *Cinema Nuovo*, March-April 1963, no. 162, pp. 100-106.

¹⁰ For the *Malattia dei sentimenti*, see Antonioni's famous Cannes statement in Seymour Chatman, Guido Fink (eds.), *L'Avventura. Michelangelo Antonioni, Director*. New Brunswick-London: Rutgers University Press, 1989, pp. 177-179.

The detective story in reverse, then, hides the melodrama, and the melodrama hides the *diva* aspect, which is first seen with the shifting of the narrator's attention from Anna/Massari to Claudia/Vitti. As Claudia gradually assumes a more central place in the narrative, we see an investment in Monica Vitti, clearly portrayed in the key episode where the two women exchange clothes before Anna disappears. The scene is the following: 1) in the cabin of their yacht, Anna encourages Claudia to try on one of her blouses, which she then hides secretly in Claudia's backpack (seq. V); 2) in the shepherd's hut on the island of Lisca Bianca, Claudia finds it among her things and is visibly moved (seq. X); 3) she wanders around on top of the island with Sandro, looking for Anna, dressed in her friend's blouse (seq. X); and 4) on the top of the island again, Claudia apologizes to Anna's father about wearing the blouse (seq. XII). There are at least three layers of meaning here. On one level, the exchange of clothing is narratively justified by Anna's generosity and Claudia's need for a new shirt after swimming. On a second level, the exchange materializes Anna's self-destructive instincts as well as Claudia's desire to be like her wealthy, engaged friend. On a third level, the one that most concerns us here, the exchange of clothing becomes a metaphorical "passing of the baton," both between the two female characters and between the two actresses who play them: the shirt is as much a simple element of wardrobe as an instrument of the actor's craft. The image is clear. The blouse gives Claudia the weight and the role that, until then, had been held by Anna/Massari. When Claudia takes the place of Anna in the story, Monica Vitti takes the place of Lea Massari in the role of leading actress.

The star-making discourse that runs beneath the plot becomes obvious through the character of Gloria Perkins (Dorothy De Poliolo), who is trying to become an actress in popular cinema. In the second part of the film, once Anna has been removed from the plot as well as Lea Massari from the spotlight, Antonioni sets up Claudia/Vitti in opposition to a negative star-model in two key episodes of the movie: the huge turn-out in Messina for Gloria and the "warm" reception accorded to Claudia by the inhabitants of Noto. In the first episode – inspired by something that actually happened in Palermo – hundreds of men gather menacingly in front of a bar in the old town of Messina to see the would-be writer, dressed in a short, tight dress that reveals the top of her garter-belt through a strategic rip. In the second episode – probably influenced by the writings of Vitaliano Brancati – Claudia attracts the attention of a few dozen men in the main street in Noto. They are so shocked by her non-Mediterranean appearance that they move in closer to her and make it hard for her to even walk. The episodes mirror each other in showing the different attitudes of the two women towards the male gaze. Gloria Perkins excites the crowd and enjoys the collective attention, whereas Claudia is not only passive but also visibly upset. The salacious comments and stares only cease when Sandro appears on the stairs of Trinacria, restoring order and eventually dispersing the

group. This certainly shows the difference between Claudia and Gloria – which not by chance is responsible for Sandro’s betrayal at the end – , but it is also a criticism of the classical stardom of the American-style Italian *maggiorate* (“busty beauty”) in favour of the new model presented by Vitti. The double meaning of the episode is clear given Gloria’s interview with journalists, the eruption of photographers snapping pictures, the rapture of the crowd, and her explicit intention to pursue a film career: the beautiful but unskilled actress, ready to sacrifice her own body for the sake of Spectacle, is the most “negative” character in the movie.

3. The Modernity of Monica Vitti

When I talk about Monica Vitti being a “star,” I do not refer to the Hollywood star system. Nor I was thinking of its Italian variant, embodied at its best in the 50s by the classical status of Sofia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida and Silvana Mangano, which Antonioni had already attacked in *La Signora senza camelia*.¹¹ Indeed, one could say that the type of stardom associated with Monica Vitti is exactly the opposite of the type overtly criticized by Antonioni via the character of Clara Manni (played by Lucia Bosé). Clara is a beautiful Milanese shop clerk who briefly becomes a movie star but has no talent.

The difference between Vitti’s modern star image and the Italian *maggiorate*, or more generally from the Hollywood divas in who inspired the Italian version, can be broken down to at least three elements. First, Antonioni’s suffering Claudia is totally different from the bevy of simple, one-dimensional characters traditionally embodied by the classical American film star. She is ultra-sensitive, highly introspective and has a strong sense of morality, which make her a complex woman. With great difficulty and almost against her will, she rejects the superficiality, indifference and cynicism of most of the men she deals with, and questions the world she lives in and can no longer recognize. This is the first appearance in Antonioni’s films of a female “type,” described in terms of existential marginality and social criticism, whose precursor is probably to be found in the part of Diana (played by Vitti), written for the play *Scandali segreti* (Secret Scandals) in 1957.¹² Diana’s crisis/realization is triggered by her stormy relationship with Marco (Giancarlo Sbragia) in this sort of female *Bildungsroman*, and seems like the “mother” of all of the crisis/realizations that women go through in Antonioni’s later work – or at least in those films that critics often group together as the *Tetralogia dei sentimenti* (the quartet of feelings) given their time

¹¹ See Elena Dagrada, “Antonioni e la macchina cinema (“La signora senza camelia” e altro),” in *Michelangelo Antonioni. Identificazione di un autore*, vol. I. Parma: Pratiche, 1983, pp. 121-128.

¹² Antonioni founded a prose theatre company made up of promising young actors such as Giancarlo Sbragia, Virna Lisi and Monica Vitti in the summer of 1957. For a documented discussion of this theatrical interlude, see Federico Vitella, “Michelangelo Antonioni drammaturgo: Scandali segreti,” in *Bianco e Nero*, no. 563, January-April 2009, pp. 79-93.

of production (1959-1964), the use of the same actress (Vitti), and the unity of both style (recurrence of the same modern solutions) and content (recurrence of the same narrative themes).

Secondly, the physicality that Vitti lends to Claudia is far from the model of femininity seen in classical film stars. She was even aware of this: “I didn’t come out of the world of beauty contests; they would have disqualified me immediately, I was just too different from the norm. I was too thin, too tall, too blond, I had studied at the Accademia, done theater, I was covered with freckles, I had a deep voice, I never wore make-up, and I always wore a black sweater and black pants.”¹³ These were all highly unusual characteristics for a leading dramatic actress at the time: they made her less Mediterranean and situated her squarely in the industrialized and mechanized world of mass consumption.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, she was not immediately embraced by Italian cinema in the 1950s, and some directors (like Luciano Emmer and Renato Castellani, who considered her nose too prominent) exploited her features only as an element of caricature or marginality. We can see her easily as aristocratic, snobbish or a caricature, in roles that she played in *Ridere, ridere, ridere* (Anton, 1955), *Una pelliccia di visione* (Pellegrini, 1956) and *Le dritte* (Amendola, 1958); but she also dubbed the voices of commoners, prostitutes, immigrants and drunks when she was between jobs, sometimes in major films such as *Le Notti di Cabiria* (Fellini, 1957), *Il Grido* (Antonioni, 1957) and *I Soliti ignoti* (Monicelli, 1958).¹⁵

Lastly, Monica Vitti’s “representational” interpretation of Claudia is far from the declamatory classical acting style. The range of emotions felt by the protagonist is not conveyed so much through words, but mostly through a structured array of expressive gestures and movements that are always related to the spatial context in which she finds herself. The scenery – or *fondo* (background), as Antonioni calls it¹⁶ – is a sort of emotional sounding board for Vitti. It can receive, support and even amplify her movements simply through physical contact, whether she’s dealing with interior elements like ornaments, chairs, doors, windows or walls, or external elements like architecture, trees, rocks or blades of grass. She gives a “self-referential” performance, based on the main dialectics of touching-grabbing (objects), standing up-surrendering oneself (support structures), walking-running (open spaces), which seems to pay homage to the acting style of the pre-classical divas of the Italian cinema of the 1910s. Vitti’s intensely “tactile” performances harken back to the vivid (and of course silent) poses of Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini, and

¹³ Monica Vitti. *Sette sottane*. Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 1993, p. 188.

¹⁴ For the representation of the female body in the Italian cinema, see Stephen Gundle, *Bellissima, Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy*. London: Yale University Press, 2007.

¹⁵ For a biographical sketch of Monica Vitti, see Laura Delli Colli, *Monica Vitti*. Roma: Gremese, 1987; and Cristina Borsatti, *Monica Vitti*. Palermo: L’Epos, 2005.

¹⁶ See Carlo di Carlo, Tinazzi Giorgio (eds.), *Michelangelo Antonioni. Fare un film è per me vivere*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1994, p. 41.

Eleonora Duse in *Ma l'amor mio non muore* (Caserini, 1913), *Assunta Spina* (Serena, 1915) and *Cenere* (Mari, 1916).¹⁷

Whenever Claudia thinks she is on the point of seeing Anna appear again, she is shaken by a swirl of emotions that are conveyed beautifully through her expressive gestures in a complex interaction with the setting. There are at least six distinct moments in different locations: at the top of Lisca Bianca (but she sees Giulia instead); in the hut on the island (it is the shepherd); in the waiting room of the Milazzo train station (it's Sandro); in the villa in Montaldo (first it's a driver, then Raimondo); on the stairs of the cheap pension in Noto (it is a young local woman); and in the hall of the luxury hotel in Taormina (it's Gloria Perkins). The most striking example of her "silent movie" style is probably the extra-long take of shot 426, in the final sequence in Taormina. This is the longest shot of the film, lasting about 107 seconds, divided into four main phases. In the first, Claudia wakes up in the middle of the night: she throws a pillow on the ground, turns on the bedside lamp, checks the time on the clock, lays down on the bed, sits, and then finally gets up. In the second, Claudia goes into Sandro's empty room: she opens her door and then the door into Sandro's room, picks up a shirt from his suitcase, pulls it to her face and smells it. In the third, Claudia returns disappointed to her room: she rubs against the wall, stops in front of the wardrobe mirror, then makes faces in the mirror. In the fourth, Claudia goes back to bed: she gets to the bed and slumps heavily on the side, turns off the lamp, and stays that way in the dark. The setting is not simply there as a backdrop to the acting. Here, the relationship actor-setting is a real sensorial exchange (touching, smelling, looking) as an alternative to the traditional actor-actor verbal communication.

Conclusion

L'Avventura thus reveals the grand beginnings of Monica Vitti's star image. In spite of her limited contractual power, the centrality of her image in the film's key paratexts, the quality and quantity of her screen presence, and even some intriguing meta-cinematic connotations of the story clearly prove that a complex star-building effort was deliberately orchestrated by Antonioni himself. The operation has a double meaning. Vitti's unusual non-Mediterranean physicality, her silent-era acting technique, and the very role that she played were indeed meant to challenge the classical stardom of the Italian *maggiorate* Silvana Mangano, Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida; and they also put forth a fresh modern star paradigm along the lines of that established by Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini in such films as *Stromboli* (1948), *Europa '51* (1952) and *Viaggio in Italia* (1953). If Monica Vitti finds in Antonioni the guide that was lacking to Clara Manni in *La*

¹⁷ On this theme, see Cristina Jandelli, *Breve storia del divismo cinematografico*. Venice: Marsilio, 2007, pp. 157-161.

Signora senza camelia, Antonioni finds in Monica Vitti the ideal performer to embody his key female characters. In turn, they were bearers of what we may call, with some simplification, the director's "ideology." The sensitivity of Vitti's Claudia – as a younger version of *Scandali segreti*'s Diana – is in fact the hallmark of her privileged narrative status and evidence of her role as spokesman for Antonioni himself. Antonioni's vision is superimposed on that of the actress who plays his *personaggio-guida*: the modern stardom of Monica Vitti mirrors the modern authorial stardom of Michelangelo Antonioni.¹⁸

¹⁸ See Gillo Dorfles, "Autoriflessione nei linguaggi artistici contemporanei," in Tinazzi (ed.), *Michelangelo Antonioni. Identificazione di un autore. Op. cit.*, pp. 76-81.