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Melinda Camber Porter In Conversation With Michelangelo Antonioni Rome June 1977

Part I

“Too many untold stories are weighing me down. The images of films I have not made continue to accumulate and obsess me,” said Michelangelo Antonioni in a strangled voice. His rigid stance and mournful expression spoke more readily and simply of his predicament than his words. For since *The Passenger* (1974), he has been forced to write scripts, short stories and articles about the films he needs to make.

Antonioni is notoriously loath to explain or even discuss himself or his films. And having spent almost two years limited to verbal expression has merely added to his dissatisfaction with words. Inevitable, his reticence became the starting point of our conversation and I obliged him to convince me that it was not a pose.

“I can only communicate through films. For me, words are either neutral or misleading tools. The image is forceful and direct. I have always felt that words make habits of my thoughts and so I constantly try to liberate myself from them. They are cluttered with the myths of society,

weighted down by judgmental and prescriptive attitudes. In my films, I have tried to destroy such myths, but, each time one gets rid of one lie, a new one hurries to take its place. I think *all* myths are dangerous, but in fact, I don't 'think' a lot."

As Antonioni spoke, the tension within him increased and he gave a convincing demonstration of his uneasiness with words. In his view, dialogue merely falsified or elaborated on his conflicts. He fidgeted, got up to show me books, objects, the splendid view over Rome, told me that the tone of my questions would be affected by the fact that they were placed in a rose colored folder, and returned despondently to our conversation, with a story which illustrated the inadequacy of words:

"Recently I was in Melbourne to get finance for a film about being stranded at sea. I participated in a conference where people were asking me questions. If you asked me my reaction to that situation, of course, I could say that I felt hounded, uncomfortable, tense etc. But that wouldn't express anything. I would have to tell you that the audience was placed against two different backgrounds: brown, somber wood and rough, grey concrete and that my reaction would be expressed by choosing to place them against the grey bricks. This is the way I work in my films and it has invaded my way of looking and living. I never make a lucid analysis of a situation. I use an instinctive method."

Antonioni seemed to derive a momentary relaxation from the harmony of colors he had visualized and he offered to develop the point:

“You see, I always create a catalogue of objects around a character. I do not see him or her as the center of my film. There is no hierarchy in my mind between a character’s context, clothes, objects and his personality or emotions. People think you have to tell a story about someone rather than something. But the two are invisible for people are so enmeshed in their surrounds.”

I asked him whether observation could be so easily equated with insight, whether he had discovered that appearances absorbed and manifested personality and therefore judged people by appearances. He replied in a hurt tone:

“When I used Jack Nicolson in *The Passenger* I did not choose him because he appeared to fit the role. His previous parts had been totally different. Similarly, with Monica Vitti, I was not being sadistic when I got her to play parts which constricted her natural vivacity. I sensed another side to her which ran contrary to the impression she makes. She possesses wonderful defense mechanisms against her neurosis. In everyday life, she is extroverted and lively. When I made her play an introverted woman I merely took away that mechanism which allows her to cope with life. But the anguish was always under the surface.” ###