

Stark Eclipse
MARK RUDMAN

“What modern movies lack is the wind in the trees.”
—D.W. Griffith

Dear one, I’m answering you in this way because I don’t think you’d have liked the first response that came to my head if you weren’t familiar with the works.

I thought to say, and thought better of saying it, that your letter is right out of a book I love, *Among Women Only*, and the movie Antonioni

made from it *Le Amiche: The Girlfriends*. The women are even in a business somewhat similar to your own, fashion-design-art. The night you describe

could have been lifted from the scenes where Rosetta, the odd woman out, looks so alone among the other women only some

of whom are far crueller thoughtless senseless and insensitive than the somewhat dunderheaded men who flail through A’s oeuvre.

That their weapons are words—some rarely stop to breathe—makes them no less lethal. Their banter is never anything less

than treacherous. It’s not a man who feels alone among these women, it’s a woman, “no longer a woman,” as the gravediggers say;

the second time around she succeeds, drowns herself and enters a select—company. The only difference between

Rosetta’s suicide and Virginia Woolf’s is that the former exists only on page and screen (to say nothing of my memory, so seduced by the magic of the presentation, it fails, it forgets, to separate

the real suicides from the pretend). In this case. *Among Women Only. Tra Donna Sola. Le Amiche. The Girlfriends.*

The titles as drenched with portent as the sudden booming gusts in mid-ocean that rattle the shutters with a vicious prattle of sprays,

confirming the off-the-charts shifts in barometric pressure neither captain, crew, nor engines, is equipped to endure.

But the writer, Cesare Pavese, and the director, Michelangelo Antonioni, weren't pretending. There was nothing pretend about Pavese's suicide

in his room in the Albergo Roma in Turin, following in his heroine's wake after being awarded the Strega Prize for this novel

whose title the director pointedly revised, to bring it down a notch and closer to—corruption.



For reasons I don't remember the lovers don't meet at the appointed place. But someone else, that is, something else shows up: the camera—

the water moves like thirst through the gutters, the water that repeatedly flows through the gutters like a rivulet.

The first thing she sees when she draws open the curtains as dawn breaks, a structure that assumed the shape of a mushroom cloud—

a marked absence of human presence in the geometrical streets; a triumph of Fascist architecture left over from the war—

after it registered the deathly vibration. So much for outer space being far away.



The only one awake at the desolate dark hour it chose to land was a drunk
 who hijacked Piero's Alpha Romeo and, distracted by something unfamiliar and bright
 in the night sky, veered and ended deep in the Olympic lake that wasn't there
 the last time he looked. Too late. Frogmen from the crew descend
 and through the murk discern two headlights
 still burning, still gleaming as the car clears the water.



Everything she looks at takes on life, the umbrella pines
 never more beautiful than now;

and under her eyes they fill
 like sails after an interminable lull

with the wind rushing through them to keep time with the fair-haired woman
 who, having come through the coruscating night-long quarrel on top,

exhales an exhilaration that widens avenues and parts congestion, armed with mere
 awareness. Not even the crowd at the stock exchange can put a hitch in her stride,

nor the rendezvous with her mother
 and the avaricious lingo that infests, infects.

A translator by profession, she's free to observe.
 And seizes the chance to track a big-time loser to his lair

where he orders a tranquilizer, pours it into an unclouded glass,
 and proceeds mechanically to a lunch place where no one

could divine his misfortune.
 She's learning what she needs to relearn.

Somebody else can translate her ex-lover's novel.



How many people can stake a claim on one woman?
 There's only so much time. And everything she does

I wish she would do over again with identical attention,
 since I cannot encompass the changeable,

fleet expressions aimed at no one, yet available.
 Her rapture when the propeller plane enters

the nimbus clouds, lit from inside.
 Her astonished gaze when the white,

unearthly flagpoles rattle on a bridge at night.
 How rapid her acceptance of another man within

hours after she's loosed from her longtime lover.



No one, nothing, has been more patient than the shadows.
 What a solid impression they make on the jagged, roughened,

broken-down stone walls and smooth, stark verticals
 that grew alongside her, curtailed while she developed—

maintaining disorder against sterile acceptance
 where the question that function is the highest

order is no longer a question, but a way
 of life oiling passage through this world.

Their achievements swept away by the brand that stuck: Fascist.
 Many wish Socrates were alive to ask, "Then were all Fascists bad?"

And if so, were all who opposed them—good?”
In his heavenly messages, the great Fascist poet D’Annunzio

addresses twenty-first century man, “If you’d gone our way,
you would have more time for poetry.

Now, my friends, you’re as endangered as me,
but you’d rather live in denial than own up to your discontent.”

Night falls. Rain falls. Water pours from a hole in a barrel,
leaves a trail I would follow, past the happy, shrieking

children to the source
of their delight: a sprinkler

which an impervious time-clock attendant
instantly shuts off; and the wire

fences dissolve for the woman to pass through as she
proceeds resolutely

from what will never be, to what is—



How often I’ve wished some revival house would screen *The Eclipse*
on a day when I wasn’t in another state.



“My house is built on a void left by the Romans.
The void is taking over.”

—Michelangelo Antonioni

My memory of *The Eclipse* will always be shaky,
spliced together with segments from other of A's films

with Monica Vitti, through Monica Vitti, but not about
Monica Vitti; only what we see through her

and not being able to take my eyes off her,
I am forever, forever. . . I don't know.

To know—is beyond my ken.
And now it hits: to ask my wife, Madelaine, who so often sees

what is obscure to me why I never tire of this
one film, and not another. . . Gratify me with an answer—?

Not her. “You know why.” Maybe this is why I never tire of her—
answers play no part in it.

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Co-conspirators: the discarded footage of a real
solar eclipse, misrepresented objects distressed by having been shown

in a wrong light, and viewers who felt let down, left out—of the final
takes. Combustible stuff.

One woman takes up the screen.
Even when she isn't on it.

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“Terrific thrust!”

—boys shooting off rockets in a field
in *La Notte*

“I guess that A is like Kubrick in a way.
The care taken in choosing projects.

The relatively small output—compared to their contemporaries—
the pressure for each film to extend

the possibilities of the art; to take
the mechanical aspects—the camera—

to the limits of their language and surpass
the vocabulary so that the adventures

of the characters run in vaguely parallel lines
to the sheerly formal, technical

aspects about which I know no more
than what I witnessed.

Kubrick filmed *A Space Odyssey*.

A had used his cache to cadge from JFK

a ticket to ride—to the moon, and further—
he never put a lid on it.

It was the flight itself that didn't come to be.
After—the death of Kennedy.

Both men's scenarios required shots
without precedent which forced

them to invent on the spot and hope
the weather, crew and camera would

cooperate; almost always imagination
overcame logic as if the ensemble of men

and machines managed to stretch
out of gratitude for being

tested—taken to and beyond
their limits; or, more simply, used.”



The last half of *The Passenger* was shot in Spain.
As mind turned to Hemingway, bullfights.

The arena. But once he found the arena
outside the Hotel de la Gloria, he was stuck:

his camera couldn't take in the entire site.
There was only one camera

rumored to do what he needed
to take the place of broken close-ups

to complete a 360-degree reversal in one
long shot. Only one camera, Canadian, a Wesscom,

16 mm; he needed 35,
so it would have to be mounted

on a gyroscopic crane once it reached the grille
behind which Locke lay down to die.

And once it escapes it looks around—
startled, curious, uncertain in a world

without bars as it turns
with the blues of sea and sky converging.



“But the most amazing sequence was in another film
I wasn’t in: the beach scene in *Le Amiche*

requiring so many setups
on frigid, gray, wintry afternoons

that no matter how many times I got A
to tell it again I still lagged behind his narrative

as I could not keep from mulling over bits
of the awkward, weird, cruelly thoughtless

and revealing dialogue; interchanges
that revealed more about these women,

showed them more naked and exposed
than if they had taken off their clothes,

which brings back the line offered by
Mariella that the clothes a woman looks best in

is—her skin! (*Laughs.*) I like to think
that as the thought sunk in

the men, watching, would stir, swell, and rise.
The sentence exposed all women, made men

hyperaware in a way they couldn’t prepare for;
all those strangled gasps, thwarted couplings,

sand, wind and the tide coming in
and everyone changing places like chessmen.

No wonder he balked when I asked him to tell it again;
I am worn out by this modest attempt to tell it

once, to merely point—”



We are, as she is, laboring to find a way
to be at ease with being uneasy.

The last time we saw Vitti she stands in an open doorway
hips tilted and, as the camera extends this shot, she steps

on the switch to turn out the light
and is thrown into silhouette,

the most beautiful frieze
I had ever seen in a motion picture.