

De Interpretatione, Umberto Eco

De Interpretatione

The Difficulty of Being Marco Polo
(On the Occasion of Antonioni's China Film)

What happened in Venice last Saturday fell somewhere between science fiction and comedy all'italiana, with a dash of Western thrown in. In the wagon train circle, desperately resisting, were the Venice Biennale officials. Around them galloped Chinese diplomats, the Italian foreign minister, the Italian ambassador to Peking, the Italian-Chinese Association, the police, firemen, and other Sinophiles. The story is noteworthy. China was protesting the imminent showing of Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo* at La Fenice. The Italian government had done everything possible to prevent the showing, while the Biennale had resisted the government in the name of the right to know and of freedom of artistic expression; at the last moment the prefect, coming to the aid of Peking, discovered that La Fenice was unusable as a movie hall (after nothing but films had been seen there all week).

The president of the Biennale let drop at a press conference a few well-chosen words of "pity" for the prefect, "forced into such a vile business," and got on the phone to his colleagues. Within half an hour he got hold of the Olimpia movie house, where Barbra Streisand was fleeing, pursued by stampeding cattle. Here the screening took place while police held an enormous, tense crowd at bay so that no incident could give the prefect (their direct superior) an excuse to cancel even this last expedient. Antonioni, nervous and troubled, was once again suffering his personal and paradoxical drama—the antifascist artist who went to China inspired by affection and respect and who found himself accused of being a fascist, a reactionary in the pay of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism, hated by 800 million persons.

Now the Biennale did with firmness and dignity what should have been done long ago: It gave us the chance to see and see again the three and a half hours of incriminated documentary, so that now we can finally open a political and aesthetic debate about it.

What is Antonioni's China? Those who saw it on TV remember it as a work that displayed, from the start, an attitude of warm and cordial participation in the great saga of the Chinese people; an act of justice on TV's part which finally revealed to millions of viewers a real China, human and peaceful beyond any Western propagandistic schema. All the same, the Chinese have denounced this film as an inconceivable act of hostility, an insult to the Chinese people.

It has been said that Antonioni's film is only a pretext, a *casus belli* chosen by a Peking power group to advance the anti-Confucian campaign. But even if that were true, the fact remains that a *casus belli*, to work, must be credible: A world war can be started by the murder of an archduke, but not by the murder of a footman. Where is the archduke in Antonioni's documentary?

So we must look at the entire work from a different viewpoint: not from an Italian point of view, but from a Chinese point of view. This is not easy, since it amounts to activating all one's anthropological antennae, alert to the fact that words and images acquire different meanings according to the cultures which interpret them. Saturday night I got lucky, because I had the opportunity to see the film while a young

Chinese movie critic from Hong Kong—who regarded and still regards this work sternly and polemically, identifying himself with the values and culture of the People's Republic—provided a shot-by-shot commentary on it.

Now serious ideological objections can unquestionably be made to Antonioni's work. A Western artist, inclined to plumb the depths of existential problems and to emphasize the representation of personal relationships rather than abstract dialectical problems and the class struggle, tells us about the daily life of the Chinese within the revolution instead of showing the revolution as the moment of a primary contradiction, within which poles of secondary contradiction develop. Furthermore, a director capable of speaking with masterly skill by stressing the inessential, the secondary episode charged with multiple meanings and subtle ambiguities, tries to open a dialogue with an audience better accustomed to great frontal oppositions, symbolic characterizations in clear ideological cipher. Here is enough to start a serious debate about the ends and means of revolutionary art, and it is no use for Antonioni to defend the rights (for us, incontestable) of his poetic vision, of his artistic eye's special interpretation; another aesthetic opposes him, an aesthetic which seems to negate the rights of art, an aesthetic which in reality reaffirms them but in a way that is foreign to Western tradition.

If this were all, a splendid chance for confrontation would have presented itself, and China would have become an occasion for mass showings followed by political debate. Instead China unleashed an almost physical reaction, a violent and offended rejection.

The China question reminds us that when political debate and artistic representation involve different cultures on a worldwide scale, art and politics are also mediated by anthropology and thus by semiotics. We cannot initiate a dialogue between different cultures on identical class problems if we do not first resolve the problem of the symbolic superstructures through which different civilizations represent to themselves the same political and social problems.

What discourse did Antonioni address to the Western public with his film? In a few words, I would say the following: "Here is a vast and unknown country that I can only look at, not explain in depth. I know that this country used to live under immensely unjust feudal conditions, and now I see the beginnings, through daily struggle, of a new justice. To Western eyes this justice might have the look of widespread, austere poverty. But this poverty creates the possibility of dignified survival, it produces people who are calm and much more human than we are, at times it comes close to our ideal of serenity, harmony with nature, affection in personal relationships, tenacious inventiveness that resolves with simplicity the problem of redistribution of wealth in an often greedy territory.

I am not so much interested in seeing those cases where the Chinese were able to construct industries like Western ones (we know that they even have the atomic bomb); it seems to me more interesting to show you how they were able to construct a factory, or hospital, or child-care center from a few scraps, under working conditions based on reciprocal respect. I want to tell you how much sorrow and how much work that task cost, and suggest to you the measure of happiness—different from ours—that it all could encompass, perhaps also for us."

All this entailed the search for China as a potential Utopia by the frenetic, neurotic West. When our art critics speak of *arte povera* they mean a kind of art rescued from the commercial gallery circuit, and when they say *medicina povera* they mean a medicine that substitutes the rediscovery of the relationship between human beings and medicinal herbs, and the possibility of a new, popular knowledge, for the poisoning of our pharmaceutical industries. But what sense can the same words have for a country where "poverty" meant, only a few decades ago, death by starvation for entire generations of children, class genocide, sickness, ignorance? And while the Chinese see a suddenly acquired collective "fortune," the film commentary speaks about a serene and just "poverty."

Where the film means "simplicity" for "poverty," the Chinese viewer reads "failure." When his Chinese escorts told Antonioni, with pride, that a refinery had been built from nothing, using scavenged material, the film emphasizes the miracle of "this humble factory, made with discarded materials"—and Western taste for the ingeniousness of bricolage, to which we currently attribute aesthetic value, is at play in this linguistic formula. But the Chinese see in it an insistence on an "inferior" industry, just at the historical moment when they are successfully closing their industrial gap. When the film celebrates fealty to the past and proposes a model of integration between development and tradition, the Chinese (engaged in a struggle to destroy an unjust past) see praise of feudalism and an insinuation that nothing has changed.

The root of the misunderstanding becomes evident in a theatrical presentation with which Antonioni ends his documentary: Smiling Chinese athletes, dressed in vivid colors, guns slung on their shoulders, make their way up tall poles with acrobatic energy. This is Revolutionary China, which presents a strong picture of itself. But Antonioni's film offers a tender, docile picture. For us, gentleness is opposed to neurotic competition, but for the Chinese that docility decodes as resignation. Antonioni explores with realistic gusto the faces of the old and of children; but Chinese revolutionary art is not realistic, it is symbolic, and presents, in posters as in film, an "ideal type" that goes beyond ethnic characteristics (as if Sicilians decided, and with justification, to represent themselves through the faces of Sicilians of Norman ancestry, blond and blue-eyed).

Doesn't it occur to us Italians to feel betrayed when a foreign film depicts us with the faces of Southern immigrants or Sardinian shepherds in costume, while we tend to identify our country with freeways and factories? The narration states (and it is a positive thing in our eyes) that the Chinese surround suffering and sentiment with shame and reserve. And a culture that rewards dynamism, enthusiasm, and extroverted competitiveness reads "reserve" as "hypocrisy." Antonioni thinks about the individual dimension and speaks of sufferings as an uneliminable constant in the life of every person, bound up with passion and death; the Chinese read "suffering" as a social ill and see in it the insinuation that injustice has not been eliminated, but rather covered up.

Thus we see how the now famous criticism in Renmin Ribao could regard the shot of the Nanking bridge as an attempt to make it appear distorted and unstable, because a culture that prizes frontal representation and symmetrical distance shots cannot accept the language of Western cinema, which, to suggest impressiveness, foreshortens and frames from below, prizing asymmetry and tension over balance. And the shot of Peking's T'ien An Men Square is seen as a denunciation of swarming mass disorder,

whereas for Antonioni such a shot is the picture of life, and an ordered shot would be the picture of death or would evoke the Nuremberg stadium.

Antonioni depicts the vestiges of feudal superstition, and then immediately afterward he shows students returning to work in the fields, spades slung over their shoulders, and the post-'68 viewer thinks that is justice: The Chinese critic sees another logic (today students work as hard in the fields as they did in the past) and becomes indignant. Cutting, too, is a language, and this language is historical, linked to different material conditions of life; the same shots can portray different things and different people. The same thing happens with colors, denounced by the Chinese as unbearably pale and cold, and rightly so, if you compare China with a film like *The Red Detachment of Women*, where extremely bright colors acquire a precise linguistic value and directly symbolize ideological positions.

I could go on at length and point out that the dialogue between people (and between people of the same class who live in different cultures) must be sustained by a historical and social awareness of cultural differences. We must not blame Antonioni, for he made a film for the Western public; but he might have realized that his film could not remain a work of art and would immediately acquire the weight of a diplomatic note—in which every word is fraught with ambivalence. The consultants of the People's Republic should have realized it too, since they showed Antonioni the places and things to film, insisting on the peaceful aspects of their society; and it was a year before those consultants were denounced by other critics who in their turn are now displaying remarkable ethnocentrism and proving incapable of seeing the different effects that the film can have inside and outside China.

But perhaps the greatest responsibility rests with the Italy China Association, whose task is precisely that of resolving these misunderstandings, supporting on more than one level of "translation from culture to culture" the cause of understanding between peoples. In introducing the Chinese protest into Italy, the Association acted objectively as a factor of misunderstanding; it widened the gap and fomented a reactionary game (which enlisted willing ministers, prefects, police superintendents, and old-school diplomats for whom it is important for the Chinese to remain yellow, treacherous, inscrutable, and pig-tailed).

Finally, if useful mediation had been undertaken, we would then have been able to clarify the grossest misunderstandings. For example, the notorious scene of the pigs over which—for pure reasons of sound mix—a musical fragment is inserted.

Unfortunately this fragment happened to resemble somewhat a wellknown Chinese patriotic song, evoking in the Chinese viewer the same reaction that a bishop might experience seeing a clinch accompanied by the hymn *Tantum Ergo*. It seems there was a consultant from the People's Republic on hand who realized nothing and told no one about the blunder. And then there is the fact that the narration, intending to be dry and objective, leaves too much room to isolated words, which thus acquire a disproportionate value:

When it is said that a certain restaurant (rather modest from the outside) is the best in the city, probably the meaning is that it serves the best food, but the viewer could infer that it is the most imposing. And when a historical truth is related, such as the fact that modern Shanghai was laid out by colonial powers, a handbill distributed in Italy

by the Italy-China Association maintains (in fact, without justification) that industrial Shanghai was built by the People's Republic "with the help of the imperialists." All these are slights that Antonioni could easily have avoided if only someone had brought them to his attention. But by now the situation has deteriorated beyond repair.

Now Chinese and Sinophiles have become rigid in their rejection.

Antonioni has closed himself up again in his personal sorrow of the artist-in-good-faith and accepts only with difficulty the idea that from now on the debate will go far beyond his film and will involve on both sides—apart from political questions which elude us—unexorcised phantoms of ethnocentric dogmatism and aesthetic exoticism, and symbolic superstructures that obscure material relations and delay the course of history. The Venice Biennale pointed a way; it reopened critical discussion. We hope that this will not be in vain.

Already last Saturday evening, after the showing, a more open debate was in the air, beyond scandalmongering. And to illustrate that fact, journalists' eyes were fixed on Antonioni and the young Chinese critic, who, at two in the morning, at a restaurant table, were polemically exchanging ideas and impressions. And in the corner, ignored by everyone, a young woman with soft, sensual eyes was following the discussion, accepting the fact that more important considerations were at stake and that the protagonist of the evening was the Chinese. This was the film actress Maria Schneider, but few would have recognized her.

1977

The end