

## R. D. Laing Goes To the Movies

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There are a number of interesting references to film and screen in Laing's books, and in the course of his career Laing was involved in a number of film projects.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more significant was the relationship between Laing's thought and European cinema, and especially with the films of Italian directors Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Marco Bellocchio.<sup>2</sup> Dysfunctional family tales were the very stuff of European cinema during the 1960s; one need only think of Ingmar Bergman's intense contributions to the genre. In Bergman's films the psychological influences were often those of Freud or Jung, and this is also true of Fellini. Fellini had read Jung under the supervision of Jungian psychoanalyst Ernst Bernhard. Nevertheless, for many Italian directors of the 1960s, the themes of Laing's writings—pathological miscommunication, environmental degradation, and women's oppression—provided rich sources of inspiration. The phenomenological appeal of cinema to Laing and the three Italian directors mentioned is perhaps summed up by Laing himself, quoting Proust, to the effect that the "true voyage" is not to look at one hundred different lands through the same eyes, but to look at the same land as if through one hundred different pairs of eyes.<sup>3</sup>

### *Laing and Fellini on the Master and the Slave*

In *The Divided Self* Laing notes the apparently cathartic effect of film "from the existential point of view" in the case of Marie, a twenty-year old student drop-out. Laing reports that "something very decisive" had occurred to Marie while watching Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954).<sup>4</sup> Laing explicitly acknowledges the existential value of this film as instrumental in Marie's recovery, as it presents her with a female experience that is inspirational.<sup>5</sup> In the case of *La Strada* a young woman, although treated appallingly, is still able (unlike Marie herself) to see and enjoy the beauty of the simple pleasures in life. Although Fellini's *La Strada* is *avant la lettre* to Laing's philosophy, what both Laing and Marie see in *La Strada* is something phenomenological; Marie in the act of watching the film, and Laing in interpreting his own experience of her experience of interpreting the film. Both find themselves engaged in a meditation on the Master-Slave narrative.

Laing only acknowledged his philosophical influences *en passant*, but Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kojève, Sartre, and Lacan are always present in some sense. Consequently Laing's philosophy was rooted in long-established narratives of recognition, misrecognition, and non-recognition in European thought.<sup>6</sup> For Laing the starting point of any analysis of existential crisis was "love," love which was, in turn, regulated by patterns of Desire (capitalized here to denote Alexander Kojève's special Hegelian sense of the word in his *Introduction to Reading Hegel*).<sup>7</sup>

According to the existentialist reading of Hegel by Kojève, Sartre, and Lacan, human Desire is always desire for another's desire. Unlike animal desire for an object, for food, for example, in which the object is destroyed or negated, in such cases there is no real advance of consciousness. In the case of human Desire, on the other hand, Desire is the struggle for another Desire, not for an object. Kojève put it like this,

Desire is human only if the one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other; if he wants to "possess" or "to assimilate" the Desire taken as Desire—that is to say, if

he wants to be “desired” or “loved,” or, rather, “recognized” in his human value, in his reality as a human individual.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Fellini’s *La Strada*, pathological communication is expressed in the play of recognitions between the main protagonists. In the first instance there is the complete non-recognition of the bullying strongman Zampanò (played by Anthony Quinn) of his assistant, and in turn there is the partial recognition by the assistant Gelsomina (played by Giulietta Masina) of the strongman’s complete domination of her, and finally there is her further conscious awareness that he is really dependent upon her, that his independence is a dependent-independence. Gelsomina’s desire to stay with the bullying strongman, despite the way he treats her, is a form of ‘love’ (or self-affirmation) which provides her with a sense of her own value, it is a love of ‘life.’ This was the lesson that was taken from the film by Marie, according to Laing in *The Divided Self*.

Human Desire is expressed symbolically in the language of signifiers, such as in the phrase the ‘language of love.’<sup>9</sup> As such, these elements—mythical, symbolic, imaginary, and real—are shared by all language users, and this is also a view Laing shared.<sup>10</sup> The ‘sign’ of love can be almost anything invested with Desire. Laing reports in one of his therapy notebooks the following story concerning one of his clients,

He was never jealous of her. He encouraged her to go out with other men. She would come back and report their intimacies to him in detail. One day he saw her put a candy bar in her handbag before she went out. He knew she never touched candy. She had never given him a candy bar. He beat her up, badly, there and then.<sup>11</sup>

Human Desire is quite different from *demand*, and demand, in turn, is also different from *need*. Need or ordinary desire—and this is especially true in the case of both Heidegger and Lacan’s philosophy—is something we share with other animals such as thirst, hunger and so forth, which may be satisfied at least for a time. However, need should not be confused with Demand, like the demand of the demanding child (Lacan), which can never be satisfied because it is inexhaustible. This is the reason why very young children are so tiring for their parents. According to Lacan such demands are inexhaustible because they are all sublimations of the need to be loved, *i.e.*, to be recognized, perceived, and attended to.<sup>12</sup> In this sense then ‘love’ is also *Being* in a state of demand, as in the case of Gelsomina in *La Strada*, and wanting to give something that one cannot give while simultaneously wishing to receive something that a lover cannot return. This is because in demand the individual believes that he/she wants an object, while what they really demand is Desire itself. In essence this is a combative relationship of mutual antagonism.

Daniel Burston has suggested that Laing’s account of love was shaped by his personal experience with Jutta, his second wife. According to Burston, when Laing discovered that Jutta was having extra-marital affairs it shattered his confidence, and he increasingly questioned his own ability to read people.<sup>13</sup> Burston says, “in the past he [Laing] had often remarked that love is a lucid awareness of the other person in her essential suchness, free of the illusions generated by hatred, fear, and greed or the desire to turn her into something she is not.” Thus Burston continues, “love discloses depths in the loved one that are invisible to others.” The implication is that following Laing’s own misrecognition of what kind of person his wife was he later took a more pessimistic view (“thoughts which came later,” suggests Burston), viewing love simply as another tool in the struggle to get what one wants [*sic* *Knots* and the unpublished manuscript, *The Lies of Love*].

While there are many instances in Laing's texts which demonstrate that Laing often viewed *love* as a mixture of negotiation, acceptance, empathy, and intimacy (as in some moments of Fellini's *La Strada*), and although Burston is ultimately correct in holding that Laing considered human relationships to be adversarial, not cooperative (for example in the Sartre-Camus dispute Laing sides with the more combative Sartre), Burston somewhat overstates the importance of the Laing biography. Sounding much like Martin Heidegger Laing said of *love* in *The Divided Self*, and long before his relationship with Jutta, that "no word has been more prostituted."<sup>14</sup> Laing was always pessimistic about love. Laing always held that there were limits to recognition and empathy. He acknowledged, for example, that although "I take many feelings to be private," "this was not always so," since "people often feel that they can actually feel another person's pain, or think directly another's thoughts," but he remonstrates, "the body-for-self of the other is essentially inaccessible," and an area of "unqualified privacy."<sup>15</sup> Confusion on this point arises because not all 'feelings' are the same kind of thing: some are *emotions* such as love, hate, and jealousy, and some are *moods*. While emotions are at least controllable, moods, unlike emotions are determined by the ineffable and unknowable, and according to Laing these point towards a deeper existential problem.

Following Heidegger's line of argument in *Being and Time* Laing drew a distinction between our emotions and our moods. In phenomenological terms the emotions are directed towards some object (again this is why 'love' is such a problem). One gets angry with some 'thing,' or jealous of some 'one,' and to some degree one is able to control these feelings and emotions. A mood, on the other hand, is something which is not directed towards any particular thing, but is the result of some feeling about the world in general. The German term Heidegger uses to describe this phenomenon is *Befindlichkeit*, not an everyday term, but meaning something like a harmony between feeling and situation (not necessarily a good or bad thing). A person might feel 'blue' or 'elegiac' for example, for no discernable reason, at least not to themselves. Laing himself gave the example of two men looking at a landscape painting,

To one man the landscape may simply be itself, full of its 'is-ness': he feels a delicate sadness, perhaps, at his otherness from it. To the other the 'same' trees and sky and grass are seen as creation: as a veil, revealing through themselves their creator.<sup>16</sup>

According to Laing the emotions of the viewer had nothing to do with the object or how it was seen. If the landscape is invoked as a more general representation of the world the same landscape appears differently to different viewers. Why? Like Heidegger Laing thought that among the various possible moods there is a special place for anxiety, joy, and boredom.<sup>17</sup> For Laing these different moods present the world to each individual with very different realities. He says, "in so far as we experience the world differently, in a sense we live in different worlds."<sup>18</sup> Thus Laing says each of us, taken as individuals, are [as] separate as constellations in *space*, [my emphasis].<sup>19</sup> This existential alienation, he continues, is "insidious." This is also why we allow ourselves to be drawn into the kind of social fantasy systems that Laing detailed in *Self and Others* (such as group solidarity). However, the problem is that this attempt to preserve one's 'identity' is only achieved, paradoxically, by submerging what little personal identity there already is in the *Other*, thus Zampanò's existential collapse in the final denouement of *La Strada* after he learns of Gelsomina's lonely death. Alienation, for example, is ineffable, like feeling "blue," and is inherent in the human condition and is not merely an epiphenomenon of material forces or economic relations.<sup>20</sup>

Our loneliness in the world is a result of our troubling failure to understand the existential implications of time and space, which are, in turn a product of a modern discordance between science and myth. Thus, says Laing, referring to the moody and “enchanted nostalgia” of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*,

Time is empty. It is as futile as it is inescapable. A false eternity, made out of all the time on one’s hands which drags on eternally. It is an attempt to live outside time by living in a part of time, to live timelessly in the past, or in the future. The present is never realized.<sup>21</sup>

According to Laing our alienation is always first a self-alienation, an alienation which, by turns, discloses and submerges patterns of the authentic (trying to realize the present), and the inauthentic (the failure to realize the present).<sup>22</sup> As we shall see when we turn to the cinema of Antonioni, inauthentic relationships are ambiguous, seldom satisfying but often lived out with a kind of lonely mechanical complacency that finds a mirror image in our relationships with urban and industrial environments.

Returning to the narcissistic demands of love and the impossibility of a certain kind of love, such as the Desire for the ‘object’ of our love, we are now better placed to grasp something like Laing’s pessimism regarding the idea of love, “the most prostituted of words.” The lonely prostitute Cabiria in Fellini’s *Nights of Cabiria*, (1957) now readily comes to mind. Certainly our emotional demands are often temporarily satisfied, but our Desire to be the Desire of Desire falls prey to our inexplicably difficult moodiness. We become bored, or anxious, or joyful, but in each case we seem to have little real control over our ‘feelings.’ Guilietta Masina goes on to play other heroines of self-discovery in many of Fellini’s films of the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the neglected and abandoned Juliet in *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), thus Laingian themes becoming more explicit in Fellini’s work during the 1960s and 1970s.

Like Laing (and Antonioni, as we shall see), author and critic Roland Barthes challenged the social construction of love in his *A Lovers Discourse: Fragments* (1977), but did so without trying to assert some definitive theory of the meaning of love, or of the meaning of anything for that matter. The ‘Lover’ of the discourse is the archetype of the unrequited lover, in other words, a person in a state of non-recognition. As Barthes’ text unfolds our hapless lover becomes increasingly distraught as he struggles to read the ‘signs’ of love in the Other. As the lover tries to place himself into a false, ideal reality, this reality becomes increasingly doomed as the mythical and illusory elements of ‘love’ take hold. One rather funny episode is the sign of the “dark sunglasses,” where Barthes’ unrequited lover says,

...yet, to hide a passion totally... is inconceivable; not because the human subject is too weak, but because passion is in essence made to be seen: the hiding must be seen: I want you to know that I am hiding something from you, that is the active paradox I must resolve.

Devotees of Federico Fellini’s films will instantly acknowledge there is a special place in his work for dark glasses. Ray Bans became a modern cultural icon after they were worn so stylishly by Marcello Mastroianni in *La Dolce Vita* (1960), and by both Mastroianni and Anouk Aimée in *8½* (1963), who wear them even in the evening.

## *Laing, Antonioni and Moods of Love*

Laing's final burst of creative effort was a work in progress he called *The Lies of Love: a study of sexual jealousy and deception*.<sup>23</sup> The manuscript, held by the University of Glasgow, suggests that from a qualitative point of view this was not going to be Laing's finest hour.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless the manuscript demonstrated that at very least Laing remained concerned with an issue that he himself once defined as his guiding motif. As he states in *The Facts of Life*, "The main fact of life for me is love or its absence."<sup>25</sup> In his long, but uneven literary career, Laing frequently returned to the subject of love, and especially to questions of love, authenticity, and madness. In his quest to work out a theory of the emotions Laing followed Heidegger. Laing was a creature of his time and certainly the existential questions of life were in the air during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Laing was among the few able to relate what often appeared to be something of a trendy philosophical fad such as "existential phenomenology" to much deeper social and cultural processes. Another cultural figure of the period that often appeared to share Laing's outlook to a remarkable degree was film director Michelangelo Antonioni.

Antonioni's writings and films provide us with a series of cinematic images of a recognizably Laingian world, giving a more visceral visual representation than texts alone can achieve. Antonioni once said in an interview, "One of my faults is always seeing in books things that could be turned into films."<sup>26</sup> The point of departure for Laing at the beginning of the *Lies of Love* manuscript is again Roland Barthes, and specifically Barthes' work *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977).<sup>27</sup> Antonioni shared Laing's enthusiasm for this text, and at one point indicates that he would like to make a film based upon it. What interests both Laing and Antonioni with regard to Barthes' text is the contested idea of love, the question of love's meaning. Barthes posited a mythic and impossible love similar to Laing's and Antonioni's.

The idea of taking Laing seriously regarding the question of love and the emotions is not made easier by the appearance of a bizarre book that he co-authored with a thirty-seven year old American psychologist, Roberta Russell, *R.D. Laing and Me: Lessons in Love*.<sup>28</sup> As Russell herself explains in her forward to this self-help book, she managed to sell this project to Laing on the basis that it would be a possible money-spinner, and Laing was apparently strapped for cash at the time. The idea was that Russell would teach Laing the dark arts of modern self-promotion and he would in turn validate her self-worth and help her lose weight. Russell's proposition was that she and Laing could demonstrate to a wider audience that a private therapeutic relationship could exist between two individuals outside of any kind of institutional setting. A process she called "co-counseling."<sup>29</sup> Russell's proposed method was to live with Laing and his family and to use a tape recorder, often placed in his study or on his kitchen table, and to 'relate' to one another in a somewhat forced and artificial way. A procedure, one might note, that would not be out of step with one of Antonioni's own cinematic creations. In any case, Laing and Russell went on to eventually discuss some tangible and mutually-agreed upon personal problems; Russell had problems with her weight, and apparently with her self-esteem, and Laing required money. For her part Russell claimed that Laing's real problem was *really* his drinking. Not an auspicious beginning.

The book makes for some embarrassing and difficult reading, Russell's questions are often impertinent and Laing's answers evasive. Often Laing's wife Jutta was involved and one can only imagine what she thought of this new 'experiment?' The tension between the protagonists was palpable. Complaining that Laing was "inaccessible," for example, Russell said to Jutta, "I told Ronnie that his problem is that he has a general defense against being close to anyone."<sup>30</sup> By turns

childlike, patronizing, self-pitying, vain, and self-centered, again Russell to Laing, “..I adore you. I think you are so fabulous,” gushed Russell as she struggled to mold her taped conversations into a therapeutic narrative, and trying to attach some deeper meaning to this grisly economic and emotional *Quid pro quo*.<sup>31</sup> The subtitle of Russell and Laing’s *Lessons on Love*, should perhaps have been ‘lessons on vanity and economics?’ I will return to the significance of this theme *vis a vis* the writings and films of Antonioni in a moment.

We might also ask what Laing and Russell’s criteria of success was going to be in this endeavor? Presumably success could be declared when Russell managed to lose a few pounds (how was the reader to verify that one wonders?), and when Laing, either stopped drinking, or when he managed to increase his book sales in the U.S., his increasingly reluctant golden goose.<sup>32</sup> The ‘trip’ of the book came to a fantasy conclusion, literally Russell’s fantasy when Laing, whose marriage to Jutta was virtually over, eventually visited Russell in New York City and they consummated their relationship.<sup>33</sup> Although the reader could see through Russell’s ultimate motive from the beginning, Russell herself is surprised to discover, in a masterful piece of self-delusion worthy of the Freudian classics, that what she really wanted all along was to be the mother of Laing’s children. When Laing finally announces to Roberta that he will not have a baby with her, she contacts Clancy Sigal, author of a highly critical fictional account of Laing’s life called *Zone of the Interior* in search of some solace. In this story erotic satisfaction is passed over as the final denouement moves toward an emotional climax of betrayal, disappointment, and ultimately a failure to connect. Laing, in a sense, was now living out his own philosophy of the emotions.

Roberta Russell, feeling hurt, strung along and manipulated by Laing discovered that Clancy Sigal had some insight regarding Laing, what she called his “sobering revelations.”<sup>34</sup> But what was the “lesson in love?” The promise suggested by the book’s subtitle? Apparently the lesson was nothing more interesting than a realization on her part of the need to forgive, regain some composure and a measure of magnanimity. Despite it all, said Russell in the closing pages of the book, she would forgive Laing, since she was “...no longer angry with him,” she had decided to “find a man of her own,” she concluded “Therein lies the genius of Laing. He knew how to love.”<sup>35</sup> The genius *lies* in love, or perhaps in *his* love lies his genius? Russell unwittingly gestured towards an unstated antinomy at the center of their narcissistic project, and in Laing’s thought. Rather, in the ultimately successful, but much delayed erotic encounter of the needy couple we find not love’s work, but its dissolution and decay. Perhaps in the very impossibility of Laing’s love, in Laing’s impossible *love*, there was a Laingian model of the emotions that was entirely missed by Roberta Russell.

### ***Antonioni and the Environment of Impossible Love***<sup>36</sup>

Between 1960 and 1965 Michelangelo Antonioni produced four films which mapped out a recognizably Laingian landscape of love. The first three films are considered by film critics as a tetralogy: *L’Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L’Eclisse* (1962). The fourth film, *Red Desert* (*Deserto russo*, 1965), had as its theme the relationship between industrial landscapes and schizophrenia, a Laingian denouement to Antonioni’s creative burst of cinematic history. Italian critic Lorenzo Cucco has defined these films, including *Red Desert* “la tetralogia dei sentimenti,” or as a “tetralogy of feelings.”<sup>37</sup>

The similarities between Antonioni’s vision and Laing’s were not coincidental, both men were interested in psychotherapy, both lived in spiritual and industrial geographies that were being

violently plunged into a period of suburban renewal, post-war reconstruction, and Cold War paranoia (for Laing Glasgow and London; for Antonioni Milan and Rome). *La Notte* for example, opens with a descent in an elevator which looks over a cityscape of high-rise buildings which could easily be mistaken for Glasgow rather than Milan. Perhaps most importantly both Laing and Antonioni were interested in existential-phenomenological issues of personal relatedness and communicative pathology. “The first time I put an eye behind a camera,” recalled Antonioni, “it was in a lunatic asylum.”<sup>38</sup> In fact Antonioni’s films are phenomenological meditations *par excellence*.

In Antonioni’s cinema, machines take on a special significance; fans, blenders, toasters, telephones, cars, tape recorders, apartments blocks and so on, are all instruments that come between people, while the people are what he once described as “moving spaces.” When Valentina (Monica Vitti) and Giovanni (Marcello Mastroianni) try to get to know each other at a rather tedious bourgeois party in *La Notta*, there is an interesting bedroom scene. Valentina tries to reach out to Giovanni, she wants to tell him what kind of a person she is, so she plays him some recordings of her reflections on a reel-to-reel tape-recorder. However, when Valentina thinks she is not getting the response she is looking for, she rewinds the tape and deletes the recording with evident frustration. Like so much of the dialogue in Antonioni’s films, this rather pathetic and embarrassing attempt to communicate leads nowhere. The deeper existential problem is that these objects existed before the people; the scientific technological world does not really facilitate intimacy but is a paradoxical inheritance which cannot be renounced.

The obvious emotional alienation and loneliness of Antonioni’s characters is always juxtaposed with the sterile urban landscapes of modern Italian life. From an existential perspective, Antonioni’s discomfort is interesting because this alienation is not a product of a particular landscape, but rather the landscape is a mirror-image of the internal landscape of the characters’ emotional lives. Antonioni often directed his actors to move in a clumsy, almost robotic manner. For example Giovanni, the insecure and anxious writer (played by Marcello Mastroianni) walks around apparently without purpose, arms by his side, looking like one of the automatons reported by Laing in *The Divided Self*. The female characters in Antonioni’s films often gaze listlessly into space, and as one film critic has said of Antonioni’s direction, he often goes to chorographical pains to geometrize his actors in his angular shots. Another technique of Antonioni’s direction is his love of weird and impossible shots that disorient the viewer and his use of the false point-of-view. In one shot we see one of his characters looking out from a balcony window, and then the film cuts to what appears to be the view of the character that we first saw, but from a position which is clearly impossible. Again and again the phenomenology of Antonioni’s direction points to spaces that we can intend (in the phenomenological sense) as conscious objects, but which we do not really experience in our ordinary, everyday world.

In *L’Avventura* (in English, something like “the fling”) the entire plot of the film revolves around the absence of a female character rather than her presence. This phenomenological device allows Antonioni to tell a story apparently without middle, beginning, or end; or at least if there is a beginning, a middle, and an end they are certainly not presented chronologically. In *L’Avventura* we never find out where the missing Anna has gone. Perhaps she had fallen into the sea? A search by police boats turn up nothing, nor do we ever find out what happened to her. This gives the film a rather disturbing quality as our attention is increasingly drawn to the erotic space left between the protagonists of the film: Sandro, Anna’s lover (Gabriele Ferzetti), and Claudia, Anna’s best friend (Monica Vitti). Anna’s absence is really a presence because in her absence her lover and her best friend are inevitably attracted to one another, and their Desire simply displaces the missing Anna.

Like the world of Barthes' unrequited lover, and like Laing's world of 'love,' "whatever 'love' is," as Laing says sarcastically in *Self and Others*, the erotic inevitabilities of Antonioni's movies have no deeper meaning, as the protagonists move towards sexual intercourse. The characters are motivated by moods the origin of which remain unknown to the viewer.<sup>39</sup> Recall again Laing and Roberta Russell's rather bizarre project, a project that appeared to have been about lust and motherhood in search of a meaning.

Certainly Antonioni's characters are sensitive to landscapes but nowhere are attitudes towards these ever really explained. Much like Laing's writing in *The Voice of Experience*, Antonioni wrote in his piece *L'Avventura: A Moral Adventure*, that there is a disconnect between the ancient nature of human emotions, which he says are rooted in myth, ancient stories, biblical tales and so on (perhaps the pre-conscious source of our moods in a Jungian sense?), and between all of these and modern science.<sup>40</sup> Whereas science always looks forward, said Antonioni, our basic human sentiments were petrified in the past, and we are reluctant to try to reform them. Science, argues Antonioni, renounces false knowledge, yet our moral system does not; whereas science points towards what he calls a "cosmic vacuum," our morality posits no similar moral vacuum, and sex, or *Eros* more generally, is important to Antonioni as a filmmaker precisely because it is "ignoble and pointless." The parallels between Antonioni and Laing are striking in this regard. Laing, sounding like Antonioni, says, "The present discordance between one of the most important types of thought to arise in human history [science], and human experience itself, is profoundly disquieting."<sup>41</sup>

Phenomenology describes this disconnect between our so-called technical and scientific progress and our failure to re-evaluate our values accordingly as a colonization of the *lifeworld* of the subject. We haven't recalibrated our values because this colonization, like all forms of colonization, has been internalized and we ourselves are not always aware that (as Heidegger would have said), it has *always already* happened, although the signs are everywhere.<sup>42</sup> Antonioni's cinema, much like Laing's meditations in *The Divided Self* and in *The Voice of Experience*, tried to show how some of his characters can, and should perhaps exist only in the mood of the moment, as such in a temporary moment of authenticity (*Befindlichkeit*). Antonioni, for example, said of his films that they were an attempt to show how people really could exist in a "particular statement of the mood, or the moment." In one scene in *La Notte*, Valentina (Monica Vitti), says to Giovanni (Marcello Mastroianni) that her "misery is creeping back like a melancholy dog," and later she declares to him that "love restricts a person, it creates misunderstanding all around." Towards the end of *La Notte*, when it emerges that although Valentina is attracted to Giovanni she has decided not to sleep with him because he is married, she says to him, "whenever I try to communicate, love disappears." One can hardly imagine a more Laingian observation. In the closing scene of the film when Giovanni and his wife Lidia, a truly bored and unhappy couple, come together at dawn and go for a walk, and as the story inexorably moves towards their sexual union in the sand feature of a local golf course, Lidia says to Giovanni "I wish I no longer existed because I can't love you," yet they embrace passionately and have sex regardless.

In the third movie of the tetology, *L'Eclisse* ("The Eclipse"), a film generally regarded by critics as a masterpiece, Antonioni again covers now familiar terrain, but this time his point is given a more abstract and disturbing expression. In *L'Eclisse* we find a representation of the total eclipse of the emotions. Actors again are stripped of their naturalness and are reduced to automatons. Modern life, machines, empty urban streets, the futuristic mushroom-cloud restaurant in the EUR district of Rome, the stock exchange, the breeze blocks, and the construction sites, appear to undermine any attempt by the characters to connect in a meaningful way with their surroundings. There are

moments of serenity, such as Vittoria's (Monica Vitti again) short flight in a private plane, when they fly through clouds, but for the most part these modern urbanites are living an isolated and lonely existence. One six-minute scene which didn't make it into the final cut was a visit by Vittoria to a museum where she becomes fascinated by a fossil, a fossil which Antonioni later said was intended to represent the vast sweep of geological time, as opposed to the very short time human beings have here on earth.

The characters of *L'Eclisse* do not feel at home in this modernity, and they are strangers in a land that they seem barely able to recognize. Piero the stockbroker surveys the landscape while sitting on the grass with Vittoria and sighs, "I feel like I'm in a foreign country." There is a lack of connectedness to the contemporary world. Traditional Romantic Love is never on the agenda for any of the film's characters, and sex is again portrayed as transient and insignificant in the big scheme of things. The only real moment of intimacy between the couple, Piero and Vittoria, is interrupted by an office buzzer that is never explained. At one point Vittoria decides to call Piero to tell him that she does want to see him, but when he picks up the receiver she cannot bring herself to speak, and he screams at the handset in frustration while yet another attempt to communicate via modern technology fails.

Perhaps the most extraordinary scene however, is the final six or seven minutes of *L'Eclisse*, six or seven minutes which reportedly left audiences completely bemused. The two main characters, Piero and Vittoria completely disappear, and there follows a series of shots of the geometric patterns of contemporary urban architecture, empty streets, buses that pull into bus stops with false promise, and our anticipation of the arrival of one of the protagonists who never appear. In the final shot there is the empty street corner where the couple met several times earlier in the film, then a shot of a street lamp, then the word *finis*. Again the spaces are filled not with presence, but with the absence of characters. Antonioni's spaces of modern life, in their obvious material plenitude, seem to point to a paradoxical, inner emotional wasteland reminiscent of Laing's description of our modern 'reality' in *The Politics of Experience*. This is a violent process, but there is little overt violence in Antonioni's films. Unlike the violence that sometimes erupts in Laing's texts, the violence of Antonioni's films is latent; the mushroom-cloud restaurant, the crush and aggression of the Roman *borse*, and in the physical act of sex itself.

The similarity between the work of Laing and Antonioni might be dismissed as a coincidence, were it not for Antonioni's next project, *Red Desert*. This film strongly suggests a more direct relationship between Laing and Antonioni. If the tetralogy was primarily concerned with an analysis of the emotions (and moods) "worked out between individuals," as one film critic said at the time, in *Red Desert* Antonioni "is more concerned with the individual in relation to his surroundings."<sup>43</sup> The 'environment' in this case is the ravished industrial landscape of Northern Italy, and the story follows a descent into schizophrenia by the film's protagonist, Guiliana (again played by Antonioni's leading lady, Monica Vitti). This descent appears to replicate to an astonishing degree the descent of key characters charted by Laing in his works *The Divided Self*, *Self and Others*, and in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.

In her own passing critique of Laing, feminist scholar Elaine Showalter argues in *The Female Malady* (Chapter 9) that Laing was guilty of sexism on three counts: first, in his personal and professional life Laing did not always treat women as well as he should, blaming mothers and families for creating schizophrenics; second, Laing's therapeutic experiments exploited women; and

third, that Laing romanticized mental illness (presumably contributing to the cliché that women, being of a more romantic disposition are particularly prone to this condition).<sup>44</sup>

Gavin Miller (*R.D. Laing*, 2004) and Laing have adequately answered the first two criticisms offered by Showalter. In the case of the first charge Miller points out that when Laing did come across a case of domestic abuse, Laing said he removed the woman from her bad situation as quickly as possible, acting decisively in a situation where there was no time for therapy. With regard to Showalter's second charge, Miller also points out that Laing was always a sensitive reader of psychoanalytic accounts of women's experiences that were written by men, and especially by Freud. (I have made similar observations elsewhere concerning Laing's comments on the misuse of phenomenology by theorists like Binswanger, see Laing's comments on *Ellen West*, in *The Voice of Experience*, for example).<sup>45</sup> Further, Showalter's second accusation is predominantly based upon the difficulties faced by Mary Barnes, a person who had limited contact with Laing, and who was never one of Laing's patients. But what of the third more serious charge, that Laing romanticized madness, especially in *The Politics of Experience*?

Antonioni's film *Red Desert* (1964) provides the viewer with the kind of disturbing visual representation of life from a female perspective that Laing was also proposing, and one is forced to conclude that, if this comparison has any validity, far from being a male chauvinist Laing was remarkably prescient concerning the female predicament.<sup>46</sup> Antonioni himself actually mentioned Laing's influence upon British psychiatry in an interview with *L'Express*, 9-15, August, 1985. One recent commentator has said, "in these films [of Antonioni's], the male leads remain virtually oblivious to the woman's pain. They are often fully integrated into the menacing surroundings that frighten the female protagonist." The main character in *Red Desert* is Giuliana (Monica Vitti again), but this time she appears to be descending into a modern hell. Antonioni famously paints the grass bright green, and all the paraphernalia of the industrial landscape in bright and gaudy colors to create the highly sensitized perspective of Giuliana. Giuliana's environment is aesthetically appalling: yellow smoke belches from chimney stacks, refineries, and chemical plants; machines and turbines hum, strikers demonstrate wrapped in polythene to keep out the rain, rivers have thick brown scum floating on the surface, and food tastes like crude oil. Giuliana's husband is an industrialist or factory manager—this is *his* environment—but he is seldom present, choosing instead to spend most of his time on business trips. Giuliana has one child whom she must try and protect from this ghastly poisonous world. At one point her child appears to be ill; he can't walk, and she worries, 'is it polio?' It turns out that he is 'faking it' in order to get attention. Giuliana sees danger everywhere, "you can't imagine my fears" she says as she tries to avoid everything from the newspaper to loose sidewalk pavings, "there's something terrible about reality," says Giuliana. As Laing would have it in *The Divided Self*, Giuliana is being 'engulfed.' Towards the end of her descent, patterns on the sofa fabric are an object of her intense observation, radio waves trouble her, as do pylons, transmitters, and the university radio receivers which point towards space.

In the absence of her husband, Giuliana develops a relationship with his business partner (played by Richard Harris). At one point she tells him that "everything hurts," her body feels like someone else's, and she complains that she "never gets enough love." When she hears a ringing tone in her ears she tells him that "she will never get well." "I'm scared," says Giuliana. "What of?" asks Harris, and she replies, "The factories, the plants, the colors, everything." And again a moment or two later, "I feel separated, no, not from my husband...bodies are separate." The breakdown seems inevitable. Ultimately it is never suggested in the film that there are 'real' reasons (as Showalter might say) for Giuliana's gradual breakdown, after all, what other reasons could possibly be necessary?

Men and women do not share the same emotional language, and the ‘economic miracle’ of post-war Europe is a gendered event that has stripped and engulfed women.

### *Laing and Bellocchio on Tormenting Desire*

In a passage in *Self and Others* (1961) Laing discusses the expectations that groups, particularly families, often have of their therapist, saying,

The dominant phantasy in a group may be that the therapist has ‘the answer,’ and that if they had the ‘the answer’ they would not suffer. The therapist’s task is then like the Zen Master’s, to point out that suffering is not due to not getting ‘the answer,’ but *is* the very state of desire that assumes the existence of that kind of answer, and the frustration of never getting it.<sup>47</sup>

Marco Bellocchio’s *Fists in the Pocket* (1965) is a film about forbidden desire and control in a bourgeois Italian family during the 1960s.<sup>48</sup> Like Laing’s explosive *The Politics of Experience*, and Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*, it is often taken to be an anticipation of the generational rebellion of *May 1968*. Again, as in the case of Antonioni’s films, no single member of the family or group is to ‘blame’ for the collapse of its individual members, rather, it is the communicational and environmental chemistry which plays out that is decisive.

There are three brothers, a sister, and a blind mother in the family. The eldest brother is ineffectual and has taken on the role of the dead father, but without commanding much real authority. The youngest brother is retarded and epileptic, but gentle. And the middle brother, Alessandro (played by Lou Castel) is also an epileptic, and displays signs of increasing pathology. The sister is gentle but narcissistic and sexually curious. All of the family members exist in a living hell of boredom, claustrophobia, mutual irritation, dependency, repressed rage, and religious morbidity. The daily life of the family is anarchistic, and so the plot is really the story of Alessandro who struggles to impose order on this terrifying situation. The whole scene is complicated, in turn, by hints of an incestuous relationship between Alessandro and his sister, Giulia (played by Paola Pitagora). The family members are engaged in a constant guerilla war with one another as they try to get what they want. Their success requires deployment of the full range of unceasing communicational pathologies listed by Laing in *The Divided Self* (1960), and in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1964). There are collusions, false and untenable positions, false attributions and disjunctions, projective identifications, imperviousness, and minimizations. Eventually the desperate and increasingly schizoid Alessandro decides to kill his mother by pushing her into a ravine, and he drowns his younger brother in the bath. The film ends inconclusively with Alessandro’s epileptic fit on his bedroom floor.

Exhausting and disturbing though this film is, it successfully reminds the viewer, (if they were in any doubt), that sweeping desire, dependency, and disability under the carpet with the usual bourgeois responses —patriarchy, matriarchy, nationalism, religion, altruism, or materialism— is not the solution to all of life’s problems. This is surely the same fundamental purpose of Laing’s project and it is the message that inspired a generation of poststructuralists, such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari.

## Conclusion

The argument of this chapter has not been to suggest, along with Laing, that film can be therapeutic or existentially relevant. Perhaps good cinema can be all that, but this is an argument which is beyond the scope of this chapter. The concern here has been to trace the way in which a particularly receptive group of filmmakers give expression to some of R. D. Laing's most important ideas: communicative pathologies, environmental degradation, and the connection with individual breakdown, and existential collapse. In the course of charting these associations we have seen that Laing worked through a theory of the emotions that was rooted in an existential tradition which reached back to Heidegger and beyond. Laing was conservative and hardheaded when it came to human emotions; he was not drawn to notions of primitive naïveté, or to romantic love, or to empathetic sentiments (a fact that was often interpreted as cold-heartedness on his part). Certainly, the rich experience of human life included and would always include, "Duties and obligations, freedom and destiny, fascination and enchantment[s]" that "do not go away because they are not hard data."<sup>49</sup> Yet Laing's phenomenology of the emotions sought to privilege our moods and dispositions, and to recover these from the shipwreck of modern life, much in the same way as Fellini, Antonioni, and Bellocchio did in their films of the same period. In the course of doing this kind of phenomenological analysis Laing demonstrated, contrary to accusations from some feminists, an affinity with women, and a deep concern for the environment, but more importantly he also sought to theorize Being *as such*, and was therefore concerned to restore the quality of life for all individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Divided Self*, 1990, 155, for the reference to *La Strada*, in *The Politics of Experience*, 1990, 11, where "silence on the screen" is invoked as an analogy for the disconnect between truth and reality and as such is one of the few things in life which is "feasible." In his book *The Facts of Life* (1976), 57, Laing recounts his feelings about a possible pre-birth experience after being taken by his parents to see the utopian fantasy film *Lost Horizon* (1937, starring Ronald Colman). The dark Scottish winter afternoon is contrasted with the epic Tibetan mountain fantasy on screen. In 1971 the film *Family Life* was released, directed by Ken Loach. This dramatization charted the decline of a young woman called Janice, and put the blame for her emerging schizophrenia squarely upon her family. Press reviews stated that the film was 'influenced' by R. D. Laing, but Laing had nothing to do with this film in any practical sense. *Family Life* was released as *Wednesday's Child* in the United States. In 1972 Peter Robinson directed a documentary about Laing's therapeutic Archway Community; although Laing himself does not appear in the community interactions there is a short introduction to the film in which an uncomfortable Laing sits behind a desk in a badly-lit room.

<sup>2</sup> These three film directors were quite different, and Bellocchio was of a younger generation than the other two. In fact, philosophically and aesthetically they were all quite different, Antonioni did not really like Bellocchio's *Fists in the Pocket* (*I pugni in tasca*, 1965), and in an interview given to *Sight & Sound* (Winter 1967-8), Bellocchio said that he got bored after watching a Fellini movie for more than ten minutes. However, although the normative projects of these filmmakers were not the same, the quite different claim in this paper is that to some extent all of these Italian directors were engaged with a recognizably Laingian landscape. In a personal correspondence with the scholar and translator of Italian literature and film, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who personally knew Antonioni, Nowell-Smith states that although Laing never came up in conversations he had with Antonioni, Laing was almost certainly known to Antonioni because Laing's books were translated into Italian almost immediately on their English publication. Furthermore, Nowell-Smith also points out that Laing was widely discussed among educated Italians during the early 1960s. Antonioni had almost certainly also read Heidegger and Sartre as well, according to Nowell-Smith, personal correspondence, 9.1.2006.

<sup>3</sup> Laing, *Self and Others*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Laing, 1990, 155-6.

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- <sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Fellini, in turn, admired Laing, “penetrating gaze of the soul observer,” and he managed to persuade Laing to write an introduction to his book of photographs, *Fellini’s Faces*, Laing Collection, University of Glasgow, Letter B206/1.
- <sup>6</sup> Laing, 1990c, 165, “The main agent in uniting the patient, in allowing the pieces to come together and cohere, is the physician’s love, a love that recognizes the patient’s total being, and accepts it, with no strings attached.”
- <sup>7</sup> Laing himself capitalized the word ‘Desire’ in a letter to Marcelle Vincent on his late night philosophical discussions with Joe Schorstein, Mullan, 1997, 82.
- <sup>8</sup> Kojève, 1969, 6.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 1969, 3, “To understand man by understanding his “origin” is, therefore, to understand the origin of the I revealed by speech.” Also Laing, 1990c, 116, including the language of gestures and the eyes.
- <sup>10</sup> Laing, 1990a, 56, “The real blends with imagination, imagination with phantasy, and phantasy with the real.” Also Russell, 1992, 106, where Laing said, “well take the word “love” for instance. The word “love” as it appears in the Old Testament. “Love” they neighbor as thyself” doesn’t mean love Tom, Dick and Harry. Who is the neighbor?”
- <sup>11</sup> Laing, MS Laing A326, 3-5.
- <sup>12</sup> Laing, 1990c, 119, “The need to be perceived...extends to the *general* need [*sic* demand] to have one’s presence endorsed or confirmed by the other,” [my emphasis].
- <sup>13</sup> Burston, 1996, 135.
- <sup>14</sup> Laing, 1990c, 34.
- <sup>15</sup> Laing, 1990a, 34-35.
- <sup>16</sup> Laing, 1990a, 36.
- <sup>17</sup> As Heidegger said in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, “The question [of Being] is upon us in boredom, when we are equally removed from despair and joy, and everything about us seems so hopelessly commonplace that we no longer care whether anything is or not,” 1961, 1-2.
- <sup>18</sup> Laing, 1990a, 37.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1990a, 38.
- <sup>20</sup> In Fellini’s films Marxist intellectuals are often portrayed as tedious bores and pedants.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, 1990a, 48.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 1990a, 51, “Man is always between being and non-being, but non-being is not necessarily experienced as *personal* disintegration. The insecurity attendant upon a precariously established personal unity is *one* form of ontological insecurity, if this term is used to denote the insecurity inescapably within the heart of man’s finite being.”
- <sup>23</sup> MS Laing, A326, Laing began this work in 1986.
- <sup>24</sup> Burston, 1996, 143, “trite and disjointed.”
- <sup>25</sup> Laing, 1976, ix.
- <sup>26</sup> From *L’Express*, 9-15, August, 1985.
- <sup>27</sup> Barthes, 1979.
- <sup>28</sup> Russell, 1992.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, 1992, 52.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 1992, 45.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 1992, 60. Also, Russell reports, “I financed his trip as an advance against any potential revenues he might gain from his half of our book royalties. In spite of my longing for him, I was painfully aware of his motivations,” 234.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 1992, 77.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 1992, 227-231.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, 1992, 237.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 1992, 252.
- <sup>36</sup> There is not the space here for a full treatment of Laing’s increasing concern with the environment, I have written of his views on the environment elsewhere (forthcoming), however it is clear from his biography *Wisdom, Madness, and Folly*, 1985, 35, that a significant development had already occurred in this regard. Laing says, “When World War II started no one could imagine how it could possibly end without endless devastation, poison gas, germ warfare, torture, mutilation, rape, pillage, massacres, killing and killing and killing, shelling, bombing, sea warfare, food shortage, famine and pestilence, and not for the first and probably not the last time in history. But we all thought (there was only this one thought) this must be the end of civilization as we know it. *Not, as we now surmise, the end of the whole macro-biosphere and ecosystem,*” (my emphasis).
- <sup>37</sup> See Clara Orban, “Antonioni’s Women, Lost in the City,” *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 31, No.2 (2001), p11.
- <sup>38</sup> Antonioni, *Film Culture*, Spring, 1962.
- <sup>39</sup> Laing, 1990a, 106-7.

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<sup>40</sup> Of course Laing's *The Voice of Experience* was published a few years after Antonioni's essay on *L'Avventura*, but their phenomenological critique of scientific positivism had been percolating for many years before in both cases.

<sup>41</sup> Laing, 1982, 27

<sup>42</sup> "Western science has advanced by pursuing the paradox of somehow simultaneously investigating and negating them [the senses]. It has delivered itself not only from our senses, but much else: superstition and spirituality, magic and metaphysics, polytheism and poetry," Laing, 1982, 19. Laing used the Heidegger phrase "always already" a number of times in his *Politics of Experience*, and in his discussions with Bob Mullan he mentioned that he and Joe Schorstein couldn't find this reference. I have discussed this and traced the reference elsewhere (forthcoming).

<sup>43</sup> See Colin Young, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 1. (1965).

<sup>44</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 1985, 220-247. Laing's own response to these charges was recorded by Bob Mullan, 1995, 183-188, "total shit from beginning to end," said Laing and it is hard not to agree with him. There is certainly a question mark over Showalter's scholarship, her use of sources, and it is also clear that she attempts to discredit Laing by association. Finally she appears to display little familiarity with Laing's most profound intellectual influences; there is certainly no mention of Heidegger, for example. As far as the Laing texts are concerned it is worth noting that Laing repudiated all of Showalter's misconceptions in his autobiography, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, 1985, 9, and more importantly in *The Divided Self*, a book that Showalter should have read carefully, where Laing says, "In recent years, the concept of a 'schizophrenogenic' mother has been introduced. Fortunately an early 'witch-hunt' quality about the concept has begun to fade," 189. In one sense Laing's timing was wrong here because the blame heaped on mothers was only really beginning to play out, but the passage clearly indicates that Laing took the view that this 'witch-hunt' was begun by people other than himself, and secondly, that he himself wanted to have no part in it, theoretically or practically.

<sup>45</sup> Laing, 1982, 52.

<sup>46</sup> Clara Orban, *Modern Language Studies*, Autumn, 2001, Vol. 31, No. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Laing, 1990, 123-4.

<sup>48</sup> The original title of the film was to be *The Family Gene*.

<sup>49</sup> Laing, 1982, 27.