Red Desert (1964) is the first color movie created by Michelangelo Antonioni. This film is an extraordinary pictorial dialogue between bright chemical colors and a variety of industrial greys.

What I am interested to point out here is the “dark materialism” developed by Antonioni throughout the film to provide the perfect environment for the generalized paranoia of the main character played by Monica Vitti. In fact, Antonioni ‘fills’ his images with a quasi-infinity of micro-particles that have all been influenced by human activity. The built environment is an obvious component of it: factories, antennas, modernist apartment buildings, off-shore rigs, etc. Even what remains of the so-called “nature” — a problematic notion in itself — has been ‘corrupted’ by human activity, and is now part of a sort of humanly produced mono-matter, which seems to engulf Giulana’s body. Even, sounds themselves, generated by the continuous processes of the transformation of this matter, are always there in an oppressive and persistent background.

However, I believe that it would be a mistake to understand the darkness of this materialism as being despised by Antonioni, who would then be merely providing a moralizing vision of the successive industrial revolutions. On the contrary, he develops a creative approach that can be associated to the
one practiced by Bernd & Hilla Becher in their industrial photographic inventories. A few decades later, a photographer like Edward Burtynsky seems to have been greatly influenced by Antonioni’s and the Bechers’ approach. This approach is characterized by the expression of an ambiguity between disgust and fascination for these landscapes.

This ambiguity here is expressed in a much more powerful way than in the Bechers and Burtynsky’s work, since Antonioni, in his skilled dramatization of women bodies — Monica Vitti in particular — manages to contrast this environment with Giuliana’s elegantly dressed body. The confrontation between the backdrop and clothing is violent and helps fuelling her continuous panic.

In Spinozist terms, the relations developed between the environment’s body and Monica Vitti’s body can be said to be “sad” as they seem to never be able to harmonize. Her body seems to be the last one uncorrupted in this landscape and it has to wage a dreadful fight in order to remain as such. Only the power of her imagination seems to create an escape world where the environment is composed of untouched beaches in a bright blue sea. Paradoxically, in reality, the boats that could be considered as the means of a potential escape for her seem to constitute the ultimate barriers of this environment won over by corrupt, industrial matter. When the first one is under quarantine, the second one is inaccessible by the border of language. No material exit is therefore allowed, and the fight of and within the matter continues.

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