

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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RED DESERT (Il Deserto Rosso) 1964

Michelangelo Antonioni

OVERVIEW

Red Desert, which came after the director's famous trilogy of films depicting *ennui* in post-war Italy, could be described as more alienation, only now in colour. Like those earlier films, he also uses the built environment, this time monstrous industrial sites, to symbolise the main character's disturbed state of mind. Colour, including the frequent grey colourless landscape, is also used to build themes and characters. Different commentators have suggested different interpretations for the colour used, but it's possible that the director simply used colour to create beautiful images. (The working title, incidentally, was 'Sky-blue and Green' or 'Celeste e Verde'). In any case, as a result of the focus on landscape and colour, dialogue is used sparingly. The final product is a disturbing exploration of human pain in a time of economic progress. Antonioni had this to say about his film: 'It's too simplistic to say...that I am condemning the inhuman industrial world which oppresses the individuals and leads them to neurosis. My intention ... was to translate the poetry of the world, in which even factories can be beautiful...The neurosis I sought to describe in *Red Desert* is above all a matter of adjusting.' The film won the prestigious Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

PEOPLE

Giuliana	Giuliana is a young Italian mother and wife.
Ugo	Ugo, her husband, is the manager of a factory.
Corrado	Corrado is one of Ugo's business contacts.
Valerio	Valerio is Giuliana's young son.

SYNOPSIS

Giuliana is a young Italian woman living with her little boy and husband, who manages a petrochemical plant. From the beginning, she is disturbed and frightened, and we learn that she was in hospital. Soon, she meets Corrado, one of her husband's colleagues, and they begin to build a relationship based on mutual understanding and attraction. As they visit various industrial sites and polluted tracts of land and water, she reveals that she tried to commit suicide but never told her husband, who was away at the time. Giuliana drifts around these bleak landscapes, lost in her isolation and fear. Her emotional separation from her husband is matched by the growing affinity with Corrado. After a panic attack when they watch a sick man evacuated from a ship, she has another shock when her son is paralyzed from the waist down. When it turns out that the boy was pretending, she feels even more lonely and runs to Corrado's hotel room. They make love, but not with equal interest, and go their separate ways.

SCENES

Petrochemicals Under a dark sky, in Ravenna, Giuliana escorts her young son, Valerio, toward a petrochemical plant managed by her husband, Ugo. As she approaches, we see strikers massed outside using a loud hailer to shame those who have gone inside to work. Seeing a man eating a sandwich, she impulsively buys it half-eaten. She hides behind some bushes to devour it, surrounded by the debris of the plant, twisted metal containers, plastic bags and mounds of smoking material. Behind her, we see the red bursts of the gas fires shooting up into the air and hear the grinding noise of industry at work. Valerio catches up with her, and they go toward the plant with its monstrous structures.

Ugo Ugo, the plant manager and Giuliana's husband, attempts to recruit skilled workers for a visitor named Corrado Zeller. As Ugo and Corrado walk through the plant, they are dwarfed by the gigantic metal machines and their conversation is rendered inaudible by their constant roar.

Car accident After Giuliana meets Corrado, Ugo tells him that she had a car accident and that she's still not recovered mentally. At home in their austere, modernist apartment, Giuliana is agitated and frightened by unseen causes. Ugo wakes and tries to comfort her by making love, but she is not interested.

Corrado Corrado follows Giuliana to an empty shop that she plans to open, though she hasn't decided what she will sell. Their conversation drifts from topic to topic, but she is especially fragmented and erratic. Later, he takes her to Ferrara, where he is also trying to recruit a manager for a mining project. During their visit, she tells him about a woman who was with her in hospital, a woman who felt there was no floor beneath her and had to be told who she was.

Radio telescope Next, they drive to a radar installation facility. Again, the huge metal structures, without harmony or symmetry, loom over them, reflecting Giuliana's inner state, but she appears calm and chats with the workers.

Polluted river The scene shifts to a river, where Ugo has joined them. Corrado laments that the factory's discharge has killed all the fish in the nearby river, but Ugo accepts that the effluents 'must go somewhere.' Giuliana says they heard a man in a restaurant complaining that his eel tasted of petroleum, and they all laugh.

Party They have come to this bleak site by the polluted river because Ugo has arranged for a little party in a rundown shack, owned by the company. As they wait for the other guests to arrive, Corrado shows sympathy for Giuliana and they grow closer. The party, which consists of four men and three women in the cramped shack, features food, banter, trivia, business advice and sexual innuendos. Giuliana is on the periphery, though she and Corrado talk about deeper things.

Flight Through a window she watches a doctor arrive and climb up into a large ship docked on the riverbank. Giuliana says she heard a cry from the ship, but the others dismiss it until they see distress flags raised on the ship. Frightened, Giuliana runs out of the shack and the others follow. She jumps in Ugo's car alone and drives it to the very end of a pier. When the others catch up, she cries out in despair that she 'made a mistake.'

Revelation At home, Giuliana and Ugo play with their young son. Soon, though, Ugo leaves on a business trip, and she spends time with Corrado. Standing on a cargo ship, which will take machine parts to his project in south America, they open up to each other, and she reveals something that she hasn't told Ugo: she was in hospital because she tried to commit suicide.

Paralysis She receives a big shock when her son seems to be paralyzed from the waist down. Unable to help him, she tells him a story about a young girl who lived alone on an island and loved the soft sounds and colours of the sea. One day, she says, the young girl saw a mysterious sailing ship and heard a beautiful singing voice that seemed to come from the sea. After telling the story, Giuliana discovers that her son has been pretending and is completely normal. Her relief is tempered by her inability to understand why he caused her so much anxiety.

Sex She rushes to Corrado's hotel room and explains that she feels isolated because she needs her son while he doesn't need her. She also speaks of her incurable condition and pleads with him to help her. Eventually, he tries to make love, but she pushes him away. They stop struggling when they hear a humming noise, like that of a distant machine. When it dies away, he continues to force himself, and she, too exhausted to resist, gives way.

Not cured Later, she confesses that nothing, not even he, has helped her 'reintegrate with reality.' When Corrado leaves her, she wanders to a docked ship and speaks to a foreign sailor who doesn't understand Italian. She wants to know if the ship takes passengers. 'I can't decide,' she says, 'because I'm not a single woman...though sometimes separate. Not from my husband. No, the bodies are separated. If you prick me, you don't suffer.' He doesn't understand a word, and she goes back home.

Avoiding danger Some days or weeks later, she is walking with her son near the petrochemical plant, as in the first scene of the film. The little boy points to a cloud of yellow poisonous smoke coming from a tower and says that birds will die if they fly through it. She reassures him that the birds have learned not to do that.

THEMES

1. *Environment*

overview Made less than twenty years after Italy's traumatic experience of World War II, the film reflects the economic recovery of the country. A large contribution to that progress was the petrochemical industry, which had two large plants around Ravenna, where the film was shot. Those factories, which are actually those shown on screen, caused considerable pollution of the riverine estuary near that city, which again is part of the film. Directed by an ultra-modernist, the film is somewhat ambivalent about economic progress, although the devastation revealed in many scenes is startling.

wasteland After the credits roll over hazy images of a factory, the first shot of the film is a bright yellow image of burning gas rising from a tower. Then the camera tracks across the grey towers and girders of the vast industrial complex, desolate and threatening. Giuliana arrives, in a green coat that gives some life to the scene, and wanders into a wasteland of debris from the petrochemical plant. All around she sees heaps of smoking material, discarded metal containers and black bags of refuse. Behind her, the yellow puffs of gas burn in the sky. Her son joins her and they walk away, two small figures, in the wasteland that resembles the earth after an apocalypse. This is the signature scene for the next two hours. What is the place of people in this devastated environment?

polluted river Giuliana accompanies Corrado to a site where men are erecting an enormous radio telescope to 'listen to the stars,' as one worker explains. They stroll away from the towers and look out at a river estuary, which is so polluted that all the fish have died. As they laugh at an anecdote about a man who said that his eel tasted of petroleum, tall electricity towers scar the sky behind them. When Corrado says he believes in progress, 'a little,' the camera focuses on those symbols of post-war modernity. Giuliana stares out at the estuary, which, at low tide, looks like a half-drained marshland, and we know that petrochemicals have poisoned this water, too. Corrado asks her what she's looking at, but she doesn't answer, perhaps because she doesn't know what she is seeing. The devastation of the natural environment is not something we can identify, like a building or a road.

threatened birds The primary message of the film, if not already obvious, is underscored in the final scene, which is a repeat of the first scene. Again, Giuliana wanders near her husband's plant with their son. Again, the towers blow out yellow balls of burning gas. The little boy asks his mother why the smoke has that colour, and she says 'because it's poisonous.' The boy continues to stare and says, 'Then if a little bird flies through it, it will die.' She replies that the 'birds have learnt that and they don't fly through it.' With those final words, she and her son walk away, with the polluting towers and industrial landscape beside them. It is a small note of hope in an otherwise pessimistic film, and one has to question whether Giuliana herself can adapt in the same way as the birds.

2. *Psychology*

anxiety The environmental disharmony mirrors Giuliana's interior condition. Unlike many of Antonioni's earlier heroines, who were merely lonely, Giuliana is deeply disturbed. Here alienation from other people and the world around her is displayed in erratic behaviour, neurotic fears and sudden panic attacks. It is striking that the film provides no name for her condition and offers no cure.

displacement Giuliana's condition is never named, though psychosis seems a close description. Although it is visualised by the alienating environment throughout the film, her condition is described only once or twice. The most detailed description is one she gives to Corrado of another woman, whom (she says) she met in the hospital. 'She was very ill,' she says, agitatedly picking at the fabric of a couch. 'She wanted everything...but she couldn't love anyone or anything.' Corrado asks if this woman told her about her feelings. Giuliana stands in the near dark, back lit by a mirror and says, 'There was no floor beneath her. The sensation of sliding down a slope. Down. On the verge of drowning. She had no one...not even her husband, who was away. When she left the hospital, she didn't know who she was. She had to have it explained to her.' Later, we discover that Giuliana is describing herself, just as she will do later in the story of the little girl and the sea. Displacing herself into another, fictional character, she is able to talk about her condition. Giuliana is unable to love. She feels there's no floor beneath her. She has no one. She is totally alienated.

isolation The isolation that underlies her condition is highlighted throughout, but nowhere more explicitly than in the penultimate scene of the film. She has had sex, a little less than consensually, with Corrado and he has left. She wanders to a docked ship and speaks to a foreign sailor, asking if the ship would take her as a passenger. She says she's married, 'But sometimes, sort of separated.

Not from my husband, but the bodies are separated. If you prick me, you don't suffer.' During her halting speech, the man, who understands no Italian, makes comments in his own language. When she apologises and leaves, he stands with arms outstretched in bewilderment, muttering. It is a powerful dramatisation of the estrangement of human beings. If he pricks her, he won't feel anything. The two characters speak but neither understands.

3. Leisure

The set piece of leisure in the film is a curious gathering in a dilapidated shack beside a polluted river. Ugo, Giuliana and Corrado are joined by two other couples. Trapped in a small space, the seven of them carry on conversation laced with sexual innuendo, jokes and teasing. 'I can't go to bed with a man who makes less money than me,' says one of the women. That woman also plays a touching game with Corrado, designed to excite him, but he feels nothing. The frivolous party atmosphere is then dispelled by the cry of distress from a ship outside.

4. Love

Giuliana and Corrado

search The entire story can be seen as Giuliana's unsuccessful search for love. Her husband, Ugo, appears to be caring but not really loving. To him, Giuliana's condition is a problem that needs solving. Certainly, he doesn't understand her, or try to understand her, in the way that Corrado does. Perhaps this is why Giuliana never told him the real reason she was in the hospital (it wasn't a car accident; it was attempted suicide). She seems to love her son, but his pretence at paralysis hurts her deeply.

lack of love Giuliana herself is aware of her lack of love, as expressed in her conversations with Corrado. In the first example, she describes the case of a fellow patient in the hospital (an externalisation of herself), who was told by doctors to find someone or something to love: 'your husband, your son, a job, a dog.' In the second scene, she says to Corrado, 'You don't love me, do you?' He has been very attentive and supportive, but she senses that something is missing. 'I never get enough affection,' she continues to explain. 'Why do I always need others? I can't look after myself. You know what I'd like? For everyone who's ever cared for me...to form a wall around me.' Giuliana's condition, which is a personalized symptom of the wider social and economic alienation shown in the film, is fundamentally the inability to love and to be loved.

love as understanding Her pain at the lack of love is highlighted by the fact that she does achieve a close understanding with Corrado. Indeed, that rapport builds in every scene, as a counterpoint to her displays of loneliness, fear and panic. Corrado, unlike her husband, watches her, listens to her and asks questions of her. He understands her, it is suggested, because he, too, suffers from an inability to connect, settle down and adapt. He refers to their shared disability in a scene when she is staring out at a landscape and says she doesn't know what to look at. He replies that he doesn't know how to live and adds, 'It's the same thing.' But the nearest they come to a declaration of love occurs in a scene when they are standing on the deck of a cargo ship, which will take machine parts to south America for Corrado's project there. They talk about what it means to travel, to leave a place and possibly not to return. When Corrado says he will only take a few personal possessions, Giuliana stays that she would take everything. 'If I left forever,' she says, 'I would take you because now you're a part of me. One of my everyday things.' It is a rare moment of happiness, when Giuliana does not feel alone.

courtship Corrado is attracted to Giuliana when he first meets her and continues to woo her through the entire film. He tracks her down at her still unopened shop, where they reveal a little about their backgrounds. Later, after they talk about eating animals only if you loved them, they exchange flirtatious remarks. 'Could you eat me?' he asks. 'If I loved you,' she says with a bright smile. She accompanies him on site visits, and their affection deepens when he understands her suicide attempt and its aftermath. Slowly, they develop a genuine rapport (as described in the previous paragraph). Finally, when she goes to his apartment after the shock of her son's deception, they begin to make love.

guilt and loneliness Giuliana is terrified during much of their half-naked embraces, but Corrado persists, and we assume that the act is consummated. She runs out on him in the early morning, feeling alone and guilty that she has been unfaithful. Corrado tries to comfort her, but she says that he hasn't helped. The long process of attraction, courtship and sex has ended in failure.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Giuliana Giuliana is a young mother and the wife of a factory manager. From the first scene, she is disturbed, fearful and possibly psychotic, and it is later revealed that she tried to commit suicide. She has little or no support from her husband and gravitates toward Corrado, who shows an ability to understand her. Throughout the story, she is erratic and impulsive, though briefly happy and able to laugh. She is alone, without love and without the ability to love.

Disturbed Giuliana's psychotic state is dramatised in the opening sequence of the film. As she walks toward the factory, she seems out of place. Her bright green coat stands out against the ubiquitous grey of the sky, land and buildings. Her high heels sink into the wet ground. She has to pause as a stream of striking workers and their supporters block her way. When she sees a man eating a sandwich, she starts toward him, stops, turns and turns again. She asks where he got the sandwich, and he says the corner shop. When she asks him to sell it to her, he points out that it's half-eaten, but she doesn't care. She pays him a large amount and retreats. Throughout this exchange, with the roar of the factory in the background, she is nervous, her voice breaking and her eyes darting around like a frightened animal. The short scene is as effective as it is bizarre in showing us that she is disturbed and without revealing any obvious cause.

Panic Another illustration of her condition reveals a primal fear. She and several others, including Ugo and Corrado, are enjoying themselves during a party in the dilapidated shack by the polluted estuary. Outside, through the smudgy window, she sees a docked ship and watches as a doctor climbs aboard. Moments before, she'd heard a man cry and now the yellow distress flag is raised on the ship. When the others casually mention leprosy, malaria and smallpox, she panics and flees. Outside, she stops and stares at the others who stand like lifeless statues in the fog, with their faces blurred. She jumps in a car and drives it to the edge of the pier. When the others reach her, she starts to scream that she 'made a mistake because of the fog' and turns on one of the women. 'Why are you crying?' she demands in a hoarse voice. The answer, of course, is that she and everyone else is sad to see Giuliana so fearful and irrational.

Happy While Giuliana is afraid and lonely throughout the film, there is one sequence in which she is happy. This is the story, a sort of fable, that she tells to her son (while it is also depicted on screen). The story is a miniature film itself, inserted in the main film, about a young girl who is another externalisation of Giuliana. The young girl lives alone on an island and revels in the warm waters, the fish and the birds around her. A strange boat appears and disappears. She hears an unidentified voice singing and realises that the rocks are like human flesh. Everything is singing to her; everything is sweet. The story has the concise beauty and mystery of a fairy tale, but we can assume it depicts Giuliana on the brink of womanhood, love and sexual experience. There are unexplained phenomena (the boat, the voice, the rocks), and something vaguely sinister, but she is curious and she is happy.

Corrado Corrado is a young man who is planning a big mining project in south America. He is thoughtful, with a watchful face that suggests he is always considering something. Although he is restless, he has the ability to understand Giuliana. And yet, something is left unexplained in his vague plans and eyes that search for a place to settle.

Restless Although he is calm in manner and speech, Corrado is restless in his mind. That quality is illustrated in several scenes, but most explicitly in a conversation with Giuliana. After their first meeting, he visits her in her still-unfurnished shop and she asks where he lives. He smiles and explains that he's from Trieste, moved to Milan, now lives in Bologna and is about to go away to south America. 'It's rather complicated,' he says vaguely and she asks why. 'To tell the truth,' he begins a little unsure of what to say, 'I don't like to stay in one place... Sometimes I feel like I don't have the right to be where I am. Perhaps that's why I always want to go away.' Later, he adds that 'travelling makes sense. One should change direction now and then.' She asks if there is a place where one can travel to and feel better. 'No,' he says, 'one travels but ends up the same as before.' Corrado doesn't realise that he is searching for something that is not geographical and so he keeps moving. He is lost, just like Giuliana, which is why they are drawn to each other.

Thoughtful Another feature of Corrado's character is his thoughtfulness. He is never voluble and weighs his words to match his thoughts. A good illustration of this quality occurs when he and Giuliana talk near the polluted estuary just before the party begins. They stroll away together and,

suddenly, she asks if he is on the right or left of politics. He stops and says, 'Big words, Giuliana, call for precise answers.' A pause and then he says, 'After all, one doesn't quite know what one believes in. One believes in humanity, in a sense. In justice, a little less. In progress, a little more [he looks up electrical power lines]. In socialism, perhaps. What matters, is to act as one thinks right for oneself, and for others. A clear conscience.' Giuliana comments, a little unfairly, that he's 'strung together a nice bunch of words.' It is, instead, a thoughtful attempt to express his ideas, which reflect something of the director's worldview, too.

Perceptive Corrado is not only self-reflective but also perceptive about others. That feature of his character allows him to understand Giuliana as no one else can. The best illustration of his insight occurs when they are talking aboard the cargo ship. After describing their ideas about travel and returning, she says, 'If Ugo had looked at me as you do, he'd have understood many things.' He considers this and says, 'About the accident, for example?' She nods and he pauses again before saying, 'And your friend in the hospital?' She nods again. Then he says, 'She was you.' That is something not even her husband has figured out. Calm and observant, Corrado has penetrated through the fog of her behaviour and seen who she really is.

Hidden flaw Corrado understands her because he shares her untethered condition. Unlike the ships that are docked at the quay, he is always at sea, wandering from place to place. He has a plan, he says, to set up a big mining operation in south America, but in the scene where he explains the project to the recruited workers, he appears vague when answering their questions. One man asks if salaries will be deposited in their banks in Italy, and Corrado deflects the question, saying 'one thing at a time.' But that issue of money is the most important. At one point, his attention drifts to a bright stripe of blue paint on a far wall where the meeting is taking place. As viewers, we sense that he is burdened by some hidden secret or flaw.

Ugo Ugo is a businessman first, a father second and a husband last. He is dedicated to his job running the factory, he enjoys playing with his son and he is quick to blame his wife for her 'mistakes.' His bland face suggests a man untroubled by questions of conscience.

Apologist As the manager of a polluting factory, Ugo has become an apologist for the environmental damage it creates. That part of his character is shown in the scene before the party begins when he, Corrado and Giuliana go to the shack near the estuary. Corrado looks out at the stagnant, poisonous water and says 'it's a shame.' Hearing him, Ugo shrugs his shoulders and declares, 'Well, factory effluent must end up somewhere.' Ugo cannot afford to examine his conscience for fear of what he might find. It's more convenient to absolve himself of any potential blame by simply stating that pollution is unavoidable.

Insensitive More concerned with his factory than with his wife, Ugo is at a loss to understand her. To be fair to him, she is not an easy person to be married to, but he seems to regard her illness as her fault. A good illustration of his insensitivity occurs in the scene when she panics and drives a car right to the end of the pier. Watching this, in the fog, Corrado runs to her first, followed by Ugo. She apologises, saying that she couldn't see in the fog, but Ugo gets angry. Pointing at the end of the pier, he says, "First, you were afraid and now..." He can't find a word. His annoyance at her erratic behaviour has turned to recrimination. She pleads with him to understand, but he stands silent, as unfeeling as his factory towers.



(Giuliana with the factory behind)



(Giuliana near another installation)