

Blanchot and Ambiguity

Paolo Bartoloni

*National University of Ireland Galway*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

### Recommended Citation

Bartoloni, Paolo. "Blanchot and Ambiguity." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.4 (2010): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1675>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1675)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 12 Issue 4 (December 2010) Article 7**  
**Paolo Bartoloni, "Blanchot and Ambiguity"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/7>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.4 (2010)**  
**Thematic Issue, *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature***  
**Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Blanchot and Ambiguity" Paolo Bartoloni investigates the enigmatic and ambiguous turn of the famous Blanchotian statement "existence without Being." The intention of the article is to locate Blanchot's remark in the context of a discussion on history and its possible end, famously initiated by Alexandre Kojève in a lecture on 4 December 1937 at the College of Sociology in Paris; and provide insights into the difference that distinguishes Kojève's reflection on the end of history, Bataille's subsequent interpretation of it, and Blanchot's original conceptualization of a state of being suspended between nature and culture, history and the end of history. The theoretical discussion is enhanced by the innovative relation that Bartoloni draws between Blanchot's notion of "existence without Being" and one of Antonioni's most significant but also enigmatic films, *The Eclipse*. Bartoloni focuses his attention on *The Eclipse*'s last seven minutes, producing an interpretation which is simultaneously a concrete example of Blanchot's theory but also a critical contribution to Antonioni studies.

---

**Paolo BARTOLONI****Blanchot and Ambiguity**

In a well-known and often quoted passage of *The Work of Fire* (1995) (*La Part du feu* [1949]), Maurice Blanchot introduces a notion that continues to perplex and challenge us: he speaks of an "existence without being" (*Work* 334) ("existence sans l'être" [*La Part* 336]). This concept is interesting for many different reasons, but especially because it resonates with literary and philosophical preoccupations which are central to Western thought, including a major current of contemporary philosophical speculation also known as biopolitics. My primary interest in this article is to follow Blanchot closely as he brings his extremely mobile and malleable language and thought to bear on the idea of "existence without being," relates "existence without being" to a series of parallel literary and philosophical conceptualizations, and provides a possible example of "existence sans l'être" through a discussion of the last seven minutes of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Eclipse* (*L'Eclisse*, 1962).

The coupling of "existence" and "being" through the preposition "without" is simultaneously puzzling and seductive. The puzzlement derives from finding a separation where a conjunction is expected. It is not only Bishop Berkeley who would object to this idea, stressing that there simply cannot be existence without being. Even Christian cosmology, as well as idealism and metaphysics, would have trouble in accepting, let alone coming to terms with, such a notion. In fact, the very foundations of Western thought rest on the belief that "existence" is "being" and that "being" is "existence." How is it possible to contemplate an existence in the absence of being? Of course, it all depends on what one means by "being" and "existence." The seduction stems from the boldness of the formula which deliberately separates what ought to be inseparable. And yet, this separation is only apparent; it is only a separation managed by grammatical rules. As a matter of fact, "existence" and "being" are still facing each other, although across the distance of a "without." One could say that their separation is brought about by their mutual belonging, and that they are together through being separate. On the page and to the eye, they still appear as conjoined. The odd linking of "existence" and "being" by "without" pulls us in different directions, creating a degree of ambiguity of meaning, which we are not about to resolve but rather to expose.

The context of Blanchot's "existence sans l'être" is the essay "Literature and the Right to Death" ("La Littérature et le droit à la mort"). Towards the end of the essay, Blanchot argues that, while literature (the example he offers is Gustave Flaubert) strives to be transparent, expressing "the reality of the human world," it ends up by presenting the very opposite, that is, the "horror of existence deprived of the world" (*Work* 334) ("L'horreur de l'existence privée de monde" [*La Part* 335]). One might surmise, quite legitimately, that Blanchot is here simply reiterating the view that language effaces the world, and that words plunge things into negativity as soon as they speak these very things. Comforted by the universally accepted influence that Hegel's concept of language has had on Blanchot, one could simply leave it at that and move on. Moreover, is it not Blanchot himself who, a little later in the same essay, reminds us that "speech is the murder of existence" (*Work* 335) ("parole meurtrière de l'existence" [*La Part* 337])? True, Blanchot refers here, however, to speech (*parole*), which operates in the world of appearances, which is also the world of a conventionally understood literature, and a conventionally understood negativity. With subtle rhetorical ability, in the space of about two pages Blanchot provides a condensed critique of the negativity of language, opening at the same time the path for a conceptualization of the potentiality of language. These pages are dense and the argument intricately interwoven. Care is needed to navigate them and separate the critique from the proposition, recombining them once more as Blanchot's project gradually emerges out of the page. If, on the one hand, the negativity of language is predicated on a conventional understanding of language as that which represents and speaks the non-linguistic, the potentiality of language is predicated on the hypothesis of a world in which the difference between language and the non-linguistic becomes indeterminate. The latter, according to Blanchot, is a world "without existence."

Before we go any further, it is essential to emphasize that for Blanchot the notion of "existence without being" is heralded by the completion of history (*l'histoire achevée*) and the coming to presence of a time and a space in which, "nature almost made human," "speech advances to meet the

thing and the thing learns to speak" (*Work* 335) ("la parole vient au devant de la chose et la chose apprend à parler" [*La Part* 337]). Blanchot hypostatizes a mode of language and existence which are alternative to both the actuality of existence with being and to the negativity of literature as mimesis. The complex and puzzling relation Blanchot draws between "existence without being" and poetry a page earlier begins now to make sense: "This process is day which has become fatality, consciousness whose light is no longer the lucidity of the vigil but the stupor of lack of sleep, it is existence without being, as poetry tries to recapture it behind the meaning of words, which rejects it" (*Work* 334) ("*la poésie entend la ressaisir derrière le sens des mots qui la rejette*" [*La Part* 336]; emphasis in the original). Literally speaking, Blanchot writes that poetry seeks to reconnect with a form of existence, some characteristics of which are dim consciousness and stupor, which defies the instrumentality of language. "To recapture" means to possess again that which is no longer in possession, that which has been separated from us. One of the reasons for this fracture might be ascribed to the ordinary understanding and experience of language. Blanchot could very well be proposing, in this sense, a return to a pure and natural state when the distinctions between humans and nature were blurred, and when culture and history had not yet driven a wedge in between men and life, organic as well as inorganic.

Gerald Bruns is right when he claims that Blanchot's concerns are ontological, but perhaps slightly hasty when he assumes that, given the ontological context, language is marginal (Bruns 51-52). As for Martin Heidegger, whose influence on Blanchot is well documented (Clark, *Poetics*; Savage; Keenan; Wolin; Ungar; Silverman; Clark, *Derrida*), language and ontology are inextricably linked in the work of Maurice Blanchot. And yet, Blanchot's is a special kind of language, an appreciation of which must pass via the interrogation of the meanings and implications of a life after the world. Recapture, re-appropriate (*ressaisir*) may also be understood as a task to be undertaken by moving forward. It is, in fact, in this sense that *ressaisir* is employed by Blanchot, since the life he intimates is clearly located at the end of history, not at history's beginning. It is, therefore, a matter of going ahead to meet our destiny of being in the world rather than of being before the world. The terminology is deliberately Heideggerian, and we will go back to Heidegger in a moment. What I wish to stress now is Blanchot's articulation of a return achieved by going forward. In other words, Blanchot proposes to return where we have never been, to a place, that is, that is familiar in its utter strangeness. What is this place, this *topos*, which, paraphrasing the Italian poet Vittorio Sereni, "we know without knowing" ("*sapendo di non sapere*") (Sereni 248)?

On 4 December 1937, in a famous lecture he delivered at the College of Sociology in Paris, Alexandre Kojève announced the end of history. He arrived at this philosophical conclusion through a close reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in which he found clear and obvious indications pointing to a state in which the distinction between subject and object, and between human and nature, would come to an end. This moment, according to Kojève, will mark the apotheosis of universalizing principles and thinking, and the final celebration of human history and culture the result of which, ironically, will determine the end of culture, history, and humanity as we know it (159). The similarities between Kojève's analysis of history and Blanchot's semantics with regard to the "achievement" of history are obvious. Through a long, deliberate, and hard-fought period in which humans will do everything they can to define their identity and specificity in opposition to other forms of life, they will return to a form of natural and primordial state of indistinction. It is to be assumed that this re-appropriation of being in the world, rather than before the world, is the cause of a deliberate separation and estrangement, and that its achievement will lead humans to move forward to where they had already-been. And yet, this already-been is the unknown that lies behind history or, to be more precise, at the end of history.

Kojève's lecture had an enormous impact on French intellectuals, and especially on a close associate of Blanchot, Georges Bataille. Kojève's lecture on the end of history was published, together with all the other lectures he delivered at the College of Sociology, in 1947 with the title *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*. A revised and extended version was published in 1968. The English translation, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, appeared in 1980. Bataille responded immediately to Kojève's hypothesis with a letter later published in *Le coupable* (English translation in Hollier). With the typical blend of intensity and manic creativity so characteristic of Bataille's writing, he embraced most of what Kojève had proposed, but with a strong reservation. Kojève had stated that "Man properly so-called" will disappear and with him history and philosophy. What will remain indefinitely, he added, will be

what "makes Man happy," that is, "art, love, play" (159). Bataille could not reconcile the disappearance of "Man" with the extant remnant of what "Man" had produced. What will be the form and use through which the "rest" will continue to exist? (Bataille qtd. in Hollier 90). Bataille's question goes to the very heart of humanity's action and production, teasing out the mysterious, and perhaps even sacred elements connoting art.

In opposition to what Kojève produced in the form of an answer to Bataille's letter nearly thirty years after the original debate, that is, that art, love, play will become natural again with the disappearance of "Man so-called" — "Hence it would have to be admitted that after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts" (Kojève 159) — Bataille proposed that the remnant of humanity after the end of history would be nothing other than an "unemployed negativity" (Bataille qtd. in Hollier 90); a testimony without a story to testify to, a non-language, or rather, a language which only speaks to itself, and for nobody else, the story of a return to the never-been. What kind of place a life at the end of history might be was already, as we see, at the center of the dialogue between Bataille and Kojève. Blanchot, although not directly involved in this dialogue, partakes of it, and responds to similar concerns throughout his work, providing his own answers to the question of what might remain after the disappearance of "Man so-called."

Among the similarities marking Blanchot's perspectives and those produced by Kojève and Bataille — the most important of which is the consensus on the beginning of the new world from the self-annihilating fulfillment of history — there are some obvious differences. While for Kojève and Bataille the end of history determines the movement of humans toward nature, the opposite direction appears to be the one entertained by Blanchot. We remember that Blanchot writes of a "nature almost made human," and of a speech that "advances to meet the thing and the thing learns to speak." If this is correct, the historical *éschaton* produced by humans brings about a reunion, which is also the stage on which the differences between "Man" and nature are levelled and made indeterminate, but also on which what remains of this separation speaks a language that can potentially still be acted upon, that can still find uses. In other words, Blanchot distances himself at once from Kojève's naïve and elemental approach and from Bataille's "unemployed negativity." The ontological state that Blanchot announces is neither aesthetically savage (Kojève) nor aesthetically suspended in negativity (Bataille). What is it then?

The neuter has been often cited as the symbol of Blanchot's "existence without being," and with good reason (see e.g., Bruns 52). Blanchot himself writes of the neuter — *The Space of Literature* (1982) (*L'Espace littéraire* [1955]) is almost entirely devoted to mapping the neuter — in ways that leave little doubt regarding the significance of this indeterminate zone in which space, time, and language appear to have been snatched away from history and negativity, from *chronos* and *kairós*, and from a determination that is entirely human. And yet, they are not entirely other. It is only that the differences between negativity and instrumentality, *chronos* and *kairós*, are no longer evident. What is important about this language, this time, and this space — which are not totally foreign and unknown, and which, therefore, are not another language, and not another space and another time — is the ways in which what remains might speak and act, and ultimately the ways in which it might be used. That which remains must be understood here not as what is left of history or negativity, but precisely as what remains after the moment at which humans and nature have come together, making differences and distinctions, even in relation to what is left of history and negativity, inapplicable and inoperative. Let us remember the metaphor of a space, a time, and a language where we have been by never being there, or that which we know without knowing.

The biopolitical project embarked upon by Giorgio Agamben depends on the philosophical use of this inoperativeness. We do not have the space here to elucidate the connections between Blanchot's "existence without being" and contemporary biopolitics, especially Agamben's take on biopolitics. It is nonetheless apparent how Blanchot's, Bataille's, and Heidegger's thought is central to Agamben's work, especially in relation to the *topos* of the threshold (*The Open* [2004], *L'aperto* [2002]; *The Time that Remains* [2005], *Il tempo che resta* [2001]).

The neuter might very well be the cipher for Blanchot's ontological and linguistic project, but it is the interrogation of the considerable philosophical importance of the remnant that may shed further and original lights on a project that, notwithstanding the enormous literature about it, continues to challenge us. Martin Heidegger's thought and philosophy may be summarized as the attempt to think an ontological state that grows out from the old, and that preserves the old by making it inapplicable — in Heidegger's case, the old is Western metaphysics. This project remains operative throughout Heidegger's opus, and connects periods of his writing that might otherwise appear unrelated or even oppositional. Heidegger's main preoccupation is, in a sense, that of spying and investigating the experience of being in the state of thrownness, in that zone, that is, that opens in between metaphysics and pure essence. The facticity of *Dasein* is nothing other than the effort to bring to fruition the condition of "worldliness" (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 56-57, 71-72). "Worldliness" must be understood here as the ontological experience of being in the world, as opposed to being before the world. We start to recognize concepts and concerns that clearly indicate the proximity of Heidegger's and Blanchot's thought. According to Heidegger, Western metaphysical tradition places humans before the world, conjuring up what he believes is a pernicious duality and opposition between subject and object, nature and "Man," and, ultimately, being and Being. In his phenomenological years Heidegger proclaimed the need to re-experience things as such rather than as concepts, and in his later writing he returns again to the necessity to open oneself to things, to make oneself available to an experience of mutual appropriation. This would result in what Heidegger calls, at times interchangeably, the "open" or, borrowing the term from pre-Socratic philosophers, *aletheia* (truth, unconcealment). The main trait of this new ontological experience — which as we shall see in a moment is inextricably linked to a new experience of language — is the ability to act upon the ultimate potentiality, the final purpose of which is the mutual appropriation of being and Being. In the open, metaphysical distinctions and oppositions would be erased by rendering them inoperative through the conjunction of subject and object, nature and "Man." This, according to Heidegger, might only be achieved at the end of metaphysics, that is, at the moment of metaphysics' exhaustion — which is also its completion. If it is correct to presume a similarity between the end of Western metaphysics and the end of Western history, the connection between Heidegger's and Blanchot's projects appears immediate and unavoidable.

But there is something else that must be stressed at this point, and that will shed further light on the distinctions between Blanchot's thought on the one hand, and Bataille's and Kojève's on the other. For Heidegger, the experience of the "open," which introduces a further ontological plane, inevitably excludes humans from the reified, and in a sense pre-arranged, potentialities available to them. This would emancipate humans from their position of outsiders looking in and partaking of life as if it were always already removed, detached from them. And yet, this process of assimilation does not entail the renunciation and destruction of humanity (as in Kojève), it instead implies a mutual appropriation that maintains relevant specificity but renders them inapplicable. Moreover, life in the open is guided by the ultimate potentiality that acts upon what remains (the mutual appropriation of being and Being in Heidegger, and of nature and humans in Blanchot), and that actively uses what is left in order to turn potentiality (*dynamis*) into actuality (*energeia*). Therefore, there is no negativity without use, as in Bataille. What is left is productive tension, which might be described as a modality of language and being, activated through the relation of what is made inoperative.

It is in this sense that references to destruction must be understood in Heidegger (*What is Philosophy?* 71-72). As he himself emphasizes, destruction means to demolish not to destroy ("Destruction bedeutet nicht Zerstören, sondern Abbauen, Abtragen," *What is Philosophy?* 72). A new building is erected by using what is left, the remnants of the old, and combining the old with other materials. Life in the open is this construction in which old and new, sameness and difference become indeterminable. And yet, the existence of this construction, its very being — this must be stressed — is predicated upon the very use (*messa in opera*) of what remains. Suspension, waiting, oblivion, the neuter are the central words and concepts that lead Blanchot in his investigation of "existence without being" (on suspension in Blanchot see also Bartoloni). They all allude to a break, a caesura, a pause, and to a condition that might bring about the movement of mutual appropriation, and an experience of language and being which, having rendered ordinary language and being inoperative, initiate a movement of exploration in the gap between negativity and appearances in the attempt, perhaps, to catch

the world rather than the "horror" of its disappearance. It might seem ironic that in order to exist in the world, to be in the world, one should choose an "existence without being." But, as should be clear by now, this expression cannot be interpreted literally. It can start to make sense only if we understand it as "existence without historical and/or metaphysical being."

It is clear — as Bruns noted — that the works of Franz Kafka provide Blanchot with a model and an articulation of the neuter. Blanchot goes back to Kafka's writing time and again, finding in it those literary and philosophical elements, the furniture and the vocabulary, of an experience that speaks directly to, but also in the context of, a suspended zone where the world of conventions and its eschatological counterpart are momentarily halted. Kafka brings to the surface a possible gap, and presents it before our eyes. And yet, Kafka's neuter does not appear to have a redemptive use, and perhaps indeed no use at all, apart from suggesting that any hope of redemption that might be harbored by us is destined to be dashed. Kafka has been often quoted to have claimed, in a conversation with his friend Max Brod, that there is endless hope, only not for us ("unendlich viel Hoffnung —, nur nicht für uns," qtd. in Brod 75). Kafka's assertion must be understood within a particular articulation of messianism, and Kafka's belief that the arrival of the Messiah will be inevitably deferred until after our disappearance. The key to Kafka's remark, and its possible meaning, is to be looked for in the pronoun "us" (*uns*). What is it that Kafka meant by "us"? Was he referring to himself, to his generation, to human beings? Was he perhaps saying that the end of history and the arrival of the Messiah will coincide with the destruction of humanity? And assuming that the latter is correct, who or what would be the beneficiary of the remaining hope?

Blanchot embraces the idea of the neuter, but he then does something with it, which is simultaneously against Kafka and for Kafka. I believe that Blanchot empties the neuter of the messianic aura and plunges it into a state in which hope, therefore, is no longer relevant or meaningful. Blanchot's language and ontological project take us into a world of oblivion and waiting (*L'attente l'oubli*) in which what we were has been forgotten and what we will become is produced — as we wait without hope, and therefore for nothing or no one in particular — by incessantly putting to use the ultimate potentiality that we have become. Blanchot, I claim, is against Kafka because he deprives the world of the missing Messiah — which could also mean that Blanchot presents a world in the presence of the Messiah (for a discussion of Blanchot and religion see Hart) — who is so central to Kafka's cosmology; he is for Kafka — or perhaps he aids Kafka — by presenting a state of life to which Kafka might have referred without himself venturing into. In Blanchot, oblivion does not equate with the disappearance of the past, with past's annihilation and destruction. It means instead to preserve the past as the pre-eminent missing thing. What we miss remains with us, permeates our actions and thoughts. By the same token, it remains out of reach and sight, invisible, undisclosable and unutterable. Blanchot's oblivion is, in this sense, strongly connected to Heidegger's destruction. They both imply a process of production in which the past — tradition, the known, the conventional — is amised (indistinguishable) due to varying degrees of mutual appropriation (past and present, history and the end of history, metaphysics and the end of metaphysics, "Man" and nature). What is left is a language — and a life — that speaks through the remains of language — an oblivious language.

We recall Heidegger's emphasis on "learning renunciation" as the necessary path towards a new experience of language and being in his lectures later collected in the volume *On the Way to Language*. It is especially in the lecture on Georg Trakl's poem "The Word" ("Das Wort"), that Heidegger insists on the philosophical significance of learning renunciation. The poet — and the philosopher — must learn renunciation in order to attain a new perspective on the world, in order to be in the world. Put simply, Heidegger invites us to renounce our tendency to negate, deface, hide the world behind language. As an alternative to the language and the world of negativity, he suggests that we allow language and the world to come towards each other, to meet and become indistinguishable. But in order to achieve this we must renounce, we must accept oblivion (*On the Way* 143). The question that needs to be asked now is the following: "is the acceptance of oblivion or, with Heidegger, the process of learning renunciation, the cause or the result of the end of history?" In other words, where are we now, in history or outside history, in oblivion or with one foot rooted in conventions? Are we living or waiting? And if we are waiting, is this a passive or active waiting? In other words, what is left for us to think, and more importantly, what is this that is left, that remains? Blanchot and Heidegger articulated

and expounded the ontology at the end of metaphysics and at the end of history, but they themselves perhaps never thought to be over the threshold, to be on the other side. One might say that their work indicates the way, the path to choose, and that maybe some of their more daring writing ends up somewhere different, or at least ends up inhabiting the threshold. One simple answer to these questions is that we rarely know where we are.

Where are we, for instance, when we watch the last seven minutes of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Eclipse* (*L'eclisse*)? The literature on Antonioni's work is vast and insights into *L'eclisse* are many (see Arrowsmith; Brunette; Chatman; Rohdie; Rifkin). The significance of the urban space as an emblem of human malaise and confusion is rightly stressed. There is no doubt that Antonioni is one of the most "architectural" directors of Italian cinema. And this is not only exemplified in *L'eclisse* but also in his other urban masterpiece, *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*). What is disconcerting, however, is that most of the discussion on Antonioni's film pays little attention to the centrality that suspension plays in his work, and no attempt is made to link suspension to the debates that, as we have seen, are so vital in the context of a relevant section of modern and contemporary philosophy and literature. *L'eclisse* is set in the Rome of the late 1950s, and presents the story of a young woman (played by Monica Vitti) coming to terms with her complex identity which is tested against and reflected into a series of relationships with men. The film begins with the breaking of one of these relationships, and continues as a new one, with a young stockbroker (played by Alain Delon), unfolds. But the main characters of the movie are not so much the people on screen as their unseen tensions and potentialities; the possibilities that, always implicit, remain, like haloes, unspeakable, operating toward something that appears to defy completion. One might say that in *L'eclisse* Antonioni attempts to film what lies behind the image, that life, that is, which is produced through the interchange of actuality and negativity.

Antonioni offers continuous views of urban spaces as a further emblem of this parallel existence. But these are not the spaces of classical, Renaissance or baroque Rome, but modern areas in the suburbs, recently built or still under construction. We might describe them as anonymous spaces, if we agree that anonymous is meant here as that which does not have a name, and therefore a visible identity. It is in this sense that the Rome of Antonioni's suburbs provides simultaneously the image that remains always already invisible next to the historical and cultural actuality of the eternal city, and an allegory, if not perhaps the background, of an existence without being. This is especially true in the last seven enigmatic and ambiguous minutes of the film where the camera abandons the actual characters to focus and present, unmediated, sequence after sequence of urban landscape, half-finished buildings, lamp posts, anonymous pedestrians, in other words, existences without history. What is it that we are watching? Are we still witnessing a series of unfolding potentialities related to the stories of the main characters and/or, perhaps, what remains of these stories as they move towards the unseen existence that they are?

What is certainly interesting, and directly linked to the preoccupations of this article, is that in these seven minutes human and non-human blend together, and history and non-history disappear into each other. We literally watch what is left after the end of the "existence with being." It might very well be that what we look at at the end of Antonioni's *L'eclisse* is an example of the potential space, the potential language and the potential being seen as one shifts attention from the pure, but also concealed and negative, category of origin and the active, but also already consumed, experience of existence, to the productive potentiality of life in the making, that is the becoming of existence and life. What's extraordinary about these muted, lingering scenes of half-finished buildings is, using a Heideggerian phrase, "the ringing stillness" (*On the Way* 108) of their voices, those echoes of life that surround these buildings and that invite us to sharpen our auditory senses to capture the noise of the now, the before, and the after. The power of life, its plentifulness, is celebrated here by revealing it through its very raw production. We are watching life, and the reason we are so puzzled is because we're watching life in what appears to be the absence of intention and purpose. Or rather, we're annoyed and yet mesmerized because we are in the presence of life in the making as opposed to life in action. The last sequences of *L'eclisse* are baffling because they introduce a new tone, a new narrative into the usual narrative of day-to-day life. In being so unexpected, so unusual, this language jolts the viewer because it provides a new grammar for the presentation of life. Indeed it presents a new —



renewed — life as opposed to the one presented according to a series of accepted rules and conventions. But, precisely because of this, this life becomes all of a sudden more alive, more pulsating than the crystallized appearances which we are so used to. But also because of its overpowering liveliness, this life might induce scandal, indignation. It might, however, propel the viewer into a new dimension that demands to be discovered and thought. In viewing the last few minutes of *L'eclisse* one understands better what Heidegger might have meant by the "open."

Antonioni's cinema does not communicate so much the end of the "human soul" as its indistinction in the space and time of potentiality, that space in which the "human soul" enacts its power to be as "not-not-being." The power to be as "not-not-being" is the power of life to conceal its common being-there, which doesn't mean to not exist, but, more simply, to exist differently.

### Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale*. Torino: Bollati-Boringhieri, 2002.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla lettera ai romani*. Torino: Bollati-Boringhieri, 2000.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Time that Remains: A Commentary to the Letter to the Romans*. Trans. Patricia Daley. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.
- Arrowsmith, William. *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*. Ed. Ted Perry. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Bartoloni, Paolo. "Literature of Indistinction: Blanchot and Caproni." *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*. Ed. Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, and Dimitris Vardoulakis. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2005. 238-56.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *L'Espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *La Part du feu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995.
- Brod, Max. *Franz Kafka: A Biography*. Trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston. New York: Schocken, 1960.
- Brunette, Peter. *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Bruns, Gerald L. *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. *Antonioni, Or, the Surface of the World*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.
- Clark, Timothy. *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the Later Gadamer*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Gesamtausgabe*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987.
- Heidegger, Martin. *On the Way to Language*. Trans. Peter D. Hertz. New York: Harper, 1982.
- Heidegger, Martin. *What is Philosophy? Was ist das — die Philosophie?* 1956. Trans. W. Kluback and J.T. Wilde. London: Vision, 1963.
- Hollier, Denis, ed. *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- Keenan King, Dennis. *Hegel and Contemporary Continental Philosophy*. New York: State U of New York P, 2004.
- Kojève, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Ed. Allan Bloom. Trans. H. Nichols, Jr. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Rifkin, Ned. *Antonioni's Visual Language*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1982.
- Rohdie, Sam. *Antonioni*. London: BFI, 1990.
- Savage, Robert. "Between Heidegger and Hölderlin: The 'Sacred' Speech of Maurice Blanchot." *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*. Ed. Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, and Dimitris Vardoulakis. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2005. 149-66.
- Sereni, Vittorio. *Tutte le poesie*. Milano: Mondadori, 1986.
- Silverman, Hugh J. *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Ungar, Steven. *Scandal & Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995.
- Wolin, Richard. *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism. From Nietzsche to Postmodernism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.

Author's profile: Paolo Bartoloni teaches Italian Studies at the National University of Ireland Galway. He has published extensively on continental theory and philosophy, especially on the work of Agamben, Benjamin, Heidegger, Vattimo, and Perniola and the impact of these authors on Blanchot, Calvino, Caproni, and Svevo. Bartoloni's book publications include *The Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing* (2008), *Interstitial Writing: Calvino, Caproni,*

*Sereni and Svevo* (2003), and he is editor of *Re-Claiming Diversity: Essays on Comparative Literature* (1996) and co-editor of *Intellectuals and Publics: Essays on Cultural Theory and Practice* (1997). E-mail: <[paolo.bartoloni@nuigalway.ie](mailto:paolo.bartoloni@nuigalway.ie)>