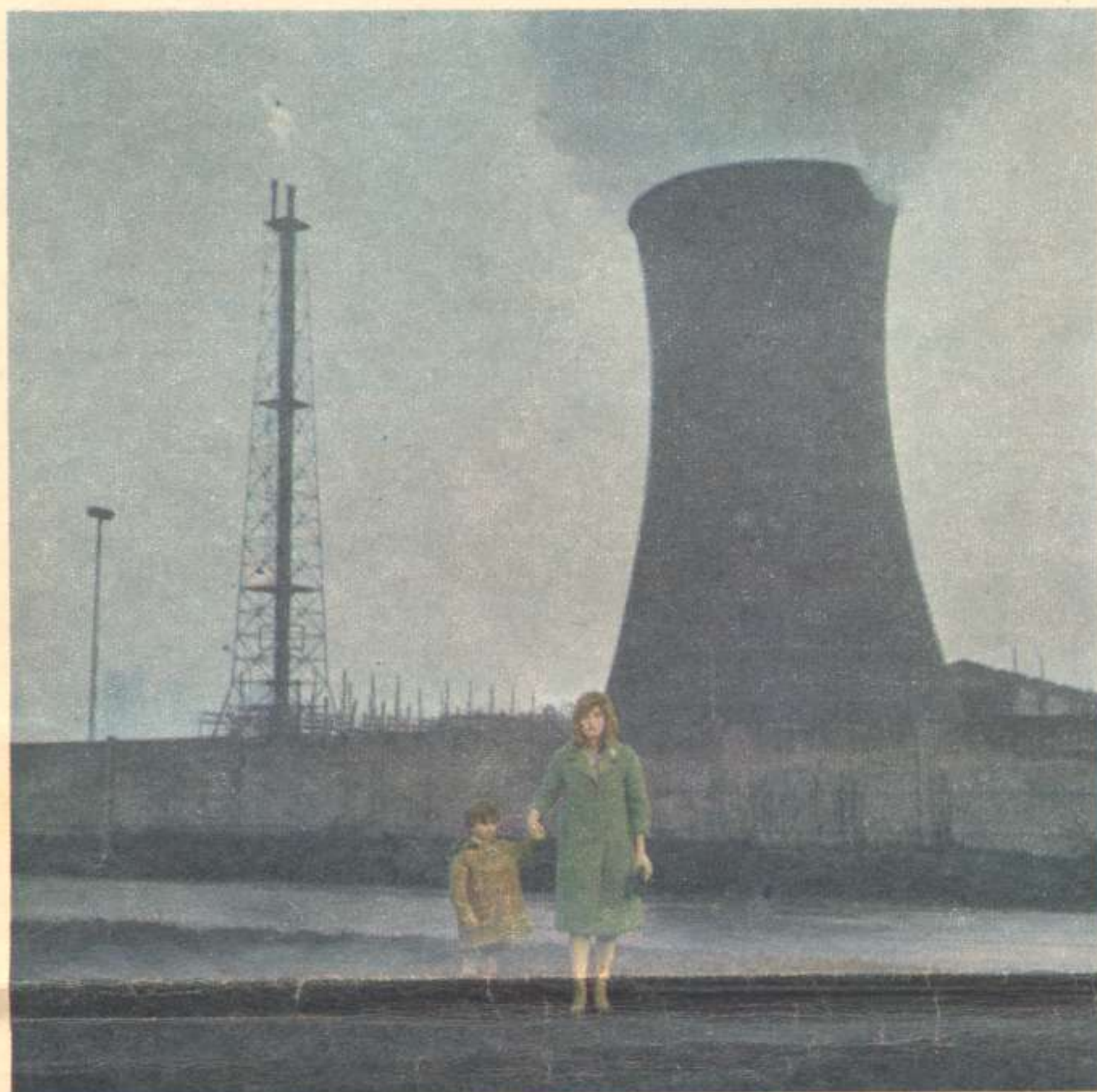


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THE RED DESERT

Antonioni's first film in colour: launching "a violent attack on reality", he paints grass purple, fruit and people grey. By JOHN FRANCIS LANE



Above: Monica Vitti, as Giuliana in *The Red Desert*, crossing the sombre landscape of industrial Ravenna with her neurotic son. Opposite page, top: Richard Harris — the colour blue makes him think of Giuliana. Opposite page, below: the orgy scene in the deserted hut, painted red for sex. Monica Vitti in the doorway, with Aldo Grotti, Rita Renoir, Xenia Valderi and Carlo de Pra. *The Red Desert* is a candidate for the 1964 Venice International Film Festival, which opens on Thursday next

ANTONIONI SWEARS he dreams in colour, and finds it difficult to remember how he ever filmed in black and white. "My films would have been very different if done in colour," he says, and adds that he has never been satisfied with any colour film he has seen.

When I visited him during the cutting of *The Red Desert* he didn't seem sure whether he would be satisfied with his own. Yet when I saw him again, with the first rough cut ready, he was excited about it. Whether audiences are going to share his excitement is another matter. In fact, Antonioni was not sure that he wanted the film to go to any festivals, afraid that the sort of audiences who attend those occasions might be the worst judges. (It had, however, already been accepted unseen by the London and New York film festivals.) But in terms of technique alone — and possibly also in terms of human psychology — *The Red Desert* looks like being the most revolutionary film of the year.

The film has had the inevitable vicissitudes of the 'difficult' non-commercial production. (And that's apart from technical problems — in Ravenna last January the sky insisted on being blue, in spite of the bitter cold, when Antonioni wanted it grey and misty.) An Antonioni film is not made on a normal 'professional' basis. This was something that the male lead, Richard Harris, was to find out the hard way. He should have known what he was letting himself in for once he agreed to make an offbeat film. The star of *This Sporting Life* chose to make the Antonioni film at a time when his box-office quota in distributors' eyes was rather low, following the financial flop of Lindsay Anderson's film in both Britain and America. But when Harris's contract with Antonioni's producer expired some time before Antonioni had finished with him, Harris couldn't stay on in Italy. He had to get to Mexico to co-star with Charlton Heston in a big

epic, thus restoring his 'box-office prestige'. *La fuga di Harris*, Harris's *Flight*, as the Italian papers called it, was not the actor's fault. Contracts are contracts. But it made Antonioni mad at the time. He needed Harris for a crucial love scene. The script had to be changed. Now Antonioni is grateful to Harris. The re-writing changed a lot of things. Some other Harris scenes also came out. The 'story' has apparently benefited from the *fuga*.

But Antonioni always seems to land on his feet. When the picture was originally planned two years ago (with Hardy Kruger in the role which Harris now plays) he ran into production difficulties, and by the time the money had been found the season had changed and the 'colours' in Ravenna were wrong. It was postponed for a year. In the meantime, the actor who was to have played Monica Vitti's husband was signed up by Franco Zeffirelli to play the husband in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Again, Antonioni was lucky: he found a non-professional who turned out to be a born actor and has even dubbed his own voice.

When the film eventually did get going last winter it was the worst moment the Italian cinema had known since the war. The myth of Hollywood-on-the-Tiber was falling apart more quickly than the sets left at Cine-Città from *Cleopatra*. But again Antonioni's luck was in. His backer was Rizzoli, whose money is not only in films so he doesn't depend on credit from reluctant banks. Even so, not even Rizzoli wanted to throw his money away recklessly; he had also backed *The Eclipse*, and that hasn't been one of the great money-makers of all time.

When I saw Antonioni in June, months after he had finished shooting, he was laid up in bed with a fractured knee-cap (as a result of playing football!). But his 'rest' was not only caused by this physical handicap. The young man who had been delegated by Rizzoli to look after the production had disappeared and consequently Antonioni had nobody to organise his moviola work, to find actors for dubbing voices, to pay laboratories. Above all, he had to shoot another scene in good weather and wanted to do it in Yugoslavia. This scene is a sort of Freudian fairy tale which Monica Vitti tells to her child in the film. When I went back to

see Antonioni after he had finished the cutting, he was in the midst of dubbing his actors. He was testing voices to match Richard Harris's face. Yugoslavia was now out of the question. His director of photography had brought him some tests of an island off the coast of Sardinia where the fairy tale would now be filmed. This scene too has had to be modified for various practical reasons. But in film-making such practical problems have always inspired directors to new inventive heights. During the making of *The Eclipse*, Antonioni told me that he preferred to work outside a studio for that very reason.

The Ravenna of *The Red Desert* is not the Ravenna which the tourist sees — no Dante's tomb or Byzantine mosaics. It is a Ravenna that symbolises the changing face of modern Italy. The landscape of Antonioni's film is that of an agrarian economy that has become an industrialised one. Already in *The Eclipse* and in *La Notte* one could detect Antonioni's preoccupation with these social and economic changes and his curiosity to see how they affect our everyday lives. It looks as if *The Red Desert* carries this analytical curiosity to a new extreme. And the novelty of the film is that here it's not just a question of ideas in a script. The film is made in colour not for pictorial effect but because the colours express the very feelings of the characters and their relationships to each other and to the world around them.

"This film could not have been made in black and white," says Antonioni. And that is the clue to its significance, or anyway to its ambitions. His director of photography, Carlo di Palma, says that working for Antonioni makes the cameraman feel like a real artist: "In spite of the fact that Antonioni is the sole author of his film, I really feel I have had a creative function for the first time." Di Palma says that when he saw the rough cut of *The Red Desert* he forgot he himself had had anything to do with it and was overwhelmed as a spectator.

Most of the colours are realistic, though the effect they are intended to convey is usually psychological. For instance, when the electronics engineer (Harris) is talking to some workers in a big storeroom (he is recruiting men to take with him to Patagonia to open a factory there), the blue walls distract



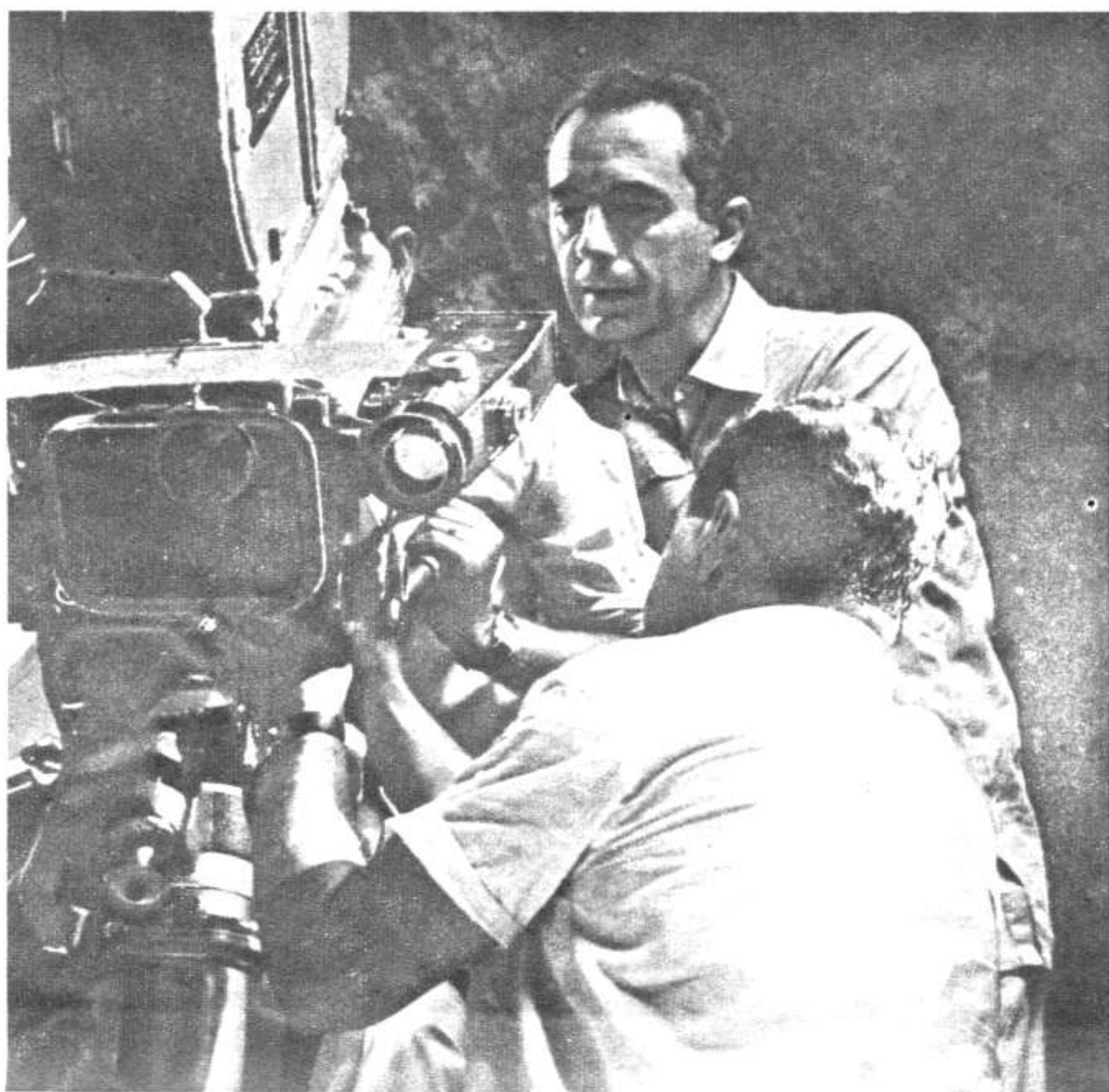
his attention from what the men are saying. His thoughts are in fact wandering to Giuliana (Vitti) and it is the colour of the walls which connects his thoughts to her.

For once, Antonioni admits to there being a *story* in a film he has made. Furthermore, he says that the story is about absolutely normal people. Of course normality is a very rare thing in the modern world and I am sure Antonioni doesn't mean us to take this too literally. Perhaps by 'normal' he means that the world in which they live and the life they lead is normal by everyday standards. The abnormal person in this film is in fact the child. This child even pretends to be paralytic in order to scare his mother, for whom he has no 'normal' affections. The mother is the Vitti character, Giuliana. She lives with her husband Ugo, an engineer, in a white-collar village near the factory where he works. Their bungalow is identical outside with all the other

bungalows on the canal banks outside Ravenna.

But inside the bungalow the particular tastes of Giuliana and Ugo are reflected. That the walls are painted with the same colour as the interior of the factory where he works indicates the monotonous continuity of work and home—one of the factors, presumably, which provokes the neurotic crisis in Giuliana. From the wide windows which cover one whole wall of the bungalow the ships passing in the canal outside seem to be coming right into the room.

One can understand how a child's mind could be influenced by this sort of environment. Antonioni took his script to some psychiatrists before he started shooting and they told him that the 'invented' characters could have come straight from their case-history books. One might almost say, then, that *The Red Desert* looks like being a case history from Jung as Van Gogh might have painted it. /continued overleaf



Most individual and controversial of film directors: Antonioni behind the camera

The transformation which has taken place in Ravenna during the past decade is symbolised by the factories which have sprung up in the pinewoods stretching between Ravenna and its beach on the Adriatic coast. Once these pinewoods were a favourite haunt for campers. The canals which flow into the sea from the tributaries of the Po were a haven for weekend fishers as well as for the local population. The huts which these fishermen built on the canal banks are now derelict shacks or have been pulled down to make way for bungalows like the one in which Giuliana and Ugo live. But a few of these huts are still to be found on the wharfs. Nobody fishes any more because the canals are full of oily refuse from the factories. Ravenna husbands used to say they were going fishing and really use these huts for *rendezvous* with their mistresses. Now the 'fishing' excuse is no longer valid. One of these abandoned huts is a meeting place in the film for Giuliana, Ugo and their friends. Part of the hut is partitioned off and entirely occupied by a bed. The walls round the bed are painted a vivid red – a colour that even the most naïve filmgoer will not have difficulty in interpreting.

The only clue that Antonioni will give to his use of colours is that his intention has been "to make a violent attack on reality". There is a scene, for example, in which the whole street is painted grey, including the man behind

a fruit stall and the fruit he is selling. Giuliana is dedicating all her time to changing the colours in the shop which she is managing, but when she goes out into the street everything seen through her eyes is grey. Another visual interpretation of her neurosis comes when she sees some coloured spots on the walls of the room – and naturally they are not seen by the other people in the room with her. But most intriguing of all are the colour transformations that Antonioni has achieved with nature. Neither Antonioni nor any of his technicians likes to talk about these colours because they don't want an audience to be aware of any 'tricks'. In reality, what Antonioni has aimed at is to capture the deadness of the 'new' landscape, of the pinewoods which have been killed by the fumes and the refuse of 20th-century progress. (For instance, in order to get the grass the dark purple-rust Antonioni wanted, it was first necessary to burn the grass and then spray it with paint – as a housepainter has to do with warped wood.) Antonioni does not feel at all depressed by this counter-nature which has become the new face of the Ravenna countryside. "Yes," he says, "the old nature was very beautiful. But, as I see it, the new landscape has its own beauty. After all, it is the landscape of social progress and it has brought prosperity to Ravenna." But, if I have understood *The Red Desert*, it has also brought on a few neuroses.