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VENICE

BEYOND THE CLOUDS

(PAR DELA LES NUAGES)

(FRENCH-ITALIAN-GERMAN)

A Cecchi Gori Group (Italy)/Mercure Distribution (France) release of a Sunshine/Cine.B (Paris)/Cecchi Gori Group, Tiger Cinematografica (Rome)/Road Movies (Berlin)/France 3 Cinema co-production in association with the Centre National de la Cinematographie, Canal Plus, Ard/Degeto Film, Eurimages. (International sales: Mercure Distribution.) Produced by Stephane Tchalgadjieff, Philippe Carcassonne. Executive producers, Danielle Gegauff Rosencrantz, Brigitte Faure, Pierre Reutfeld. Co-producers, Vittorio Cecchi Gori, Ulrich Felsberg. Associate producer, Felice Laudadio.

Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, Wim Wenders. Screenplay, Tonino Guerra, Antonioni, Wenders, based on Antonioni's collection of short stories "Quel Bowling sul Tevere." Camera (Eastmancolor), Alfio Contini (for Antonioni), Robby Muller (for Wenders); editors, Claudio Di Mauro (for Antonioni), Peter Przygodda, Luciano Segura (for Wenders); music, Lucio Dalla, Laurent Petitgang, Van Morrison, U2; production design, Thierry Flamand; costumes, Ester Walz; sound (Dolby), Jean-Pierre Ruth; sound mix, Vincent Arnardi, Thierry Lebon; assistant director, Beatrice Banfi; executive consultant, Enrica Fico. Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (noncompeting), Sept. 1, 1995. Running time: 113 MIN.

Filmmaker	John Malkovich
Silvano	Kim Rossi Stuart
Carmen	Ines Sastre
Girl	Sophie Marceau
Patricia	Fanny Ardant
Husband	Peter Weller
Mistress	Chiara Caselli
Girl	Irene Jacob
Boy	Vincent Perez
Carlo	Jean Reno
Painter	Marcello Mastroianni
Friend	Jeanne Moreau

"Beyond the Clouds" might be the most intimate, personal film Michelangelo Antonioni has made, but it may also be his least significant. Its bow at Venice was nevertheless one of the fest's major events, since it marks his first feature in 13 years, after a stroke in 1985 left him practically unable to speak or write. Adding to the buzz around this picture is the presence of Wim Wenders as the co-director of a frame story featuring John Malkovich as a fictional filmmaker/narrator.

Unfortunately, this landmark production, laced with a top-drawer cast of Euro thespians, is a leaky boat of a film whose slow artiness is more sleep-inducing than insightful. Film fans and fests the world over can be counted on to find it an obligation, but pic has little hope of capturing the public at large. It is likely to remain a curious addendum to the careers of its two directors.

According to Antonioni, the version screened at Venice is to be considered the "last work print," and minor adjustments may still be made, such as removing the episode titles and snipping a bit of the Ferrara-set segment. Film opens with a film director (Malkovich) descending from the clouds in a plane. He is hunting for a character for his next movie. Like a benevolent, omniscient angel (a favorite Wenders motif), he spies on and recounts the tormented love affairs of various couples.

The body of Tonino Guerra's screenplay is directed by Antonioni and is based on four short-short stories from Antonioni's book "That

Bowling Alley on the Tiber River." In the first episode, "Chronicle of a Love That Never Was," handsome young traveler Silvano (Kim Rossi Stuart) encounters a young woman, Carmen (Ines Sastre), in a provincial hotel in Ferrara, Italy.

Despite their strong mutual attraction, he falls asleep in his room while she waits for him in vain. Two years pass before they meet again, but this time Silvano deliberately chooses to vanish.

In "The Girl, the Crime," Malkovich is wandering around off-season Portofino when he is struck by a pretty girl (Sophie Marceau) who works in a boutique. As a conversation opener, she tells him she killed her father; then they end up in bed. Taking his leave, Malkovich reflects that he was looking for a character for his film but stumbled onto a story.

Paris is the setting of "Don't Try to See Me Again," where another young woman (Chiara Caselli) strikes up a conversation with a stranger (Peter Weller). The next thing you know, they have been lovers for three years, and Weller's wife (Fanny Ardant) is threatening to leave him. Meanwhile, a businessman (Jean Reno) returns home to his swank penthouse to find his wife has left him for another man and taken all the furniture with her. Ardant shows up to rent the apartment, and some kind of spark flies between the two ditched partners.

In the final round, "This Body of Mud," a boy in Aix-en-Provence (Vincent Perez) is so desperate to pick up a girl (Irene Jacob) on the street that he follows her to Mass. Nothing doing: She is already in love with God, and sees her body as something to escape and transcend.

A brief intermezzo, filmed by Wenders, shows Marcello Mastroianni painting in a field, observed by Jeanne Moreau, who teases him about making mere "copies" of nature. The two actors, who starred in Antonioni's 1961 "La notte," seem present mainly as one filmmaker's salute to another.

Another sign of Wenders' affection for his colleague is his generosity in stepping into the film basically as a standby director for the 82-year-old Antonioni, at the behest of the producers and insurance companies.

Somewhat less successfully, Malkovich's pensive musings on being a director read like "Profession: Filmmaker," with a stilted, over-his-head actor standing in for the real directors.

The key idea is that by photographing reality, he (Antonioni, Wenders) seeks out what lies behind deceptive images. Although the most significant themes of Antonioni's work reappear here — the inability of middle-class people to connect and communicate, their alienation from their own feelings — "Beyond the Clouds" has far less to say than such seminal films as "L'avventura" and "L'eclisse."

Pic feels much less modern than those films, particularly in its perspective on women who are struggling for love, mainly through their vulnerable, unclad bodies. This is apparently one of the film's points, yet one longs for the anguished neuroses of a Monica Vitti or a Maria Schneider or, at any rate, a more complex viewpoint.

One reason the characters feel so sketchy is undoubtedly the brevity of the tales. As stories, the episodes are dissatisfyingly inconclusive, like mere snatches of cinema, stolen moments of brief encounters and long, worn-out relationships.

Film's structure and script work

against the actors, and the fine cast barely has a chance to emerge. Ardant and Jacob leave the most lasting impression.

Shot in three languages, pic goes to the extreme of symbolizing incommunicability by having Sastre and Rossi Stuart carry on a long conversation with him speaking Italian and her answering in French. The effect is heavy indeed.

The master's sure hand is visible in the striking visuals. Each shot (lit by Alfio Contini) has a painterly quality, placing characters like figurines in landscapes greater than they are (the fog-shrouded architecture of Antonioni's native Ferrara, for example, or Portofino sobered by cold rain.) His control over the camera in capturing powerful, resonant images is still at its peak.

—Deborah Young