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FILM

Two views of Antonioni: from monstrous technology

RED DESERT. Cineriz release of Film Duemila-Francoriz co-production. Screenplay by Michelangelo Antonioni and Tonino Guerra. Directed by Antonioni.

"RED DESERT" opens at the gates of an Italian oil refinery. Police are escorting a man into the plant. He is a strikebreaker. The strikers parade past the plant. Two union leaders use a public address system to urge the strikebreaker to come out.

All of this is viewed by Giuliana (Monica Vitti), the wife of an industrial engineer, who is walking her small son past the refinery gate.

She is unmoved by what she sees until she spots a man on the sidelines eating a biscuit. She beseeches him to sell it to her and then hurries off among the surrounding slag heaps to devour it hungrily.

There is symbolism all over the place — and that's just the beginning.

MICHELANGELO Antonioni, working for the first time in color and with the splendid canvas provided by wide 70mm film, has created a provocative film on the impact of advanced technology on human beings.

As was the case with "L'Avventura," his first great international success, Antonioni has packed the film with enduring subtleties, haunting scenes, memorable vignettes and evocative camera work. It is a picture to be savored and studied.

To its neurotic victim

MICHELANGELO Antonioni's "Red Desert" has only one character, intelligently interpreted by Monica Vitti.

The other figures that pass across the screen have meaning only through and in terms of her perception of them.

By creating such a character, Antonioni has gained for the first time the freedom of expressing only those elements of his sensibility that serve artistic rather than merely psychological unity.

He has managed to get beyond the confessionalism of his earlier films. And he has not gotten hung up on personal problems of "engagement," aristocratic bias, or even certain unfruitful aspects of the dominating alienation motif.

Thus, the threatening world of weird electronic music and obsessive colors in the "Red Desert" is not, strictly speaking, Antonioni's world nor necessarily our own, but that of the character.

Or, more accurately, it is indeed our world, but looked at frame by frame through someone else's eyes.

The film is, first of all, a fascinating and highly sensitive portrait of a disturbed woman, victim of a capitalist technico-industrial society, which, even through her perceptual distortions, we have no trouble in recognizing as our own.

HOWEVER, ANTONIONI has not merely intended to present a static portrait. With great sympathy, he depicts this woman's struggle to overcome her problem, and, although there is no final solution, he does have her reach a modicum of serenity by eventually rejecting the problem itself.

Her anguished cry, "Non guarirò mai!" (I'll never get well) marks the depth of her desperation but also a beginning of awareness.

The partial calm comes when she refuses the loaded terms — "get well," "neurotic," "alienated" — which pretend to sum her up and make a case out of her.

Alienation is seen not as an aberration but as a mode of human existence. She announces,

It cries to be seen more than once.

The young wife (Miss Vitti), obviously very disturbed and in a near-psychotic state, parades her fears and her anguish against the fog-shrouded backdrop of modern industrial Italy in the vicinity of Ravenna. Her performance is superlative, but Antonioni tells us almost as much with his cameras and his settings as she does with her neuroses. (See supplementary comment below.)

WHEN THE FILM opens the young wife has just emerged from a hospital following an automobile accident. While in the hospital, unbeknown to her husband, she has attempted suicide. She is still terribly disturbed. Her husband (Xenia Valderi) is notably insensitive to her needs.

The wife is attracted to a business associate of her husband's, an engineer (Richard Harris), who is also searching for substance to his life. He is slightly more compassionate than the husband, but — while attracted to the wife — he is also confused by her strangeness, her rapidly changing moods.

The enormous fears that beset the young wife are underscored constantly by the visual presence of industry. The jargon and the logic of psychiatry are not equal to the task she faces. "There is something terrible," she says at one point, "about reality."

"Tutto cio che mi capita e la mia vita" (My life is what happens to me).

Bolstered by this spirit of acceptance, we see her in the final scenes of the film with her new maturity. It is a maturity built of the same enduring fears as before, but — if I may say so — without the fear of the fears.

ALL THIS is rather more suggested than stated, of course (Antonioni's Labensanschauung is pessimistic), but to the degree that there is this redemption, the film drops. It drops because such redemption is psychologically inaccurate.



Mere resignation, passive awareness of reality, makes a vegetable caricature of human life, precluding judgment and, hence, political action.

Since judgment is based on experience and aspirations, a life without judgment is stripped of past and future, i.e. of history.

Clearly such a life, carried to the extreme, leads either to suicide or to a mental hospital. Instead, the tension between individual and society must be grasped rationally, at which point society's victim, without ceasing to suffer, becomes society's antagonist or enemy.

This, of course, would not be credible for Antonioni's character as conceived and developed. She must search for her own existential solution. But the measure of uplift that results does not rise naturally out of a human psychology but smacks of editorial comment.

—G. M. P.

She is brought almost to a breaking point when her young son, while his father is away on a business trip, fakes an illness. She sees the illness as a rejection of her motherhood. In desperation she flees to the arms of her husband's colleague. Their brief sojourn in bed solves nothing. It provides her with no escape, and only increases her burden of guilt. She tells the puzzled engineer, "You didn't help." He departs.

She thinks of running away by ship. Faced with a leering seaman at a gangway on a murky dock, she recoils from the endless succession of new fears that she knows now exist beyond the edge of the fog and comes to the realization that, "My life is what happens to me." One can't run away.

As the film closes she is attempting once again to cope with the life around her a trifle more composed, a bit more resigned.

The psychological aspects of the story are dealt with in penetrating fashion in the additional comment on this page and will not be mentioned further here.

BUT THERE must be further mention of what Jerry Stoll loves to call the "filmics" of this picture. Antonioni is one of the great cinema artists of our time, and this picture is his greatest triumph to date.

His long lens shots foreshorten with dramatic effect. Great ships march across the landscape close behind the actors. Vast radar installations reach out to the stars. Facto-



MONICA VITTI
Reality is terrible . . .

ries spew filth and pollution into the Italian marshes.

A single woman (Rita Renoir) tells a factory owner (Aldro Groti) that she hates him because he covets her with exactly the same greed that moves him to acquire more factories.

The visual, the story, the music (and sometimes the lack of it) all blend into a monstrous indictment of what man's triumphant machines are doing to people — and to the land.

—STEVE MURDOCK

"Red Desert" will open Feb. 4 at the Surf Theater in San Francisco following a complete Antonioni retrospective.