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A defeatist view of heaven?

THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN. Written by Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro; Directed by Elio Petri; photography by Luigi Kuveiller. With Gian Maria Volonte, Mariangela Melato, Salvo Randone and Mietta Albertini. At the Surf theater.

SAN FRANCISCO

IN ITALY, where the working class and its supporters have registered more than a third of the national vote, the volatile politics inevitably are reflected in films. Such films may not achieve major distribution in this country, but they should be seen as an expression of the demand in their own land.

People everywhere want to see themselves as others see them, to agree or not; they are interested in interpretations of their aspirations, their successes and failures, their personal and political problems as they are intensified and illuminated through an art form. Socially conscious Italian filmmakers are aware of this. More and more, their versions of social upheavals in their country reach us through contemporary films, however colored by their own prejudices.

Elio Petri's "The Working Class Goes to Heaven," a prize winner in 1972 at the Cannes Festival, now reaches us in limited engagements. (A program note in the press release tells us that for general release in this country it has been "ineptly re-titled" "Lulu the Tool", whether that re-titling is indeed inept is one of the questions this review will attempt to explore.)

The film has won some praise, mainly as a "cynical satire" about the working man, a "more complex, caustic vision" of Chaplin's classic, "Modern Times". That's far-fetched, although it is true that this film is a serious attempt to deal with the economic, socio-political and psychological problems of the working man scenes of carrot-and stick manipulation by management, their cunning way of playing off one worker against another, the speedup and deceit is brilliantly and unequivocally played out. It is black humor; management is the villain of the piece; there is no softening or blurring of focus on this.

And when conditions become intolerable, and a strike is called; non-working provocateurs, a small group which calls itself "Student revolutionaries" (un-identified, but labeled "Maoist militants" in the press-release) are on hand agitating for violent overthrow of management. The majority of the workers, who speak of themselves as "trade unionists for unity" (Communists?) repulse them, and the battlelines are drawn.

SO FAR, so good. Better than that — a glimpse of reality in the daily life of Italian workers. Then what is wrong? Why can't we identify with all this? I think it is because of the principle character, who is the "outsider," for whom the writers and director seeks to engage our sympathy, yet cannot make the connection necessary for identity.

Lulu seems destined to be a "tool" (the re-titling seems very appropriate). His illusions about himself as master-worker and masterful lover, his spending of his hard and ill-earned incentive pay for consumer junk; his clear deterioration to something close to madness sets him apart from his fellow men instead of making him typical.

The story progresses in this contradictory fashion: He has left his wife and son prior to the beginning of the film to live with a sexy, but politically illiterate (his match) hair dresser. But his vanity at the factory, which drives him to create ever higher norms so resented by his fellow workers, deprives him of his energy when comes home, exhausted, and unable to give the woman he lives with what she came to him for in the first place.

To point up where his "heaven" will eventually be, Lulu visits an old friend, a worker who is vegetating in an insane asylum. Even this, although sobering because of the old man's wisdom, cannot break his macho vanity and blind adherence to the company. It is only when he loses a finger in the machine, and the finger symbolizes to him both his skill and manhood, that he cracks.

A strike is called, demanding better working conditions, Lulu irrationally joins not his fellow workers but the Maoist advocates of violence. For this, when the strike is won, he loses his job. This stuns him. Without work he is not a man, and he breaks with the "students." He is overwhelmed when the workers, he has split from make one of their successful demands the re-hiring of Lulu. This moves him deeply, but Lulu seems destined to follow the steps of Militina, the old worker in the insane asylum; he is becoming more and more irrational.

WHAT HAVE the strikers won in their "victory"? It is not spelled out, but piece-work seems to have gone, and there is now an assembly line. Lulu and his fellow workers are now sped up even more than before. Attempting to achieve a rhythm that will make the pace bearable, they take the lead from Lulu, who, now close to insane, babbles incoherently; all join him in shouting, screaming to be heard above the din of the machines. Madness is not far in the future for any of them.

IT IS A PITY that this film, in so many ways vividly portraying men at work and in conflict, should have concentrated on

one of its lesser and more "exotic" members.

Perhaps the uneasiness and uncertainty of this reviewer came from the authors' attempt to make Lulu a true representative of his class, whereas he is one of its pitiable minority.

The film is very much worth seeing. Each viewer will have to find their own answers to what really were the authors' intentions. Technically — in direction, acting and photography — it is outstanding.

—LESTER COLE



GIAN MARIA VOLONTE in "The Working Class Goes to Heaven," now playing at the Surf theater, San Francisco. (Reviewed in last week's PW.)