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THE SICK WORLD

Antonioni Looks at It Again in "The Night"

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

MICHAELANGELO ANTONIONI, the Italian film director who made the controversial "L'Avventura," which was something of a puzzler last year, is back at us with another picture in somewhat the same cryptic vein. It is called "The Night" ("La Notte") and it is now at the Little Carnegie.

Because Signor Antonioni is no one at whom you can sneeze, despite the intellectual ambiguity and down-beat quality of his films, and because he is one of the most brilliant imagists in the field of cinema, it is fair that we should try to understand him and give him his due. So here goes.

The thing that is most deceptive and confusing about his style is that it appears to be so literal, like that of a documentary film. He shoots all his stuff on locations with sharp-focus, neat photography, and there is an impressive realism in the graphic details and surface aspects of his scenes. But his dramas themselves are far from literal. They are random, allusive, abstract. And his interest is not in what is happening on the surface of his characters but what is happening within.

Bewilderment

This style was particularly bewildering in "L'Avventura" because Signor Antonioni coupled it to a deliberately garbled story-line. In addition to tricking his audience with literal photography into thinking it was going to get a drama along more or less literal lines (which it did not!), he headed his audience down by-ways and into empty dramatic cul-de-sacs and left it stumbling around in blank confusion while he went leap-frogging on ahead. He later explained his intention by saying he expected his audience to work to keep up with him, but that was indeed presumptuous when he gave it little with which to work.

Significantly, he has been more helpful as a dramatist and guide in "The Night" and has happily come up with a picture that we can follow if not entirely understand. At least his story line is simple and the problem of his characters is plain. As a consequence, we can better grasp the dark hints and enjoy the prickly subsurface implications of his intra realistic style.

On the surface, what he is giving us in this latest Italian "sick world" film is an afternoon and evening of boredom in the company of a Milanese novelist and his wife. They have evidently been married for some time—at least, a matter of eight or ten years—and the husband has reached an eminence in intellectual realms.

Suddenly, on an afternoon in summer, after visiting together with a friend who is dying in a Milanese hospital, the wife is completely overcome with a mood of intense melancholy and goes wandering off alone while her husband attends a cocktail party to celebrate the publication of his new book. Loneliness takes possession of her, and even though, later on, she meets up again with her husband, goes to dinner with him and then to an all-night garden party with a lot of splashy swells, she progressively drifts further from him until she feels completely isolated in the cool gray dawn.

Banal But—

That's the plot of the drama, and as such it is pretty dull—a tale which a literal-minded person (or one who knows something about the moods of a tired and restless woman) might find fairly normal and banal. But Signor Antonioni has done more than catalogue the tale in terms of surface details. As real as it all looks and is (to the point, indeed, of monotony, which is an emotional condition or mood), the disturbing thing he shows us is how his people feel—how loneliness leads to frustration, frustration to despair and despair to complete defeatism, especially in a decadent milieu.

By dwelling on the faces of his actors, on their gestures and attitudes, in situations of tension that they mainly build up in their own minds, he draws the audience into them and provokes the viewer to respond to the extent that his or her imagination and emotional chords are twanged. Jeanne Moreau as the woman, Marcello Mastroianni as her spouse and Monica Vitti as a vagrant female are as vibrant as violin strings.

Withal, it is a precious picture, irrationally morbid and high-strung. We'd like to have Signor Antonioni try a look at healthy people, for a change.