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(RED DESERT) (DESERTO ROSSO)

Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, produced by Antonio Cervi, screenplay by Antonioni and Tonino Guerra, photography in Technicolor by Carlo Di Palma, sets by Piero Poletto, costumes by Gitt Magrini, music by Giovanni Fusco, edited by Eraldo Da Roma. Shot in Ravenna and Sardinia, October-December, 1963; first shown at the Venice Film Festival, 1964. 116 minutes.

Monica Vitti (Giuliana), Richard Harris (Corrado Zeller), Carlo Chionetti (Ugo), Xenia Valderi (Linda), Rita Renoir (Emilia), Aldo Grotti (Max), Giuliano Missirini, Lili Rhejms, Valerio Bartoleschi.

"The story was born when I went to Ravenna, which I had not seen for some time. The film was born on the spot and the color was born with it--the industrial ambience of the film...My intention was to express the beauty of this world where even the factories can be very beautiful...The line, the curves of the factories and their chimneys are perhaps more beautiful than a line of trees, of which the eye has already seen too much." Such is Antonioni's own comment regarding RED DESERT.

In his first color film, Antonioni follows the neglected and neurotic wife (Monica Vitti) of an electronics engineer (Carlo Chionetti). She is unsettled by the severe depression and nightmarish factory noises of the town where they live, and still suffering shock from an earlier automobile accident. She meets a mining engineer (Richard Harris) and they are mutually attracted. The young woman compels her new acquaintance to become her lover, but abruptly breaks off the relationship when she finds he isn't a cure for her mental state.

The story is actually of secondary importance, though it does have moments of excitement. It is told in a fragmentary way with situations never quite conforming to the traditional rules: they often have no beginnings, or resolution. Primary consideration is given to the thoughts and feelings of the characters--a concern for the individual in relation to his surroundings. It is in this respect that Antonioni has made a remarkable and unique use of color: white-washed woods, creamy grass and pink houses are subtle gradations of a mist that constantly surrounds and separates the main characters. In one instance Antonioni had the streets painted and the trees and grass sprayed to achieve the desired effect and to reflect the mood his characters felt at the time. [Brandon Film Catalogue]

[The New York Times, Feb. 9, 1965:]

Michelangelo Antonioni has added color and geometric design to his means of suggesting and conveying the tormenting tensions and morbid moods of another of his neurotic women in an over-industrialized and alien world.

In his latest film RED DESERT which came to the Beekman yesterday, the leading existentialist director has abandoned his customary black-and-white for the advantages of Technicolor in defining the volume and hues of massive arrangements of machinery, of modern apartment walls, of buildings in misty landscapes and other aspects of her environment that impinge on the jangled and troubled psyche of his lovely heroine.

He has caught the disturbing grotesqueness of the modern industrial scene--here it is in the region of Ravenna--by contemplating a monstrous chemical plant in all its tangle of condensers and piping, like some great, hot, mechanical giant, rising in despotic grandeur amid acres of hideous waste and sludge.

He has captured in graphic compositions of angled and pastel-tinted walls, enclosing odd furniture arrangements, the strange oppressiveness of a modern home. And he has sensed, too, the oblique strain of poetry in this throbbing space age by showing a giant radar antenna reaching with arcing fingers to the sky to hear the sounds of the stars, while near it is a forlorn, abandoned farmhouse and marshes polluted with slag.

In his characteristic fashion, Mr. Antonioni has done a superb job of suggestive image-making--of putting upon the screen compositions of people and places, of situations and atmosphere, that suddenly seize the senses with implications of profound ideas.

When he shows us, for instance, an assortment of men and women, husbands

and wives, engineers and their indolent consorts, lolling all together on a huge couch, coaxing one another with caresses and aphrodisiacs, he vividly states the emotional poverty of an over-civilized society and one reason for the distress and frustration of his married but neglected heroine.

Furthermore, by placing this strange tangle of human beings in a pale-blue shack by the side of a canal through which huge ships, poetic symbols, pass in the gray-white mist, he creates a haunting conception of the vaporous nature of the lives of the lonely, isolated people who grope so barrenly and pitifully for--call it love.

But, as in his previous pictures--L'Avventura, La Notte and Eclipse--the strangely obsessed film-maker tells us little of his tortured heroine, except that she is bewildered and can find no comfort in men. Her husband, an engineer, neglects her--sepecially in her hour of greatest need, when she is painfully recovering from an automobile accident which has left her in a neurotic state. A friend of her husband with whom she takes up and has a tormented, brief affair, is curiously calm and callous towards her. He has his own existentialist life to live.

Even her small son deceives her, in a classically selfish masculine way. He excites her anxiety by feigning an illness--the symptoms of polio--which almost drives her mad.

And so, at the end, we know little more about this woman than we know at the start. We only learn that she has had a conventional psychic experience as a girl. And we sense that she has learned, like the little birds that fly over the chemical factory, to stay clear of the poisonous vapors of her milieu.

Again Mr. Antonioni gives us Monica Vitti in the role of his alienated modern woman, and she plays it with the same congested air, the same tight and withdrawn human aspect, she has made expressive but not too helpful in her previous films. Carlo Chionetti is her husband--a cool, crisp, remote little man--and Richard Harris is the big, awkward lover who does little more than look at her sadly with empty eyes and hands.

The rest of the people in the picture are almost impersonal and vague as the social environment that we are led to construct but never see. Indeed, they are almost colorless in an engrossingly color-treated film that has more of the quality of painting than of narrative cinema.

Adequate English subtitles are used to translate the Italian dialogue.
[Bosley Crowther]

With RED DESERT, the art of the film advances...The story is both dry and full, austere and intense. It is a series of incidents with sufficient but minimal connection, not cumulative drama of well made scenes; yet each of these incidents is more than a skin-and-bones gesture (à la Bresson), it is implicative and revealing...I know of no film in which a greater tension exists between the movement of the story and the places through which it moves...it is the best use of color I have ever seen in a film, exquisite in itself. It would be quite a wrong emphasis, but one could say that the film is worth seeing for its color alone. I have now seen RED DESERT three times, and each succeeding time it has not only seemed lovelier in color, it has had an increased sense of motion forward.
[Stanley Kauffmann]

short film: THE OWL AND THE PUSSYCAT

An animated version of the old and beloved children's poem, "The Owl and the Pussycat," by Edward Lear. Directed by John Korty for NBC Exploring. Narrated by Cyril Ritchard. 1963, 6 minutes, color.

Next week: Sept. 22 -- Three comedy greats: Mae West in GOIN' TO TOWN (1935), a comic, high society love affair; Buster Keaton in NEIGHBORS (1920), with Virginia Fox; and W.C. Fields in THE DENTIST (1932), with Bebe Kane, produced by Mack Sennett.