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What the Devil?

ANTONIONI SNOOZES; ARNOLD STRETCHES

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

BEYOND THE CLOUDSDirected by Michelangelo Antonioni
and Wim Wenders

Written by Antonioni, Wenders, and Tonino Guerra

A Cowboy Booking release

At the Screening Room

END OF DAYS

Directed by Peter Hyams

Written by Andrew W. Marlowe

A Universal release

GREED

Directed by Erich Von Stroheim

Turner Classic Movies December 5, 8 p.m.

Part of the price we have to pay, it seems, for the international art-film mardi gras of the '60s and '70s is the discomfiting experience of watching the giants inch into their dotage, refusing against better judgment to retire. While some have maintained a degree of grace (Kurosawa's *Madadayo*, premiered this September on TCM, was lovely and adroit), some, like the ailing Michelangelo Antonioni, are encouraged by habit, ambition, or desperation to press on. A full decade after being hit with a massive stroke in 1985, Antonioni assembled *Beyond the Clouds* from a selection of his own short fiction, with Wim Wenders contracted as backup for insurance purposes and to direct a series of connective "interludes" following "the Director" (John Malkovich) as he dallies around Italy.

It's not easy to endure, despite—or due to the embarrassment of—an all-star cast (Fanny Ardant, Sophie Marceau, Jean Reno, etc.). Antonioni's dreamy, pretentious fickle-finger-of-fate mini-tales struggle to wrestle with love and desire, but truck in adolescent ideas and delight in nothing so much as undressing their many young actresses. The good deal of preposterously casual (but lifeless) sex in the movie seems only to invoke an itch the 83-year-old filmmaker can perhaps no longer scratch. The dialogue, backgrounded by actors standing around lovely Mediterranean byways, is witheringly silly—"Nobody watches sunsets anymore," somebody opines apropos of little; "Love is an illusion," someone else shamefacedly utters. The thing is, at least in parts, *Beyond the Clouds* doesn't feel all that different from many other Antonioni films; a reevaluation of the man's oeuvre, after one undergoes the "story" in which "the Director" ("Malkovich, Malkovich!") stares down the peachy Marceau until she non-sequitur-ily tells him she murdered her father, doesn't seem very promising. Was he just fashion?



CLOUDING OVER WITH ARDANT AND RENO

Despite panning-and-irising handstands, the voluminous use of stills doesn't flow with the movie; the effect is something like Ken Burns doing *The Gold Rush*. What we've got now is more of a piece of visual scholarship, itself a unique, invaluable, and hypnotic thing. Von Stroheim's rep, after a long dormancy, has been on the rise, and this is the best evidence of his work you'll get until someone finds those lost five hours in some Ukrainian subcellar. **V**