

Document Citation

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| Title | At long last, Antonioni's 'Identification' |
| Author(s) | Kevin Thomas |
| Source | <i>Los Angeles Times</i> |
| Date | 1996 Dec 12 |
| Type | review |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | F6 |
| No. of Pages | 1 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | Identificazione di una donna (Identification of a woman), Antonioni, Michelangelo, 1982 |

At Long Last, Antonioni's 'Identification'

MOVIE REVIEW

By KEVIN THOMAS
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The ridiculous 14 years that it's taken Michelangelo Antonioni's sublime "Identification of a Woman" to open here merely underlines the timelessness and modernity of one of the world's greatest living directors.

All that keeps it from seeming brand-new is that the color is sadly beginning to fade from the inimitable images captured by master cinematographer Carlo di Palma. Antonioni has charged those images with emotion and meaning through a vision that goes beyond a melding of composition, movement and performance and is the mark of great directors as different from him as John Ford and Orson Welles.

That it has taken "Identification of a Woman" so long to arrive is no reflection on its quality but on the increasing vagaries of the distribution of foreign films that have left fine films by the likes of Jean-Luc Godard and Federico Fellini in continuing limbo. "Identification of a Woman" has been in good company.

Tomas Milian stars as Niccolo, a successful film director whose wife has just left him and who seeks a

relationship with a woman that will actually mean something to him and who can inspire him in his work. (No wonder he stares at a still of Louise Brooks.) Niccolo's quest allows Antonioni to contemplate how difficult it is for people in general, and men and women in particular, to know each other. Since it's Antonioni doing the contemplating you can be sure that there will be an awareness of the society, indeed the universe, in which we and Niccolo live.

In the course of this mesmerizingly beautiful film Niccolo pursues two different yet elusive women, both exquisite and distinctive. "Identification's" tone is sober, as are all Antonioni films, yet we can appreciate the irony in the stories of both Mavi (Daniela Silverio), an aristocrat with a feline look and poise, and the warmer, more relaxed Ida (Christine Boisson).

No one but Antonioni could have made this film, and the way in which it has been staged is breathtaking in its impact. Mavi takes Niccolo to a party in an ancient Roman palace with rooms of incredible antique luxury filled with magnificently gowned women and formally dressed men. Antonioni lets camera movement and cropped images convey Niccolo's increasing restlessness and disdain for an

aristocracy that he finds suffocating. Much later on, the camera will pan up Niccolo's body to his face and follow his gaze out a window to peer down at Mavi on the street below; moments later the camera repeats the movement to reveal that Mavi has gone.

Only a genius could make this sequence poignant and not merely a stylistic flourish. That's because Antonioni is able to inspire his actors to give of themselves to an extent that they can sustain his supremely visual style. He leaves us with the thought that we may have to learn to understand the universe before we can have a hope of understanding ourselves.

Playing with "Identification of a Woman" is "Blow to the Heart" (1981), made by Gianni Amelio and a worthy precursor to such major Amelio films as "Stolen Children" (1993) and "Lamerica" (1996). It is

a subtle, involving psychological drama about a father (Jean-Louis Trintignant), an urbane Milan university professor, and his precocious, straight-arrow teen-age son (Fausto Rossi). Their relationship becomes strained as the son increasingly senses a decided ambiguity in his father's attitude toward one of his students, gunned down as a political terrorist.

■ **Unrated. Times guidelines: some nudity, love-making.**

'Identification of a Woman'

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|------------------------|---------|
| Tomas Milian..... | Niccolo |
| Daniela Silverio..... | Mavi |
| Christine Boisson..... | Ida |
| Veronica Lazar..... | Carla |

A Cowboy International release of an Italo-Franco co-production: Iter Films (Rome)/Gaumont (Paris). Director-editor Michelangelo Antonioni. Producers Giorgio Nocella & Antonio Macri. Screenplay by Antonioni, Tonino Guerra and Gerard Brach. Cinematographer Carlo di Palma. Music John Foxx. Art director Andrea Crisanti. In Italian with English subtitles. Running time: 2 hours, 11 minutes.

■ **Exclusively at the Nuart through Wednesday, 11272 Santa Monica Blvd., West Los Angeles (310) 478-6379. L.A. Times**