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THE NEW FILMS

THE ORGANIZER

Mario Monicelli's latest film recounts the story of a strike in turn-of-the-century Turin. The workers are revolting against a fourteen-hour day which has resulted in a high percentage of crippling accidents. After a number of false starts, they are organized by an itinerant idealistic professor who has dedicated himself to the cause of unionism at a time when Italian power opposed the idea.

Monicelli's other films shown here (*Big Deal on Madonna Street*, *The Great War*) have been marred by a common fault. Situations and tensions were built only to be punctured by a supposedly human failing: In *Madonna Street* the gangsters' signal of danger was to be a whistle; at the key moment, their lookout is too frightened to whistle. These vignettes never attain the warmth they aim for; rather, they remain precious stylistic mannerisms, more irritating than amusing.

The Organizer has obviously sprung from the same hand. However, the very techniques that fall obtrusively flat in the earlier films, yield the desired result. The reason they are so affecting, even penetrating here seems to be their deeper foundation in the dramatic fabric. They are not running gags; they are not funny ideas pasted onto situations, but the distinct property of individual characters. Throughout the film, the professor's myopia is lightly touched upon. We grow accustomed to seeing him refer to his glasses at key moments by cleaning them, readjusting them, misplacing them. In the crucial moment of the strike, when a young worker is shot by the army protecting the factory, the professor loses his glasses in the *melée*. He must crawl around in the dirt to find them before he can see who has died. It is a moment of pathos and great dramatic irony—he cannot see what he has caused.

Monicelli copes remarkably well with subject matter that threatens at every turn to become maudlin cliché. By understating certain moments, by being unafraid to push others to their limits, he achieves great variety of mood, pace, and intensity. After a tragedy in the early part of the strike, there is a thematically necessary scene in which the professor's ideals are challenged by Raul, a young worker with whom the organizer has been billeted. This sort of scene is *de rigueur* in films where idealists must demonstrate the validity of their intentions to skeptical youth. Monicelli stages the confrontation in the bed that the two must share, complete with the exclamation points offered by squeaking bedsprings and a battle for the sole blanket. The tenor of the scene thus becomes light and humorous, culminating in a gesture of tenderness and belief on Raul's part as he covers the sleeping professor. In his refusal to handle familiar characters familiarly Monicelli revitalizes them.

Although the professor/organizer is the title character, he is only one of the film's heroes. He functions as a pivot throwing the major emphasis onto the workers and their cause. The group portrait Monicelli works for and the Chekhovian cast of the professor is in the tradition of revolutionary literature, particularly recalling the Russian anthology dramas of Gorky. This tradition can of course also be seen in Eisenstein's early films. Throughout *The Organizer* one is frequently reminded of *Strike*. The stunning "rightness" of the faces (it is hard to believe they are actors) strongly suggests *typage*. The characterization of the factory owner, crippled, ensconced in a wheel chair, whose spidery movements evoke an insect image, are distinctly reminiscent of this early Eisenstein film where characters are first introduced by suggestive cut-ins of animals. However the Eisenstein comparison cannot be carried too far because *Strike* is a mixture of realism and the stylised expressionism that dominate the Russian director's later films. Monicelli's style is more akin to the romantic realism found in the early social conscious films of Griffith, particularly his strike film, *A Corner in Wheat*. Like Griffith and Eisenstein, Monicelli is extremely adept at handling large masses of people as individuals.

Certainly one of the prime reasons one is time and again reminded of these earlier films is the extraordinary brilliance of Giuseppe Rotunno's photography. He achieves purposely the grainy quality of period photography. The texture and relationship of black to white magnificently suggests the *fin-de-siècle* work of Eugene Atget. Rotunno also succeeds in capturing the steamy mists and bleakness of northern Italy in winter. Piero Tosi's costumes here are as remarkable as his work in *The Leopard* even though the milieu does not permit the same opulence. All the acting is of an extremely high caliber. Marcello Mastroianni once again proves his amazing versatility and Annie Girardot once again plays a prostitute with great skill.

The film's only flaw results from Monicelli's attempt to individualize his characters beyond conceptual types. Characters are involved in relationships which are outside the framework of the strike, albeit affected by it. Raul's romance with a co-worker comes to maturity in the strike; a prostitute's rejection of her factory background is briefly investigated; and a young homesick soldier's relationship with a factory family and his ensuing conflict of loyalties touched on. Given some personal exposition we want more. These people live for us but partially and sporadically. The scope and focus of the film cannot include individuals within the mass as well as humanization of the mass à la Eisenstein. So that, at times, *The Organizer* appears to be a much longer film cut down.

—Sibyl March

THE SEVENTH ART