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ANTONIONI
A Motion Monograph
by Philip Strick

With his next film, 'Signora senza Camelie' (1952-53), Antonioni shifted back to safer ground — to the romanesque style of 'Cronaca', to his favourite subject (woman), to his dislike of 'pop' cinema (as partly expressed earlier in 'L'Amorosa Menzogna'), and to his conviction that class divisions are ineradicable. He also tried his hand, encouraged by Suso Cecchi D'Amico (who had earlier teamed with Visconti to write 'Bellissima', a film of very similar stock), at a heavy form of satire. The story of Clara, however, turned out to be a rather unfunny combination of Pirandello and 'Shooting Stars'. I cannot remember having shared, when I saw 'Signora' a couple of years ago, the widely-voiced opinion that Lucia Bosè was not up to her part — rather the reverse. It seemed more as if Antonioni had wanted Gina Lollobrigida or Sophia Loren, his unobtainable first choices, because by very nature they would have put vitality into an otherwise anaemic and novel-ettish creation. Lucia Bosè gave the part a different dimension; she has the docility of a Chekhov heroine ('Lady with the Little Dog' is an obvious example, but I was thinking particularly of the soulfully dispirited trio in 'Three Sisters'), and there is a similar dignity about her manner of introspection. The passivity which this gives to the character of Clara is perhaps inconsistent with her venture into the film industry in the first place but it certainly accounts for her lack of success when she gets there. As a strikingly regal member of the working classes she gives the impression, very appropriately, of being out of place wherever she goes. But Chekhovian heroines always need to do their anguished vegetation in comfort, so her disconsolate path leads her in the specific direction of money, and her beauty does the rest. The face of Bosè offers scope for this kind of interpretation, whereas the script itself, more lumbered than is usual for Antonioni with a Nordic respect for Destiny, is often hazy and noncommittal.

In 'Signora senza Camelie', as with all Antonioni's films, somebody is looking for something without being precisely aware of what it is. The film is his first in which the search constitutes the entire action, free from the trappings of a dramatic story line such as holds together 'Cronaca' and each episode of 'I Vinti'. (The more protracted search by Aldo in 'Il Grido' is a logical continuation of this form.) Clara Manni (Lucia Bosè) is a Milanese shop-girl whose exceptional looks have won her a screen test as first prize in a beauty contest. In the opening scene of 'Signora' she contemplates the result, her first film, with a detachment emphasised by her standing position in a crowded cinema. When the audience emerges into the street, she hears her producers planning her future for her. With these few shots

Antonioni makes it plain that Clara the person has few connections with Clara the film-star; her career is beyond her own control, as if it is all happening to somebody else. Rather, she has another problem — that of her real identity, the real purpose of her existence. She is, like the title of her next film, at present a 'Woman without a Destiny'; it is the result of having been ejected from one class into another — as she says: 'All I know how to do is buy cloth, and that's because I used to sell it'. But having made a name for herself as an actress she is cut off from her past, just as she is emotionally detached from her present.

One way out of the predicament seems to offer itself when her self-appointed agent and producer, Gianni Franchi (Andrea Cecchi, stalwart of the Italian cinema, is more in control here than during his recent vampiric perambulations in 'Black Sunday'), decides to marry her. It is a decision she is cautious about, but her parents are delighted at the idea and she finds herself honeymooning in no time. Gianni takes over her career completely, and instead of allowing her acting to mature, he rushes her into a new 'Joan of Arc', which he considers to be the right sort of vehicle for her talents. In a painful scene at the Venice Festival we see some shots from the film; it looks a pretty hamstrung charade, and the audience doesn't take to it at all. Somebody behind Clara, sitting miserably conscious of her failure, murmurs: 'Such presumption, after Falconetti and Bergman!' Dreyer's film hangs symbolically over Clara just as it does for Nana in 'Vivre sa vie'; the two of them, like the Lark herself, are martyrs betrayed by men they trusted after having been betrayed, more fundamentally, by themselves.

Clara cannot bear to sit out the film and she leaves in tears. She is followed by Nardo (Ivan Desny), an oily young diplomat looking for diversion, and although she foils his persistence for some days, she finally gives in to him. This is because Gianni, in serious financial difficulties after the flop of 'Joan of Arc', has given her very little sympathy or attention; she is frustrated in her career and in her marriage. Conscious of her duty to her husband, she does not abandon him to his suicidal poverty; instead she finishes the interrupted 'Woman without a Destiny', which is a commercial success, and uses her earnings to set Gianni on his feet again. Only then does she apply for a separation. In this way she is a link between the guilty couple in 'Cronaca' and the troubled conscience of Claudia (as well as, to a lesser extent, those of Rosetta, Irma, and Lidia). Indeed, she is the most practical, in her consideration towards others, of all Antonioni's women. When Nardo turns out a dud and wants to get rid of her she doesn't make threats or appeals.

she doesn't pester him or curse him. She just says goodbye.

Alone, Clara seeks the advice of her co-star Lodi (Alain Cuny, giving his Steiner performance), and her director, Ercole (Gino Cervi), with whom she had worked on her big success. They advise her to go and see Gianni who is setting up a new film, and to ask him for the leading role. Clara goes back to the Cinecittà studios, which throughout the film have been the setting for her more dismal moments, and finds that Gianni has no intention of paying his debt to her. He wants, he says, somebody famous — an ironic statement, in that he has himself caused both her fame and her downfall. The only part Clara can get is in one of the sub-pornographic films her husband once objected to; convinced that she will never be an actress, an opinion confirmed when she hears from outside one of the studios a grandiose speech being delivered by an important star, she accepts the ruin of her hopes and her future. She will become little better than a 'fumetti' model, starring in such tinsel rubbish as the film which awaits her — 'Slave of the Sphinx' (another meaningful title). In melancholy recognition of her spiritual suicide which, as with Aldo in 'Il Grido', is the result of circumstances beyond her control, Clara telephones Nardo in capitulation. Everything will be as empty, as brittle, as sordid as he wants it. Then she turns to the publicity photographers for her 'new' picture, and from somewhere she manages to produce for them the shadow of a smile.

A recurring word in 'Signora', as Richard Roud mentioned in an NFT programme note, is 'sbagliare' — to make a mistake. Clara's biggest mistake was made before the film started, when she allowed herself to be bundled into the film industry. Yet the point of her story is not that she goes on making one mistake after another, which would suggest that she has only herself to blame for her position, but that the mistakes are all made for her. She is fated to be booted around like a football, because, in fact, she doesn't know the game. But Antonioni does not view her inertia as he later views that of Aldo, sentimentally. Clara is not dying for love; on the contrary, she learns (or rather, she is driven) to exist with her affection for the weak and repulsive Nardo much as Nene will later put up with Lorenzo. She is dying intellectually and morally because she does not know how she should live. She did know once, and perhaps the weakness of 'Signora' is that it never shows us what possessed her to abandon that knowledge — only Lucia Bosè, as I have said, implies by her expression the wistful longing to be more than just a shop-girl. Antonioni, however, is using the film to get some ideas straight about the destructive effect of one class upon another, and at the same time to voice his contempt as an artist of the attitude that a film (like the actors and actresses in it) is only



"...the setting for her more dismal moments..."
— Clara in Signora senza Camelé

a commodity to be bought and sold like a can of beans. 'Signora' has, as a result, an indecisive air; it plays for sympathy, but finally one tends to wonder, as at the end of 'Il Grido', what one is supposed to feel sorry for. The characters are themselves rather like something out of a 'pop' Italian weepie; they are moved around the screen with fine technical skill and certainty, they are posed against ideally suitable surroundings, and photographed with mathematically calculated beauty, but they never quite step out from all that skill and all that calculation and contrive to move around the heart.