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IL GRIDO, Italy. 1957. 115 minutes.

Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. Screenplay by Antonioni, Elio Bartolini and Ennio de Concini. Photography by Gianni de Venanzo. Music by Giovanni Fusco. Starring Steve Cochran, Alida Valli and Betsy Blair.

In an evolving structure of film creation, it is difficult to select one example to represent an artist--just as it would be futile to try to choose one painting of, say, Picasso to illustrate the man's entire output. The creative career of Michelangelo Antonioni is a complex chain: groups of links are joined by "key" links, with each "key" presaging the succeeding group.

Antonioni's first feature film followed a series of seven or eight short subjects and documentary materials. He had previously collaborated as assistant director on two films and as co-scenarist on three others, and while these works cannot be overlooked in the development of the artist, it is to his feature films that we shall look for the guideposts and resting places along the road.

Entering the lists in 1950 with Cronaca di un Amore, and following in 1952/53 with I Vinti and La Signora senza Camelle, Antonioni had set a style and somewhat of a mise-en-scene trademark: he had

been portraying middle-class situations emphasizing the outsider. In both Cronaca and Signora the plot hinged on the crossing of social lines and an inability to go back, in both cases, or to identify with the former, lower, situation in one case. This theme (social displacement) was also the basis of Antonioni's La Amiche (1955)--the outsider in a world of luxury. Ian Cameron writes: "Cronaca and Signora are founded on Antonioni's deeply-held belief in the wrongness of the class-based society. He is out to make a fundamental critique of the system." How accurate this statement is can only be judged by the individual viewer. The answer to the question of whether the films (including, actually, La Amiche) are critiques, or rather statements recognizing man's (or woman's) dilemma under certain conditions, is perhaps moot, for Antonioni has cut himself off from (more accurately, taken a different course from) the neo-realist movement with their usually explicit statements and solutions. What distinguishes Antonioni's work from that group's is his concern for the individual himself--not as a symbol of a particular social level, or condition. (Further--his interest in the broadening middle class, in those films, is not in the neo-realist mold.) This concern was readily discernible in his earlier films. Antonioni's handling of it had not been sharpened to the extent it now has: because of his apparent insistence on conveying the connection between actors and sets, his early films had few revealing close-ups, a technique he uses most successfully now. But generally, as Leprohon writes, "Antonioni's settings reflect his characters, rather than define them."

This may be thought necessary because of the essential separation of his protagonists. His people are "outsiders" and Antonioni builds some of their characters through dialogue: dialogue which Cameron states "often turns into counterpoint monologue." By these devices (i.e., relationship to settings, and mono/dialogue), Antonioni constructs an individual being, not a caricature or stereotype as could easily result. Antonioni's inherent sensitivity to his characters, their settings, and their inter-relationships "aids him in describing psychological action." This action is not always of the "happiest" kind! While Antonioni does not describe himself as an unhappy man, his childhood in the Po Valley is probably recalled to a certain extent in Il Grido. This film has been called "the culmination of an obsession with futility." As is common with Antonioni at this stage, there are no serious crises--and likewise, no resolutions. Cameron seems to feel that "Antonioni is ill at ease among the Po Valley peasants.....He seems to be able to...make convincing movies only about one section of society" (i.e., middle/upper class). But this is not borne out by Il Grido. Antonioni's treatment of the various groups and social levels bespeaks great sensitivity and an awareness of stagnated hopes.

Although Antonioni had been toying with Grido for some six years, it was not until 1954 that he attempted (unsuccessfully) to interest a producer in the idea. It was two more years before work was started. Leprohon writes: "Il Grido occupies a very special place among Antonioni's works, representing both a climax and a certain kind of exception. It has deep psychological links with his other films. But, for the first and only time...he abandoned the middle class. Antonioni detaches his hero and places him in a sort of no-man's land...his subject is man himself."

In many ways, the course of the narrative can be superimposed on a symbolic, final journey to Hell and Death. The progressive degradation and deterioration of Aldo and his condition culminates in a rush hut astride the Po's mud flats--and even this soon to be denied. It is, perhaps, at this point that Aldo may be considered "dead." His subsequent confrontation with the now-happy Irma--a vision of paradise as it were--being Hell's halfway house.

Il Grido is not an easy film. It probably should be viewed several times. Darrach has called it "a rough draft of a masterpiece." Perhaps this is too hasty a verdict. In several aspects the film parallels a piece of music in which there exists a sparse melody line, with the richness of texture, the complexity of inter-related themes, and the beauties of a contrapuntal harmony awaiting further hearing. While it is not easy, it is not at all incomprehensible. There are responsive chords to be struck in those able to participate.

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