

## ***The Red Desert (Il deserto rosso)* (15)**

**1<sup>st</sup> December 2008**

Director: **Michelangelo Antonioni**  
Italy 1964

Running time : 120 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Monica Vitti** (Giuliana), **Richard Harris** (Corrado Zeller), **Carlo Chionetti** (Ugo), **Xenia Valderi** (Linda), **Rita Renoir** (Emilia).

SCRIPT: **Michelangelo Antonioni** and **Tonino Guerra**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Carlo Di Palma**. EDITING: **Eraldo Da Roma**. MUSIC: **Giovanni Fusco**.

In his first colour film Antonioni goes beyond the portraits of crumbling or out-of-phase relationships of his previous three films, *L'Avventura*, *La Notte* and *L'Eclisse*, the so-called trilogy of incommunicability, and presents us with a case study in alienation in which one character appears isolated from all the rest.

Giuliana is married to factory manager Ugo in a Ravenna whose landscape is dominated by industrial machinery and ultra-modern architecture. She has a son who is intellectually precocious and a husband who is handsome and influential, yet despite these things she has attempted to take her own life. Giuliana feels estranged from her family and friends, and above all from this artificial world of their making. When an outsider, Zeller, arrives to negotiate a business deal with Ugo, he seems better to understand Giuliana's anxiety, but he only takes advantage of her vulnerability. Complete mental breakdown appears inevitable. As with all Antonioni's films it is not the events of the screenplay, many of which are unresolved, that should concern us. The viewer must look instead to the interstices of a narrative in which 'nothing happens' for instruction, what is *not* said, what is *not* done, what is implied, by gesture, framing or other aspects of *mise en scène*. Or, in this case, by colour.

Antonioni told how he set out, literally, to paint with colour in this film. Thus he used bold primary colours on the sets, brought out the yellow of the polluted air and even went so far as to paint the grass and trees a different colour. Fumes drift across the greyish skies and the characters seem drained of colour compared with their surroundings. The colour red, notably, seems to point to Giuliana's anguish and longing; how poignant, then, that it should be on such things as pipes and railings.

In her fourth film for the director, Vitti moves centre stage, and her famously inscrutable features just about bear the pressure of our gaze over two hours' running time. Harris appears, fresh from *This Sporting Life*, and apparently got on less than famously with the director; he left the film early to start work on *Major Dundee* and his scenes had to be completed with a double. As usual, the sight of a familiar face speaking fluent Italian in a different voice can be disconcerting, but Antonioni's characters don't talk that much.

An interesting aspect surrounding interpretation of the film stems from the director's apparent dissension from the commonly held view that it is an ecological, or anti-industrial, film, indeed the first of such. Far from Giuliana being presented as a kind of environmental litmus paper, sensitive to the disease afflicting the natural world and its inhabitants and to which all around her seem numb, but to which she, martyr-like, succumbs, Antonioni is quoted as saying that, basically, she needs to wake up and get a grip! 'My intention... was to translate the poetry of the world, in which even factories can be beautiful. The line and curves of factories and their chimneys can be more beautiful than the outline of trees, which we are already too accustomed to seeing. It is a rich world, alive and serviceable... The neurosis I sought to describe in *Red Desert* is above all a matter of adjusting. There are people who do adapt, and others who can't manage, perhaps because they are too tied to ways of life that are by now out-of-date.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Seymour Benjamin Chatman, Paul Duncan. *Michelangelo Antonioni: The Investigation*. Taschen, 2004)<sup>1</sup>