RevIEWS

eventually becomes intelligible, but some of them remain undefined, like a brief rock dance scene which is flashed at us twice, and though it is later fleshed out slightly—it is a dance hall where Archie wanders by Petulia and her husband—we never know what Archie is doing there, or what exactly happens. Even in using a rather irritating trick, then, Lester tries to appropriate it to his theme.

In the last few scenes, as Petulia is reconciled to her husband, she takes over the emphasis of the film without ever quite coming into clear focus. When she finally embraces David and cries, “Poor baby, poor baby,” it is quite disturbing, but are we to see her as a noble, self-sacrificing Earth Mother (she seems to have a compulsion to “save” people), or as a masochist every bit as neurotic as her sadistic husband? The question is never answered—but this seems to me evasion, not meaningful ambiguity. It would have been perfectly legitimate to leave Petulia unexplained, mysterious; but these scenes go on so long as to imply that the mystery is at last about to be solved, and when it is not, we have a right to feel cheated.

Richard Chamberlain as David gives the most surprising and probably the finest performance in the film, and Lester must deserve part of the credit. Chamberlain captures perfectly the hint of menace beneath California Golden Boy’s mask of generosity and good cheer, and he brilliantly registers all of the subtle, frightening transformations of a twisted contemporary Dr. Jekyll. In a rage he orders Petulia to get the Mexican boy out of his house, but a moment later he is smiling and purring, cuddling the boy, sadistically exaggerating concern, then the next moment genuinely contrite, almost hysterical, pleading with the boy to like him. “No hard feelings, no hard feelings . . .” Petulia tells him that when she met him, he was “the most perfect thing I’d ever seen . . . like one of those plastic gadgets the Americans make so well . . . I had to have one.” This dialogue is rather heavy, but Chamberlain does seem to suggest everything that is most enchanting and awful about plastic America, the cancer that spreads, invisible, within the beautiful bodies of the House Beautiful people.

Petulia is annoying from time to time. Lester cannot resist playing, throwing in coy comic bits that destroy the mood he has worked to achieve. Some of the straight satiric “business” —the mechanical furnishings of the motel, several hypocritical hippies, an unfeeling chorus of bystanders around Petulia’s ambulance (reminiscent of The Knack), the stilted conversation of Petulia’s inhuman father-in-law—is cold, obvious, predictable. The film’s opening—fast cutting back and forth between crippled rich folks being wheeled into the Fairmont’s basement and a screaming rock band upstairs—is about as ugly and unpromising as that of any film this year. And Christie’s mannered performance and the feeble invention of the next few scenes are not reassuring; it takes longer than is comfortable for Petulia to get control of itself. (It happens, I think, in the long, beautifully played scene between George C. Scott and Shirley Knight, as his ex-wife, which economically evokes the enervation of their married life.) In other words, the people who made this film have made mistakes. But even the mistakes are interesting and discussible. Every moment in the film is alert, intelligent, has a reason for being there. That is a rare enough quality in American films. The compassion and ability to sustain dramatic scenes that reveal a new maturity in Lester’s talent are added pleasures.

—Stephen Farber

CHINA IS NEAR


Marco Bellochio’s second feature China is Near is a strident film. It laughs, sneers, and jeers at everything which is for Bellochio synonymous with depravity in Italy: the family, the bourge-
oisie, interclass sexual relationships, the alliance between the Christian-Democrats and the Socialist party, the Church, the game of politicking. In the desert he creates with his pitiless irony, one thing remains untouched: the childish acts of terrorism of a young pro-Chinese revolutionary, Camillo, a Greco-looking boy with a serious beauty and an intransigent attitude. Since Fists in the Pocket (1965), Bellochio has not unclenched his fists, but he has abandoned autobiography and has gotten out of the Freudian family inferno which limited his view considerably. There is still a family nucleus in China is Near (two brothers and one sister) but not only do they not form a solid block, they represent all potential tendencies: Elena the conservative, Vittorio the compromising Socialist, and Camillo the pro-Chinese revolutionary; they mix with two outsiders, Carlo and Giovanna, both of proletarian origins. The major differences between Bellochio's two films is the devastating humor which gives China is Near its respiration and its dialectical balance. The film seesaws between a sordid drama of ambition, sex, and betrayal and a satire on political mores. The latter reacts over the former in such a way that contrary to Fists in the Pocket, we can disengage ourselves from the operatic squalor of the plot and avoid taking it seriously. It is François Mauriac revisited by Allen Ginsberg.

By comparison to Jean-Luc Godard's La Chinoise which it forecasts (China was made in the summer of 1966 and La Chinoise in the spring of 1967), China is Near is infinitely more desperate because it offers no solution. Pro-Chinese tactics are merely another face of politics in Italy, even if presented with no contempt. For the rest, Bellochio does not have enough sarcasm. Vittorio, the Socialist municipal candidate, is a well-to-do intellectual who bears the stigma of gutlessness and decadence typical of the Italian bourgeoisie. He is a mixture of pettiness and grandiloquence. Elena, his sister, is the placid sexual object who is upset only when sex interferes with order, as when she is pregnant from the “unmarriable” Carlo, a sincere socialist, and Giovanna, who both appear as committed idealists in love with each other at the beginning of the film, turn out to be ambitious parasites who make deals to force Elena and Vittorio to marry them respectively. Nothing redeems any of them. Vittorio bribes a policeman and invites his pious aunts to get their votes; Carlo betrays both Giovanna and Elena since he makes her pregnant only to marry her; Giovanna cheats Vittorio by blackmailing him through the baby she is expecting from Carlo. And so political compromises are exposed through rut and impregnation.

Where Godard was a poet, Bellochio is a novelist making a moral judgment on people involved in politics. Cheap melodrama and social ridicule are Bellochio's instruments of criticism whereas Godard was using games, puns, playlets, and psychological irreality. Paradoxically, Bellochio's characters also become abstract; they finally represent things more than they exist by themselves. This is why the image is bleak, overexposed and constantly washed out. Grotesque contrasts à la Buñuel abstractionalize further the socially rooted protagonists: Vittorio is shown crying “God, why hast thou forsaken me?” while on the pot, Camillo in his Jesuit uniform discusses political intransigence while accompanying on the piano choir boys serenading an old bed-ridden padre, Carlo caresses Elena near a display of antiques among which the shoe of a Pope is kept behind glass doors. Catholicism is only a dusty relic near which the worker fecundates the upper class, says Bellochio's humor in that very personal combination of rage, lucidity, and taste for the freakish side of people which seems to be his trademark. (Incidentally, the characters of China is Near are ordinary people and not psychological monsters as in Fists in the Pocket). But the film's irony should not make us shrug off the seriousness of the drama, for Bellochio, after some humor, comes back with more sordidness. The ending is, for that matter, exemplary. After a political meeting where Vittorio is prevented from finishing his speech by the launching on him of cats and watchdogs by his brother's Maoist friends, we see the two
women impregnated by Carlo doing maternity exercises and we learn that Carlo is indeed going to marry the rich Elena, and Vittorio the proletarian Giovanna. This is the ultimate victory of political compromise.

Camillo, a partisan of violence, is the “pure” counterpart of the Véronique of La Chinoise and the opening scenes of China is Near, where Camillo lectures two unattentive followers on sexual education according to Chairman Mao’s precepts, resemble the indoctrination of the quintet of students in Godard’s film. But if Camillo is spared Bellochio’s disdain, he still represents only one of the political tendencies X-rayed by the director, whereas Godard concentrated exclusively on pro-Chinese French students. It could not be foreseen at the time a small group of revolutionaries would be a prophecy on the future. The events of May 1968 in France have proven that indeed it was true that a minority of pro-Chinese “enraged” students at the University of Nanterre could spark a revolutionary movement which would extend to the entire nation. It is to be feared that Bellochio’s pessimism is in tune with the political stagnation of Italy (where the Communists, the governmental alliance of the Christian-Democrats and the Socialists are deadlocked) and that, contrary to the inscription on a wall in the “red” city of Imola which inspired the title of the film, China is still far away from the Italians.

—CLAIRE CLOUZOT

Short Notices

The Bride Wore Black. François Truffaut has followed his Hitchcock interest into pure murder. A woman (Jeanne Moreau) kills two rather ordinary young men whom she never personally met, before we find out why, and she goes on to kill another three. It’s a revenge story with some sharp cinematic touches—jump cuts, flash-backs, a marvelous close-up of escaping feet—the color photography by Raoul Coutard is, as ever, first rate, and this time postcard pretty: against Coutard’s bright lush background of the Riviera, Truffaut dresses his revenger white or black, sometimes half white, half black. Her two-value garb reflects her compulsive dedication; she is outside the colorful life. Conversely, her victims are quite lively. They are introduced by short vignettes of their loves, friends, weaknesses, work, which make their murders disturbingly real. Thus the bride’s revenge and its romantic justification grow progressively more grotesque, particularly in an episode with an artist-illustrator (Charles Denner), a womanizer who falls for the femme fatale posing as Diana, goddess of the hunt. He dreams of her as a full-color nude; she shoots him down but lets the image stay. Here, the sexuality which has lingered in earlier murders emerges as a motif of the bereaved virgin who comes to despise love, but neither warped passion nor the moral puzzle of revenge (a religious confession only spurs Miss Moreau on) develops a thematic core for the film. Instead, as the loss of love turns the bride into a murdering robot, so the no-comment no-emotion style turns the film into a literal see-it-happen. It’s a case of film entropy. Brilliant elements work against each other. Style and color cumulatively work against ideas. The division of sympathy between bride and victims works against sympathy for any. The film moves into an esthetic mode, French, methodical, no Hitchcock surprise, no terror anywhere, until, when the last murder is contrived, the film goes flat. Of all Truffaut’s work this is the one that leaves us in neutral.

—JUDITH SHATNOFF

A Dandy in Aspic. Unromantic spy films are nothing unusual by now, but this one does have an unusual twist; the anti-hero, flawed, sordid, but still sympathetic, is one of them—a Communist double-agent who wants desperately to go home to Mother Russia. In fact, the Russian agents in the film are all likable, while the British are cold, devious,