

MOVIES

PAUL SCHRADER

The distributors of GRAZIA ZIA are touting the fact that Salvatore Samperi, the director, now 24, wrote the screenplay when he was 17-years old. "A Seventeen-Year Old's Protest Against Society!" the ads proclaim. Not only do the distributors capitalize on the ever-popular child prodigy angle, but they associate Samperi with cinema's two prevailing myths: the Young Revolutionary Cinema and the New Italian Cinema.

Actually, "Grazie Zia" is the sort of film a 17-year old would write. It is also the sort of film a 17-year old should have abandoned by the time he has reached 24, in lieu of something more tough-minded and honest. Unfortunately, "Grazie Zia" is symptomatic of much of the "revolutionary" cinema. It attacks "society" superficially, using bureaucracy's own tools, wealth and perversion, and as a result suc-

ceeds only in perpetuating what it set out to destroy.

The story-line of "Grazie Zia" is a schoolboy's version of Pinter and Losey's "The Servant;" a bit more violent and more political. Alvise is a spoiled, impotent, psychosomatically crippled son of a wealthy industrialist, who, paradoxically fancying himself a revolutionary, keeps count of Vietnam war dead and burns model-size Vietnamese villages. He is left in the care of his Aunt Lea, an attractive psychiatrist. Lea is drawn emotionally and sexually to the perverse Alvise, who denigrates her and makes her join in his vicious and meaningless games. In the final game Lea, at Alvise's command, puts him painlessly to death.

But whereas "The Servant" drew its strength from strong characterization, "Grazie Zia" completely fails to connect at the character level. The counterposed film-making of "The Servant" created characters who, caught between Pinter's banal script and Losey's baroque camerawork, seemed logically condemned to act out their obsessions. Samperi's story is no less intriguing—or sophomoric—than Pinter-Losey's, but his direction is completely devoid of the reasoning and passion which makes people act out their fantasies. Samperi instead succeeds only in knocking down a succession of straw men, each with convenient political labels. We are expected to respect Samperi for his high-minded intentions—which are, in fact, the worst aspect of this sort of kinky film-making.

Samperi's whipping boy is our battered old friend, the bourgeoisie. The traditional bourgeoisie vices are remarkably personified in Sandro, Lea's middle-aged lover. He is an ex-Marxist who does interviews for the state-owned TV network, and hardly lets poor ruined farmer get a word in edgewise. Not only that, he articulates the left-wing intellectual jargon, has rich boring friends, is rich himself, drives a fancy car, and is mother-dominated. Such characters do not need Samperi to ridicule them. In fact, if such a pure, unadulterated Babbitt exists, he ought to be given the New Left's

Easy Target Award. If only the whole establishment consisted of such classic dummies, then it could be destroyed as easily as Alvise incinerates his matchstick Vietnamese village. The rest of Samperi's targets are equally easy: a dim-witted pop singer with long, straight blond hair, a bejeweled matron, a young man on the move, a hedonistic doctor. After a long dinner, which is like a Lord's Supper of establishment stereotypes, Sandro's friends launch into a protest song about Auschwitz.

As could be expected, the bourgeoisie have made "Grazia Zia" a great financial hit in Italy. One of the few privileges of being bourgeoisie today is to be ridiculed by your offspring. The day-to-day routine of bourgeoisie living is so dull that the bourgeoisie have to suck up the anger of their sons and daughters to infuse their existence with any sort of life. If campus uprisings and new morality did not exist they would have to be invented to fill the blank covers of "Time" and "Newsweek." Antonioni first caught onto the trick. He realized how much the bored upper classes enjoyed being told they were bored; it gave them a false sort of life in itself. Samperi and his black revolutionary counterparts know how much the decadent masses enjoy being told how decadent they are, and that they must be destroyed.

Well-meaning but superficial artists like Samperi have become the court jesters of the bourgeoisie. Babbitts are not offended by this sort of attack, they are entertained and refueled. The Samperi style jester-revolutionary only wants to pull his pants down in front of the kind, and he is a fool if he doesn't realize that the king enjoys it as much as the film-maker does. Films like "Grazia Zia" are harmless, and if Samperi can make enough money (as he has) doing pratfalls for the king, he will never have to face the tortuous dilemma of corruption or revolution, but can stay conveniently on the fringe.

Like "Grazia Zia" a great deal of the "revolutionary" film-making is only a palace revolution. They have taken over the opulent estates left from "La Notte" and "La Dolce Vita" and filled them with bizarre sex, sadism, and the omnipresent spectre of Vietnam. But the orientation is still on the faddish old life styles. You cannot attack the establish-

ment by exaggerating its vices; wealth, sadism, masochism, and corruption. Accepting Samperi's premise that there is such a breed as the "decadent bourgeoisie," it could only be encouraged by "Grazia Zia." Samperi's film, in fact, brings out those characteristics in people. The decadent bourgeoisie know, even more than Samperi, that "Grazia Zia" could not have been made with intelligent, tough-minded, or non-wealthy characters. It feeds their fantasies. This story could only have been acted out in upper class society. "Only the rich," the upper class exclaims, "can be as perverse and decadent as we." Therefore, be rich, be corrupt, and pay your sons to ridicule you.

Young film-makers are often so inexperienced that they don't realize when they are acting as free agents or when they are being used to fulfill society's fantasies. They have become so accustomed to the masochistic, culturally deprived capitalistic society that they think there is nothing unusual about receiving laurels from those whom you have set out to destroy. As Jerry Farber once said, "the hardest battle isn't with Mr. Charlie. It's with what Mr. Charlie has done to your mind."

The purpose of revolutionary film-makers should be to create an alternative culture, a new way of seeing, which is so accurate, so powerful, and so contagious, that the present society is irresistibly drawn to it, not out of faddism or guilt, but out of awareness and love. This is why "Shame," "Weekend," "Belle de Jour," "Pickpocket," or even "Fireman's Ball" are so effective: they offer a new way of perceiving. And nothing is so insidious as originality. Until young revolutionaries dare to look into their own minds, they will remain court jesters.

Elsewhere in this issue, I have published an interview with D.A. Pennebaker, director of MONTEREY POP. The interview covers most of my specific objections to "Monterey Pop," but I would like to add some general comments about Pennebaker, now that cinema-verite is approaching its second decade.

Firstly, as Pennebaker says, "Monterey Pop" is inherently interesting. Although I dislike the

(Please turn to page 50)

E SEEGER

BAEZ

& STRIKE BY FARM WORKERS

MAY 18 MEXICO

PORT-PUT YOUR MOUTH IS.

547-2789 INFORMATION

BECOME AN OPPORTUNIST MINISTER

(From Page 37)

direction, and would have preferred to have had a CBS camera crew shoot the Festival, I will go back and see "Monterey Pop" a-gain and again, if only to watch Janis wail out "Ball and Chain." This film could be shown in broad daylight, out of focus, on an elephant's back, and there still would be a crowd of freaks to catch the show.

But, more importantly, I think "Monterey Pop" marks the demise of Pennebaker as an interesting director. Ten years ago Pennebaker was involved in a brilliant form of film-making, but he has failed to perfect and update his craft, and is now, consequently, engaged in the most commonplace banalities. (It may be argued that Ricky Leacock and Bob Drew were the ideological fountainheads of American cinema-verite, but nevertheless Pennebaker was there long before anyone else.) "Primary," made almost ten years ago, is a much more perceptive and incisive film than "Monterey Pop."

Pennebaker has unwittingly become a commercial director, "Monterey Pop" could have just as well have been the product of an image-making, style-setting PR conglomerate, instead of being the film of Don Pennebaker, who was tracking up the snows of Wisconsin long before the conglomerates caught on.

All that is left of the original Pennebaker method is the shell of technique. But anyone can emulate cinema-verite's shakey,

grainy style. "Faces" was shot over a long time in one house, but Cassavetes would have you believe he caught it on the run. Regardless of what Pennebaker says, he doesn't have to rely on the affectations of the quick zoom, the wobbly camera. "Jazz On A Summer's Day" proved that. The Pennebaker style, once a means to an end, has become an end in itself. He is no longer searching out those rare moments of character revelation or sense of place that can often only be captured by an awkward camera. He is using six individual camera-sound units to capture a festival which he could have just as easily set up for the express purpose of filming it. And Pennebaker cannot excuse himself simply by calling the film a "musical."

It does matter what John Phillips or The Who think about their peculiar way of business and art. That is what nobody else will show us: we can see the performances on Ed Sullivan. But that revelation takes a second place to Pennebaker's notions of a good "show."

When a director starts talking excessively about his audience, as Pennebaker does in this interview, it's time to be suspicious. This often means that the film-maker has lost faith in his own instincts and is looking elsewhere for a sense of direction. It is the fail-safe point for a film-maker, critic, or novelist. When an artist's native well-springs go dry, he must look elsewhere for replenishment. He may, like a few rare artists, dig deeper into himself, or he may search out a good writer,

This failing, if he may turn to his audience and start giving them what he has taught them to accept. When an artist begins to exploit his own success, it is called self-parody.

The American cinema-verite movement, ten years after, seems to have become regrettably commercial. Like "Monterey Pop," Ricky Leacock's "Chiefs" is a very comfortable film—this time about the police. Don't we wish that the problem of sensible law enforcement was as simple as mocking men with beer-bellies and Hawaiian shirts. Leacock and Pennebaker seem to have lost the concern they had when ABC's equal time law was staring down their necks. They seem more interested with what a certain audience wants to accept.

There is now, thanks to the efforts of men like Leacock and Pennebaker, a commercial theatrical market for films which deal with reality in a straightforward manner. And it is now, when the market is available, that we need major artists to utilize it. But for the time being, Leacock and Pennebaker seem content to retreat the paths they once carved out.

