The bourgeoisie is also a class: class as character in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Avventura*
by Frank P. Tomasulo

Interpretation of any artwork — including cinema — carries with it an implicit or an explicit ideology. This is especially true for the Marxist film critic who studies the intersection of cinema, society, and politics within a particular historical conjunction, elevating these ideological issues from background assumptions to the foreground of the critical enterprise. Too often, however, vulgar Marxists and neo-Stalinists have sought the "social equivalent of art" only in the work’s manifest content and sociohistorical determinants and not in its "aesthetic dimension."[1] But as Georgi Plekhanov pointed out, "Sociology must not slam the door in the face of aesthetics but rather fling it open wide."[2] Plekhanov reasoned, as Maxim Gorki did, that, "aesthetics is the ethics of the future."[3] Following that line of reasoning, my methodological goal, then, is to historicize the stylistic paradigm by insisting that we not lose sight of the ideological and rhetorical meanings inherent in cinematic form. In particular, I will examine how film director Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* (1959-60) uses mise-en-scène and other formal articulations to convey both disgust and sympathy for the Italian bourgeoisie during the postwar "boom" years.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has...left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies...in the icy water of egotistical calculation.

*L’Avventura* portrays a bourgeois class alienated by an all-consuming prison-house of selfhood. Members of a dying and useless social class, the director's wealthy, narcissistic protagonists are resigned to their fates. Rootless, decadent, and indolent, they have no special social role or function, except to make and spend money. As such, they are abstractions of modern alienated human beings — epitomized by their furnishings, clothing, cars, mansions, and other material possessions. Antonioni obviously has an interest in and a feeling for the sheer phenomenology of class, those tangible signs and indices of wealth, status, and style — the full gamut of private property and its accoutrements. The filmmaker makes extensive use of such metonymic and synecdochic details to convey the class character of his people, settings, and situations. As a materialist filmmaker, Antonioni is committed to depicting a real world of objects and people, but an equally important part of that world is the manmade social order — the class system — in which the director often focuses on a particular kind of character, from a particular...
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Anna's father is allied visually with the cathedral, while Anna is on screen left, with the new housing developments behind her.

The father has a class-based attitude toward Sandro, since the latter their fate is determined not by their individual choices and actions but by the impersonal laws of the marketplace; they are thus marginalized — even within a world they rule. These one-dimensional Marcusean men and women are the products of a one-dimensional neocapitalist society.[6] In short, their class is their character.

As such, for Antonioni, social class is not an "add-on" to characterization. It is the very foundation and cause of one's character — or the absence thereof. If classical Greek tragedy is defined as "character is destiny," then Antonioni's oeuvre might be said to deal with "character is class." By focusing on the dialectics of decay of the discredited bourgeois class at the supposed precipice of historical obliteration, Antonioni's socialist-humanist films condemn the reified experience of contemporary class society. His oeuvre is thus a counterforce to the despair of the rich-but-estranged people who populate his cinematic landscape. Indeed, the solitude of the individual in bourgeois society is a founding principle of Antonioni's cinema, the *modus vivendi* of his people. These antiheroes alternately retreat into and away from that all-consuming prison-house of self, and that preoccupation eventually develops into a "cult of the ego." For Antonioni, then, the bourgeois protagonist is a victim of a social order in which he/she belongs to a useless class.

In *L'Avventura*, the very first relationship depicted on screen is class-determined: a worker on Anna's father's villa calls him "Excellency." The former diplomat resents the encroachment of newly constructed apartment buildings, yet he does not seem to mind the presence of a domed cathedral seen in the background of the shot. Juxtaposed in the deep-focus distance are the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. Anna's father seems to favor the older morality and class strictures represented by the church, while the restless Anna is associated with the transient architecture of the new buildings. Indeed, the father is positioned on screen right, allied visually with the cathedral, and Anna is placed on screen left, with the new developments behind her. Also in the opening scene, the father brusquely greets Claudia, who remains in the background, and downgrades Sandro — "That man will never marry you." Both attitudes appear to be class-based, since Claudia comes from a poor family and Sandro appears to be one of the *nouveau-riches*. 
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Although probably originally poor, Claudia mingles with the Roman aristocracy whose wealth attracts her.

Claudia displaces her original class/family background and now physically resembles Anna, whose place she has taken in Sandro's social world.

Claudia smiles on hearing the comments of two

focuses on a particular kind of character, from a particular class. As Antonioni once remarked in an interview with me:

"I know the bourgeois class better. I grew up with that background, as a tennis champion, [but] the aristocrats or the bourgeoisie are sliding into nothingness. They're disappearing slowly."[5]

L'Avventura documents the riflusso (reflux, ebb) of commitment to social causes during il boom, the years of Gucci, Olivetti, Fiat, Pirelli, and Carlo Ponti. Yet the director's materialist mise-en-scène uses aesthetic distance, spatial distance, and the social milieu (including props and costumes) as correlatives for the internal, empty lives of his upper-middle-class characters. Thus, despite their class privileges, their fate is determined not by their individual choices and actions but by the impersonal laws of the marketplace; they are thus marginalized — even within a world they rule. These one-dimensional Marcusean men and women are the products of a one-dimensional neocapitalist society.[6] In short, their class is their character.

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passing workers in the art gallery.

Raimondo yells, "Woman overboard!" but does nothing else to save Anna.

Servants leave masters free to indulge themselves.

Anna has a patronizing relationship with Claudia, keeping her waiting, as seen out the window.

Anna has no compunctions about keeping Claudia below while she and Sandro reunite.

Claudia's alienation in the social hierarchy is seen when she is framed through a doorway, back to the camera, visually entrapped by the mise-en-scène.

While Anna and Sandro copulate off-screen, Claudia again waits alone, seen in the background of the shot, alienated from her upper-class "friends."

Likewise, Anna’s patronizing relationship with Claudia is class-determined. For example, Anna has no compunctions
about making Claudia wait downstairs while she and Sandro consummate their reunion, with Claudia seen as small and in the background of the frame. Claudia’s alienated position in this social scheme is also articulated when she is seen alone through a partially opened doorway, back to the camera, and visually entrapped by the mise-en-scène. When Anna and Sandro begin to copulate off-screen, Antonioni’s camera looks down on Claudia, who is again alone, in the background of a cramped shot, alienated from her supposed upper-class "friends." Later, Anna gives Claudia a blouse, in a gesture of aristocratic condescension, not true friendship. When Claudia later takes Anna’s place in the social scheme, the repercussions of this class change propel the film forward. Indeed, on the deserted island, Claudia clutches the proffered blouse, her final tangible reminder of Anna’s disappearance.

Nonetheless, Claudia’s economic class is rather problematical. Although apparently born poor (she refers to her childhood as "without any money"), she mingle[s with the Roman aristocracy and, at times, seems attracted to the trappings of wealth. For instance, she is shown dressed in an expensive gown, languishing among frills, as she tries on jewelry at the Montaldos. She also tries on a black wig, thereby taking on the identity of a society lady. In this way, she displaces and conceals the "otherness" of her original class and family background. She also takes on a remarkable physical resemblance to Anna, whose place she has taken in Sandro's bed and in the social world in which he travels.
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At other times, Claudia's class allegiance seems to be with her working-class roots. While waiting for Anna to return from her sexual rendezvous with Sandro, for example, Claudia wanders into an art gallery. She observes some tourists critiquing the formal elements of an exhibited canvas:

"Very derivative. Frankly, I don't think he knows how to use paint."

"Too much canvas and not enough happening" (a criticism often leveled against Antonioni’s oeuvre).

These studied comments are in sharp contrast to the ironic views of two passing workers:

"He slapped it on with a shovel."

"He’s got a long way to go."

Claudia smiles at these comments, betraying an affinity for the working class’s more realistic opinions about aesthetics. That she would even acknowledge these workmen is in marked contrast to the society people in the film.

Raimondo, for instance, yells "Woman overboard!" to the deckhands when Anna jumps off the yacht but does nothing to assist her himself. After all, the servants are hired to leave their masters free to relax and indulge themselves. When one of the deckhands, straining at the oars of a rowboat, informs Corrado that the work is harder on a pleasure boat, Corrado all but ignores him. The old man on the craggy island tells Sandro that the island’s absentee owners live in Australia,
then later notes the social distinction between Sandro and himself by asking, "Do you think five [A.M.] is early?" The old man works from dawn to dusk while the vacationers revel; he does not even own the hut he lives in, his only possessions being some family photographs and a crucifix.

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