

Love and Politics: Class Struggle in the Films of Lina Wertmuller

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Introduction

Class is a primary characteristic of modern societies. Since the industrial revolution, the division of the most societies into classes has been a subject of much social theory, philosophy, and even art. Marx believed class to be an objective social relationship defined by ones relationship to the means of production. His belief in the importance of class stemmed from an understanding of history as being the result of a dialectical relationship between dominant and opposing forces which led to inevitable social change. Therefore, the industrial revolution produced two contradictory classes – the bourgeoisie, or the owners, and the proletariat, or the workers. These two classes are diametrically opposed due to their relationship to one another. The owners have complete control over the whole of society, their control of production has given them the power to control others access to necessary social products by turning everything into a commodity. The workers, on the other hand, do not control their workplace, the product they produce, how much of it they produce, what they do in terms of production, and even their own lives. They have control over one aspect of life, their ability to work for a wage set by the owners. It was predicted by Marx that the relationship between the owners and workers would forever be exploitative because the role of the owners as a class is to maximize their profits by maintaining the low wages of the workers. Therefore, modern capitalist society is defined by a class struggle between the owners and the workers over control of the society in which they live (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999a).

As capitalism has progressed in its development, there have been many critiques of Marx's dialectical class relationship from both the right and left. Foremost among leftist critiques has been the claim that the Marxist relationship between the classes is too simple and does not take into account either the capitalists ability to adapt to criticism nor the possible growth of

intermediate classes which Marx believed would disappear through the process of immiseration into either the bourgeoisie or (mostly) into the proletariat (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999a). Weber presents a more complex understanding of class that incorporates concepts of status and power. Reducing all social relations to class is nothing more than economic reductionism. For Weber class is defined by one's income and economic status. In many respects, it is not unlike Marx's definition regarding one's relationship to the means of production. However, status represents a more complex understanding of social hierarchy in that it is indicative of one's social prestige and power is defined by one's social influence (especially within political parties and similar groups). People who Marx would define as the bourgeoisie would generally be consistent in their class, status, and power in Weber's model. Weber's model also helps to explain the formation of middle classes with sympathies for the bourgeoisie that goes beyond Marxist concepts of false consciousness or identification with the inappropriate class. The middle class are simply people of medium class with high status or power. This relationship also explains groups that exist outside of the bourgeoisie such as political party leaders, religious authorities, or criminal overlords because their status is the result of their power and may not necessarily be linked to their class. Weber's understanding of social status do not preclude change as some may argue. Instead, he recognizes that change can come from groups which are inconsistent in their class, status, and power (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999b; Weber, 1946). Therefore, left-wing social change will come from those who are low class, low status, but high power – essentially, Marx's proletariat.

These theories of class have become generally accepted by the left in defining the relationship between workers and bosses/owners in modern, capitalist society. As such class relations have become the focus of much of the left's critique of capitalism. This holds true for art as well as other social interventions on the part of the left. Left-wing film makers have made

class and class relations the focus of much of their work since the advent of cinema as an art form. Films made by left-wing directors have traditionally attempted to present their subject matter in a form that would serve to inspire working class audiences to action (Heath; Tredell, 2002). These films contain four crucial elements designed to appeal to working class audiences. First, class must be the primary theme of the film. It must come to the forefront regardless of other elements in the plot or narrative. Second, class must be portrayed realistically. The characters class must be seen as real, their relationships with people in their own class and those of other classes must be realistic, and there must be a realistic assessment of class mobility, as opposed to fantasies of class mobility. Third, the audience must have some understanding of what the characters desire in order to achieve fulfillment. Finally, there must be a contradiction which ends the film and leaves the audience inspired to take revolutionary social action.

As a left-wing writer/director, Lina Wertmuller has been particularly concerned with making films for the working masses of Italy. Her films have generally dealt with topics of class in the manner outlined above. Wertmuller's style is focused on presenting parables of class relations in order to motivate working people to organize against the bourgeoisie (Michalczyk, 1986). This paper will analyze three of Wertmuller's earliest films – *The Seduction of Mimi*, *Love and Anarchy*, and *Swept Away* – in order to explain how these films are proper depictions of class relations from a left-wing, propagandist perspective.

Class is Primary

As parables for the working class, Wertmuller's films are unique in their insistence on portraying class as a primary subject. Although her films also deal with the complexities of human emotion (Des Pres, 1976; Jacobs, 1976; Marcus, 1986; Michalczyk, 1986), class is the primary

location in which these complexities are set. The plots of all three films analyzed within this paper revolve around working class characters and their interactions with the upper class world. The trials and tribulations experienced by the protagonist, played by Giancarlo Giannini in all three films, are due to his class. It is safe to say that class is the focus of all of Wertmuller's work.

The Seduction of Mimi is based entirely in the world of the working class (Bondanella, 1991; Kauffmann, 1974; Michalczyk, 1986). Carmelo Mardecheo's (a.k.a. Mimi) life is defined by his class. He is a worker living with his wife and extended family. The poverty of his simple wages does not afford him the opportunity to escape his family. His class position leads him to vote for the communists in local election which brings about the story that unfolds. His allegiance to his class forces him to leave Sicily for the north and take a job in Turin where he again is involved in class struggle via the communist party. Mimi's class allegiance leaves him with few choices in life. He often exploits his class position to survive in a world run by elites. He plays the ignorant fool or silent accomplice to many of the misdeeds of those in power.

Wertmuller also attempts to make a class connection between the ruling elite of Italy. She consciously portrays the leaders of the mafia, political parties, labor unions, the police, and even the church as "cousins." The characters in social leadership positions are all symbolized as related by having three characteristic moles on their right cheek. "Each time one of these figures appears, the Italian national anthem is heard on the soundtrack, implying a common bond between these seemingly different organizations both inside and outside the law. They are all 'brothers of Italy' as the opening line implies" (Bondanella, 1991: 355). So, we see that those who hold power have a common bond that links them in the fine Marxist tradition of demonstrating the bourgeoisie as a class in itself and for itself (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999a).

With *Love and Anarchy*, the audience is once again shown class in its most startling form. This time, the world is not of the proletariat, but of what Marx termed the lumpen proletariat or underclass (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999a). The protagonist is a naïve peasant turned anarchist assassin, named Antonio Soffianti (Tunin). He leaves his life on the farm after witnessing the murder of an anarchist who was close friends with his father (who himself was a socialist) by the police when they learned of his plans to kill Mussolini. He arrives in Rome and is thrust into its underworld as his contact is a prostitute named Salome. Along the way, he falls in love with another woman in the brothel named Tripolina. The world of the brothel presents both the make believe world of sexual abandon and the serious nature of sex work in a scene that demonstrates the beginning of the prostitutes work day. As the women playfully enter the room and entice men to come upstairs with them, the madame of the house ushers men upstairs to get on with “business” and removes those who cannot afford the services provided (Wertmuller, 1973).

As with other Wertmuller films, *Love and Anarchy* also presents the dichotomous relationship between the underclass and the upper class through its characters relationship to bourgeois antagonists. In this case, fascist Italy is personified by Spatoletti, a member of Mussolini’s elite guard and security service, a man who has been with the fascists since their first campaigns and has seen the battle to take over the nation (Marcus, 1986). Spatoletti is perfectly symbolic of Italian fascism, a man of small intellect who is obsessed with violence and self-gratification. His role is to demonstrate the cold egoism of fascism against the caring selflessness of Tunin, Salome, and Tripolina.

Swept Away is considered by many to be Wertmuller’s most poignant film about class relations (Des Pres, 1976; Gilliat, 1975; Haskell, 1997; Jacobs, 1974; Michalczyk, 1986; Quacinella, 1978). The film begins by depicting several wealthy couples vacationing on a yacht.

The audience is given a glimpse into their world of luxury through the characters of Raffaella and her husband arguing politics. Raffaella is a staunch conservative and throws insult after insult out to her communist husband regarding Stalin and Siberia and he returns with talk of Hiroshima. The irony is that both are so removed from the subjects that they are arguing about that it leaves the audience offended just as much as the sailors working the yacht. One sailor in particular, Gennarino, is the butt of Raffaella's insults and indignities as she scolds him on the temperature of her coffee, the quality of her pasta, and even the smell of his shirt. He is clearly inferior and she lets him know it. We see on the yacht class relations at their most obvious – the bourgeoisie lay idly by while the proletariat work endlessly to serve them; and yet, their work is never good enough.

Realistic Class Portrayal

Capitalism has been most successful in convincing the working class of the possibility of class mobility. This notion of identifying with the ruling class has been labeled false consciousness and demonstrates the ability of the bourgeoisie to control not just the labor, but the mind of the proletariat (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999a). Popular culture often acts as propaganda of the ruling class. Since it is the ruling class that has control of the means of production, it is able to control the creation of art through selective funding of projects which it feels reflect its view of the world. Because of this control, most film portray a world of class mobility where a working class person is able to succeed in a capitalist society and achieve some elevation of class (Adorno, 1991). Wertmuller's films, in their attempt to reflect class, do not follow such a pattern. They present little class mobility and demonstrate that the working class has little chance against the power of the ruling class.

The Seduction of Mimi is a rarity among Wertmuller films because it provides us with the only example of the limited mobility of the working class. Upon leaving the miserable work in the quarries of Sicily for industrial Turin, Mimi automatically finds his class position rising. Initially, he is exploited by the local mafia who hire him, but is able to extricate himself from the exploitation and finds a job in the local steel industry. It is here that he is able to begin to live a more middle class lifestyle. He finds himself climbing the ladder in his workplace, in part, due to his willingness to acquiesce to the demands of the “cousins” who enter his life. When he has a child with his lover, Fiore, in Turin, he is able to provide for both of them and still send money to his wife and family. Yet, Mimi’s class status does not change despite the increase in his wages. Throughout the film he is solidly working class. As shall be explained in a latter section, it is Mimi’s class that ultimately leads to his downfall.

In its portrayal of the underclass, *Love and Anarchy*, has been both praised and criticized. Praise has come in the form of depicting the world of prostitution as being a cold, calculated world where women are commodities (Marcus, 1986) who came into the world due to unfortunate circumstances in their lives. Salome is left with little choice but prostitution when she is blacklisted by the fascists after her first love is framed for an assassination attempt on Mussolini. Tripolina’s childhood in poverty leaves her few choices in life to support herself. Her allusions to a past history of abuse at the hands of other men to Tunin before their first romantic encounter adds a certain realism to her character that is often lost in romanticized accounts of the “hooker with the heart of gold.” Finally, we see a glimpse of the desolation of Tunin’s life as a peasant in an industrializing society. He lives on a decrepit farm that was his parents and earns barely enough for subsistence. It is no wonder that he readily gives up the farm to complete the mission of his father’s friend.

Critics of the portrayal of class in the film have turned to the subject of Tunin and Salome's anarchism as an unrealistic portrayal of both the underclass and the anarchist movement. When the film was first released, the San Francisco Anarchists (1974) distributed a flier which faults the picture for its portrayal of anarchists as simple minded and obsessed with violent overthrow of the state. Others have echoed the criticism, pointing out that Tunin's politics do not come from a lifetime of reflection, but from an emotional reaction to the death of a man he looked up to in his life and a visceral hatred of his miserable life (Marcus, 1986; Michalczyk, 1986; Van Wert, 1974). This reflects a belief on the part of much of the left that the politicized proletariat are the only class capable of social revolution and that revolution must arise from the organized actions of said class (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999a).

However, the film's title fully develops its theme and any criticism must be done in light of an understanding of anarchist theories of class struggle. Unlike Marxism, anarchism does not alienate the underclass. In fact, it often appeals to the lumpen proletariat in its potent critique of all power dynamics, including those between the working class and the under class whose labor is either used to break class consciousness or who serve as a target of misplaced anger and exploitation. Many of the adherents to anarchist philosophy came from the very classes portrayed in *Love and Anarchy* – the disenfranchised peasants struggling to survive rapid industrialization and the underclass who had little choice but to sell themselves for what little money they could afford (Guerin, 1970). It is no wonder that despite his mother's warnings (and obvious foreshadowing), Tunin takes up the label anarchist and continues his friend's mission. The critics of *Love and Anarchy's* depiction of anarchism are also quick to point out its treatment of anarchist assassins (Porton, 1999; SFA 1974; Van Wert, 1974). These critics see the film reducing anarchists to assassins without any concrete vision of a future society beyond the

simplest ideas of justice. In a relatively tame confrontation with the fascist Spatoletti, Tunin tells the tale of a bar owner who beat his dog until one day the dog bit him and would not let go until the man bled to death. He follows this with the statement, “You see what I’m trying to say, Captain, is that perhaps one evening... a poor soul... say someone like me who just can’t take it anymore... You come alone with your fists of steel and the poor soul sinks his knife into your throat” (Wertmuller, 1973). Despite the potent criticisms, the history of anarchism is filled with would be and successful assassins who took up the cause with little but the frustration they felt regarding their status in the social system. Some, like the Ukrainian anarchist, Nestor Makhno, rose to prominent positions despite illiteracy and a peasant background (Guerin, 1971). It is almost insulting to the working class the critics wish to defend to claim that they are incapable of achieving a “pure” understanding of anarchism because their’s is based on life experience and emotional response.

As a film completely about class, *Swept Away*, presents an extreme portrayal of class relations. Yet, in its raw honesty, we are able to see the true nature of class oppression. Raffaella’s contempt for Gennarino knows no bounds. She insults him at every chance and works tirelessly to let him know his place. As symbols of their respective classes, Raffaella and Gennarino are in constant conflict. Yet, in the world of class relations, Gennarino acquiesces to Raffaella’s demands. However, once the characters find themselves stranded on a deserted island, symbolically in a state of nature, the class relationship is turned on its head (Gilliat, 1975; Haskell, 1997; Michalczyk, 1986). The class struggle is depicted in a scene of violent contempt where “Gennarino slaps and kicks Raffaella over the sand dunes, calling her every conceivable ideologically charged name (“dumb Social Democratic whore,” “industrial whore”), and blaming her for everything from high prices to a shortage of hospital beds” (Bondanella, 1991: 361).

Despite feminist criticism of the scene as depicting cliché male domination of women, especially as it is set in a “state of nature,” (Haskell, 1997; Quacinella, 1978) the scene is a potent reminder of the class hatred held by the most exploited of the working class toward the ruling class. The two characters must be understood as symbols of their class, not their gender. In fact, Wertmuller insists that the characters can be portrayed as being any gender (Haskell, 1997).

Ideas of Fulfillment

In order to properly portray class in film, a director must give the audience an understanding of the protagonist’s desire for fulfillment. How does the hero (in Wertmuller’s case, the protagonist is always male) envision his future? Is this vision consistent with the previously constructed ideas about class? Wertmuller’s films, which focus on the tension between class and romance, often set up an ideal situation of fulfillment for the characters. This will ultimately serve her purpose in creating propaganda which shall be discussed in the next section.

Mimi is a simple man with simple needs. In the quarries of Sicily, he wishes to work and receive just compensation. This leads him to make the “mistake” of voting for the left in a local election and escaping to Turin. There he finds work and love which give him some sense of happiness. He begins a family with his new lover (despite being married) and wishes for material comfort for his son. With every new turn, he finds himself trying to escape the ever present dangers and demands of people in power, symbolized by the “cousins.” *The Seduction of Mimi* presents a man whose desires reflect those of the audience Wertmuller is trying to influence which was confirmed when Wertmuller screened the film for workers in Turin who responded to it positively despite her fears to the contrary (Michalczyk, 1986).

In *Love and Anarchy*, the audience is given two choices of fulfillment, each symbolized by a woman in Tunin's life. Tripolina, as the love interest, represents the possibility of love and emotional happiness, while Salome represents anarchy and the possibility of a world without fascism (Bondanella, 1991; Marcus, 1986; Michalczyk, 1986). The choice of love brings with it life and the possibility of happiness, two things which Tunin has not had before coming to Rome. On an emotional level, the audience feels the pressure to conclude that this is the correct choice. However, those who identify with the character of Tunin, and it is certainly Wertmuller's intention that the audience do so, begin to see a different possibility. Tunin may be a martyr for the cause, but the cause is greater than him, Salome, and Tripolina combined. His act of violence is intended, as many acts of "propaganda by deed" were, to usher in a new era of freedom for all people (Guerin, 1971). Therefore, fulfillment can only truly come from the act of tyrannicide he has chosen to commit. Should he flee with Tripolina back to the relative safety of France, he leaves Salome and other like her trapped in the whorehouse that is fascist Italy (Marcus, 1986). Tunin also understands the importance of propaganda by deed in serving to inspire others to revolution (Guerin, 1971) and knows that he and Tripolina will not be free despite their escape. This dual notion of fulfillment sets up a contradiction which will be fully explored in the following section.

Swept Away achieves fulfillment in the middle of the film. Once Gennarino and Raffaella have settled into their lives on the island, we see the ideal setting for both characters. The class struggle which they had engaged in on the boat and even in their first days on the island is resolved when Raffaella gives in to Gennarino's demands (Michalczyk, 1986). The two enemies soon become genuine lovers and find themselves surviving on the island by helping each other. We see in a state of nature the type of cooperative relationship, albeit with a gendered division of

labor, that Marx envisioned under communism (Collins, 1994; Ritzer, 1999a). Interdependence destroys class animosities and makes the former enemies lovers.

Contradictions and Inspiration

Authentic political cinema must inspire social action by depicting essential contradictions in capitalist society (Heath; Tredell, 2002). By pointing out essential contradictions, the film gives the audience a focus for its class antagonism. A skillful director points a clear course of action by leaving the audience wanting to rectify the inconsistency between their notion of fulfillment and the reality displayed on screen. Wertmuller presents such scenarios with the skill necessary to act as a major propagandist for class struggle.

The actual seduction of the character Mimi is not a romantic one. It is Mimi who seduces the virgin, Fiore, and manages to make her fall in love with him. Mimi's seduction is an economic and political one. Despite his best efforts to maintain ideological and class purity, the inconsistencies in his belief system lead to his downfall (Bondanella, 1991; Michalczyk, 1986). Mimi seeks out sexual fulfillment and love in Fiore, but denies this of his wife because of his sense of "honor." When his wife becomes pregnant by another man, he seduces the man's patently unattractive wife and father's a child with her. This act of sexual vendetta leads to the scenario which finally traps Mimi in the clutches of his enemies, the "cousins." As he confronts the man who cuckolded him with the truth about his new child, the man is shot by the mafia and Mimi is framed for the murder. Because he does not betray the actual murderer and the mafia, he is released from prison (by a man with the signature three moles) to find himself financially and legally responsible for Fiore and his child, his wife and her child, and the wife and children of the man who was shot. It is this final scenario, in all its comic glory, that forces Mimi to accept the

demands of the local mafia. The final contradictory scene shows Mimi campaigning for a right-wing candidate at his old job site where he sees Fiore and his leaving town with his former friend from the quarry who has stayed true to his class and communist party. The audience is left understanding that class loyalty must be held above other priorities. From Mimi's mistakes, we learn that we cannot act in a manner that will sell out our political principles for the meager benefits of capitalism and that our best intentions will be foiled by capitalist needs to control our actions. The only choice is the communist party.

The two options of fulfillment in *Love and Anarchy* present the perfect scenario for contradiction. As Tunin sleeps, Salome and Tripolina fight over his fate and which course his life will take. Despite the best attempts at political polemic in the film, the sentiments of the characters and history inform the audience that love will win the fight. Yet, it is Salome, the ardent defender of the "cause" that capitulates because she too loves Tunin and cannot see history repeat itself with him as it did with her lover (Marcus, 1986; Michalczyk, 1986). Yet, when Tunin awakens, the contradictions come to the fore. He is not a man searching for love. He has come to Rome on a mission and reacts with violent frustration at the betrayal he feels from those who love him. Upon witnessing a routine health patrol of the brothel approaching, he falls into desperate paranoia and attacks the police who chase him through the streets and violently arrest him. In the final scenes of the film, Tunin is interrogated by Spatoletti but confesses to nothing and is beaten to death. His death is announced by several mundane lines in the next days newspaper which hide the threat felt by the fascists as attacks on Il Duce increase.

By identifying with Tunin and the characters who inhabit the miserable underclass world portrayed in the film, the audience feels his frustration at being given love over anarchy. We understand the anger felt by a man who has been prepared for one task. Here is a man who has

given up everything he has to commit one final, desperate act of revolt against a world that has oppressed him. He has chosen to do this to reclaim control of his life, yet in his final moments he loses all control and his path is chosen by other – first, by Salome and Tripolina, then by paranoid delusions, and finally by Spatoletti and the fascist state. These scenes are meant to inspire the audience to feel Tunin's anger and act to avenge his betrayal and death. To underscore this point, Wertmuller ends the film with the following quote from Errico Malatesta, the ideological guide for the Italian anarchists of the early twentieth century:

I would like to stress my horror at the attempted assassinations. These gestures are not only evil, but they hinder the cause they are meant to serve.... One must admit, though, that these murderers are heroes as well.... When their extreme gesture will be forgotten, we shall celebrate the ideal which spurred them. (Wertmuller, 1973)

Despite the initial repudiation, Malatesta calls those who engage in acts of political violence heroes because he understands both their motivation and the sense of urgency felt by those who would act in such a drastic manner. By leaving the audience with an image of a dying Tunin and these words, Wertmuller surely intends to inspire us to action.

Wertmuller's understanding of the concept of contradictions plays out fully in *Swept Away*. Although the audience and characters are given fulfillment on the island as Gennarino and Raffaella live out an idyllic life, the authenticity of their relationship is ultimately tested when Gennarino spots the yacht that they had both been traveling on. Despite Raffaella's urging to the contrary, he signals to the boat to rescue them. He wants to know whether the love they have is real or a product of the situation. Raffaella knows better. Upon returning to civilization, both return to their roles. Clearly we see that Raffaella has changed in her ways. She displays none of the callousness of her previous self. Upon returning to port, Gennarino confesses his love of Raffaella to his wife, signifying his willingness to return to the life he once had. He enlists a friend

to return the two lovers to the island and asks Raffaella to meet him. When she does not, Gennarino searches for her only to find her as she flies away with her husband. The film leaves the audience feeling Gennarino's pain and loss as well as Raffaella's pain of betrayal, yet we knew all along that the relationship could not last once it left the island. The contradiction points out to the audience that once class struggle has succeeded, return to the world that was before only dooms us to the old relations. We will long for the equality and love of the island just as Gennarino does in the final moments of the film.

Conclusion

Class has been a primary means of defining social relations in capitalist societies. As a marker of wealth, status, and power, class serves to place people in a hierarchy of social roles based on their labor. These roles define reality for everyone living under capitalism. However, radicals have chosen to fight against the restrictions of class and inspire the oppressed majority of workers to free themselves of their class oppression.

Political films serve an essential role in attempting to bring messages of social change to the oppressed masses. By portraying class as the primary subject matter, creating realistic depictions of class relations, providing an understanding of fulfillment for the characters; and ultimately, a contradictory ending which will inspire the audience to action, political films serve as a means to revolution.

The films of Lina Wertmuller successfully achieve each of these goals. Three of her earliest films: *The Seduction of Mimi*, *Love and Anarchy*, and *Swept Away* serve as parables on class relations which are designed to stir class consciousness in mass audiences. The films present working class characters whose lives are defined by upper class demands. They seek fulfillment in

acts ranging from work to tyrannicide to love, but discover that fulfillment cannot be achieved in a society where one class dominates another. This final contradiction leaves the audience wanting a resolution that can only come through social change.

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