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Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film

ONE OF THE MOST PERSISTENT leitmotifs in liberalism's ideological arsenal, one of the most effective anti-Marxist arguments developed by the rhetoric of liberalism and anticommunism, is the notion of the disappearance of class. The argument is generally conveyed in the form of an empirical observation, but can take a number of different forms, the most important ones for us being either the appeal to the unique development of social life in the United States, or the notion of a qualitative break, a quantum leap, between the older industrial systems and what now gets to be called post-industrial society. In the first version of the argument, we are told that the existence of the frontier (and, when the real frontier disappeared, the persistence of that "inner" frontier of a vast continental market unimaginable to Europeans) prevented the formation of the older, strictly European class antagonisms, while the absence from the United States of a classical aristocracy of the European type is said to account for the failure of a classical bourgeoisie to develop in this country—a bourgeoisie which would then, following the continental model, have generated a classical proletariat over against itself. This is what we may call the American mythic explanation, and seems to flourish primarily in those American studies programs which have a vested interest in preserving the specificity of their object and in preserving the boundaries of their discipline.

The second version is a little less parochial and takes into account what used to be called the Americanization, not only of the older European societies, but also, in our time, that of the Third World as well. It reflects the realities of the transition of monopoly capitalism into a more purely consumer stage on what is for the first time a global scale; and it tries to take advantage of the emergence of this new stage of monopoly capitalism to suggest that classical Marxist economics is no longer applicable. According to this argument, a social homogenization is taking place in which the older class differences are disappearing, and which can be described either as the embourgeoisement of the worker, or better

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still, the transformation of both bourgeois and worker into that new grey organization person known as the consumer. Meanwhile, although most of the ideologues of a post-industrial stage would hesitate to claim that value as such is no longer being produced in consumer society, they are at least anxious to suggest that ours is becoming a "service economy" in which production of the classical type occupies an ever dwindling percentage of the work force.

Now if it is so that the Marxian concept of social class is a category of nineteenth century European conditions, and no longer relevant to our situation today, then it is clear that Marxism may be sent to the museum where it can be dissected by Marxologists (there are an increasing number of those at work all around us today) and can no longer interfere with the development of that stream-lined and post-modern legitimation of American economic evolution in the seventies and beyond, which is clearly the most urgent business on the agenda now that the older rhetoric of a classical New Deal type liberalism has succumbed to unplanned obsolescence. On the left, meanwhile, the failure of a theory of class seemed less important practically and politically during the anti-war situation of the 1960's, in which attacks on authoritarianism, racism, and sexism had their own internal justification and logic, and were lent urgency by the existence of the war, and content by the collective practice of social groups, in particular students, blacks, browns and women. What is becoming clearer today is that the demands for equality and justice projected by such groups are not (unlike the politics of social class) intrinsically subversive. Rather, the slogans of populism and the ideals of racial justice and sexual equality were already themselves part and parcel of the Enlightenment itself, inherent not only in a socialist denunciation of capitalism, but even and also in the bourgeois revolution against the ancien regime. The values of the civil rights movement and the women's movement and the anti-authoritarian egalitarianism of the student's movement are thus preeminently cooptable because they are already—as ideals—inscribed in the very ideology of capitalism itself; and we must take into account the possibility that these ideals are part of the internal logic of the system, which has a fundamental interest in social equality to the degree to which it needs to transform as many of its subjects or its citizens into identical consumers interchangeable with everybody else. The Marxian position—which includes the ideals of the Enlightenment but seeks to ground them in a materialist theory of social evolution—argues on the contrary that the system is structurally unable to realize such ideals even where it has an economic interest in doing so.

This is the sense in which the categories of race and sex as well as the generational ones of the student movement are theoretically subordinate to the categories of social class, even where they may seem practically and politically a great deal more relevant. Yet it is not adequate to argue the importance of class on the basis of an underlying class reality beneath a relatively more classless appearance. There is, after all, a reality of the appearance just as much as a reality behind it; or, to put it more concretely, social class is not merely a structural fact but also very significantly a function of class consciousness, and the latter, indeed, ends up producing the former just as surely as it is produced by it. This

is the point at which dialectical thinking—not merely the static and superficial notions of appearance and reality already mentioned, but the most involuted and historicizing Hegelian variety—becomes unavoidable. In what follows, I will try to avoid it as much as possible, but an initial point has to be made, without which the intent of the rest will not be clear. It is simply this: that we cannot speak of an underlying “essence” of things, of a fundamental class structure inherent in a system in which one group of people produces value for another group, unless we allow for the dialectical possibility that even this fundamental “reality”, may be “realer” at some historical junctures than at others, and that the underlying object of our thoughts and representations—history and class structure—is itself as profoundly historical as our own capacity to grasp it. We may take as the motto for such a process the following still extremely Hegelian sentence of the early Marx: “It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive towards thought.” In the present context, the “thought” towards which reality strives is not only or even not yet class consciousness: it is rather the very preconditions for such class consciousness in social reality itself, that is to say, the requirement that, for people to become aware of the class, the classes be already in some sense perceptible as such. This fundamental requirement we will call, now borrowing a term from Freud rather than from Marx, the requirement of *figurability*, the need for social reality and everyday life to have developed to the point at which its underlying class structure becomes *representable* in tangible form. The point can be made in a different way by underscoring the unexpectedly vital role that culture would be called on to play in such a process, culture not only as an instrument of self-consciousness but also even before that as a symptom and a sign of possible self-consciousness in the first place. The relationship between class consciousness and figurability, in other words, demands something more basic than abstract knowledge, and implies a mode of experience that is more visceral and existential than the abstract certainties of economics and Marxian social science: the latter merely continue to convince us of the informing presence, behind daily life, of the logic of capitalist production. To be sure, as Althusser tells us, the concept of sugar does not have to taste sweet; nonetheless, in order for genuine class consciousness to be possible, we have to begin to sense the abstract truth of class through the tangible medium of daily life in vivid and experiential ways, and to say that class structure is becoming representable means that we have now gone beyond mere abstract understanding and entered that whole area of personal fantasy, collective storytelling, narrative figurability, which is the domain of culture and no longer that of abstract sociology or economic analysis. To become figurable—that is to say, visible in the first place, accessible to our imaginations—the classes have to be able to become in some sense characters in their own right: this is the sense in which the term allegory in our title is to be taken as a working hypothesis.

We will have thereby also already begun to justify an approach to commercial film, as that medium where, if at all, some change in the class character of social reality ought to be detectable, since social reality and the stereotypes of our ex-

perience of everyday social reality are the raw material with which commercial film and television are inevitably forced to work. This is my answer, in advance, to critics who object a priori that the immense costs of commercial films, which inevitably place their production under the control of multinational corporations, make any genuinely political content in them unlikely, and on the contrary insure commercial film's vocation as a vehicle for ideological manipulation. No doubt this is so, if we remain on the level of the intention of the film-maker himself, who is bound to be limited consciously or unconsciously by his objective situation. But it is to fail to reckon with the political content of daily life, with the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the film-maker must work: such political logic will then not manifest itself as an overt political message, nor will it transform the film into an unambiguous political statement. But it will certainly make for the emergence of profound formal contradictions to which the public cannot but be sensitive, whether or not it yet possesses the conceptual instruments to understand what those contradictions mean.

Now it would seem that I've made things much too easy for myself by choosing to illustrate this process with a film, *Dog Day Afternoon*, that seems to have a great deal more overt political content than we would normally expect to find in a Hollywood production. In fact, we have only to think of the CIA-type espionage thriller, or the police show on television, to realize that overt political content of that kind is so omnipresent as to be inescapable in the entertainment industry. It is indeed as though the major legacy of the sixties was to furnish a whole new code, a whole new set of thematics—that of the political—with which, after that of sex, the entertainment industry could reinvest its tired paradigms, without any danger to itself or to the system; and we should take into account the possibility that it is the overtly political or contestatory parts of *Dog Day Afternoon* which will prove the least functional from a class point of view.

But before this becomes clear, we will want to start a little further back, with the anecdotal material in which the film takes its point of departure. The event itself is not so far removed in time that we cannot remember it for what it was; or more precisely, remember what the media found interesting about it, what made it worthwhile transforming into a feature story in its own right an otherwise banal bank robbery and siege with hostages, of the type with which countless newscasts and grade-B movies have familiarized us in the past. Three novelties distinguished the robbery on which *Dog Day Afternoon* was to be based: first, the crowd sympathized with the bank robber, booing at the police and evoking the then still very recent Attica massacre; second, the bank robber turned out to be a homosexual, or, more properly, to have gone through a homosexual marriage ceremony with a transsexual, and indeed later claimed to have committed the robbery in order to finance his partner's sex-change operation; finally, the television cameras and on the spot telephone interviews were so heavily involved in the day-long negotiations as to give a striking new twist to the concept of the "media-event": and to this feature, we should probably add the final sub-novelty that the robbery took place on the climactic day of the

Nixon-Agnew nominating convention (August 22, 1972).¹ A work of art that had been able to do justice to any one of these peculiarities by itself would have been assured of an unavoidably political resonance. The Lumet film, "faithfully" incorporating all three, ended up having very little; and it is probably too easy, although not incorrect, to say that they cancel each other out by projecting a set of circumstances too unique to have any generalizable meaning, literature, as Aristotle tells us, being more philosophical than history in that it shows us what can happen, where the latter only shows us what did happen. Indeed, I believe a case can be made for the ideological function of overexposure in commercial culture: it seems to me just possible that the repeated stereotypical use of otherwise disturbing and alien phenomena in our present social conjuncture—political militancy, student revolt, drugs, resistance to and hatred of authority—has an effect of containment for the system as a whole. To name something is to domesticate it, to refer to it repeatedly is to persuade a fearful and beleaguered middle-class public that all of that is part of a known and catalogued world and thus somehow in order. Such a process would then be the equivalent, in the realm of everyday social life, of that cooptation by the media, that exhaustion of novel raw material, which is one of our principal techniques for defusing threatening and subversive ideas. If something like this is the case, then clearly *Dog Day Afternoon*, with its wealth of anti-social detail, may be thought to work overtime in the reprocessing of alarming social materials for the reassurance of suburban movie-goers.

Turning to those raw materials themselves, it is worth taking a passing glance at what the film did not become. Ours is, after all, a period and a public with an appetite for the documentary fact, for the anecdotal, the *vécu*, the *fait divers*, the true story in all its sociological freshness and unpredictability. Not to go as far back as the abortive yet symptomatic "non-fiction novel," nor even the undoubted primacy of non-fiction over fiction on the bestseller lists, we find a particularly striking embodiment of this interest in a whole series of recent experiments on American television with the fictional documentary: narrative reports, played by actors, of sensational crimes, like the Manson murders or the Shepherd case or the trial of John Henry Faulk, or of otherwise curious *fait divers* like a flying saucer sighting by a bi-racial couple, Truman's meeting with MacArthur, or an ostracism at West Point. We would have understood a great deal if we could explain why *Dog Day Afternoon* fails to have anything in common with these fictional documentaries, which are far and away among the best things achieved by American television. I believe that the latter's success is at least in part to be attributed to the distance which such pseudo-documentaries maintain between the real-life fact and its representation. The more powerful of them preserve the existence of a secret in their historical content, and at the same time that they purport to give us a version of the events, exacerbate our certainty that we will never know for sure what really did happen. This structural disjunction

¹See, for a useful survey of the newspaper coverage of the Wojtowicz robbery, Eric Holm, "Dog Day Aftertaste," in *Jump Cut*, No. 10-11 (June, 1976), pp. 3-4.

between form and content clearly projects a very different aesthetic strategy from those of classical Griersonian documentary, of Italian neo-realism, or of Kino-pravda or ciné-vérité, to name only three of the older attempts to solve the problem of the relationship between movies and fact or event, attempts which now seem closed to us.

But it is equally clear that *Dog Day Afternoon* has none of the strengths of any of these strategies and does not even try for them: the juxtaposition, however, has the benefit of dramatizing and reinforcing all of the recent French critiques of representation as an ideological category. What sharply differentiates the Lumet film from any of the TV pseudo-documentaries just mentioned is precisely, if you will, its unity of form and content: we are made secure in the illusion that the camera is witnessing everything exactly as it happened and that what it sees is all there is. The camera is absolute presence and absolute truth: thus, the aesthetic of representation collapses the density of the historical event, and flattens it back out into fiction. The older values of realism, living on in commercial film, empty the anecdotal raw material of its interest and vitality; while, paradoxically, the patently degraded techniques of television narrative, irremediably condemned by their application to and juxtaposition with advertising, end up preserving the truth of the event by underscoring their own distance from it. Meanwhile, it is the very splendor of Al Pacino's virtuoso performance which marks it off from any possibility of *verismo* and irreparably condemns it to remain a Hollywood product: the star system is fundamentally, structurally, irreconcilable with neo-realism. This is indeed the basic paradox I want to argue and to deepen in the following remarks: that it is what is good about the film that is bad about it, and what is bad about it that is on the contrary rather good in many ways; that everything which makes it a first-rate piece of filmmaking, with bravura actors, must render it suspect from another point of view, while its historical originality is to be sought in places that must seem accidental with respect to its intrinsic qualities. Yet this is not a state of things that could have been remedied by careful planning: it is not a mismatch that could have been avoided had the producers divided up their material properly, and planned a neo-realist documentary on the one hand, and a glossy robbery film on the other. Rather, we have to do here with that unresolvable, profoundly symptomatic thing which is called a contradiction, and which we may expect, if properly managed and interrogated, to raise some basic issues about the direction of contemporary culture and contemporary social reality.

What is clear from the outset is that *Dog Day Afternoon* is an ambiguous product at the level of reception; more than that, that the film is so structured that it can be focussed in two quite distinct ways which seem to yield two quite distinct narrative experiences. I've promised to show that one of these narratives suggests an evolution, or at least a transformation, in the figurable class articulation of everyday life. But this is certainly not the most obvious or the most accessible reading of the film, which initially seems to inscribe itself in a very different, and for us today surely much more regressive tradition. This is what we may loosely call the existential paradigm, in the non-technical sense of this term, using

it in that middle-brow media acceptance in which in current American culture it has come to designate things like *Catch-22* or some of Mailer's novels. Existentialism here means neither Heidegger nor Sartre, but rather the anti-hero of the sad sack, Saul Bellow type, and a kind of self-pitying vision of alienation (also meant in its media rather than its technical sense), frustration, and above all—yesterday's all-American concept—the “inability to communicate.” Whether this particular narrative paradigm be the cause or the effect of the systematic psychologization and privatization of the ideology of the fifties and early sixties, it is clear that things change more slowly in the cultural and narrative realm than they do in the more purely ideological one, so that writers and film-makers tend to fall back on paradigms such as this who would otherwise have no trouble recognizing a dated no-longer-fashionable idea. Meanwhile, this “unequal development” of the narrative paradigms through which we explain daily life to ourselves is then redoubled by another trend in contemporary consumerism, namely the return to the fifties, the nostalgia fad or what the French call “la mode rétro,” in other words the deliberate substitution of the pastiche and imitation of past styles for the impossible invention of adequate contemporary or post-contemporary ones (as in a novel like *Ragtime*). Thus, as if it were not enough that the political and collective urgencies of the sixties consigned the anti-hero and the anti-novel to the ash-can of history, we now find them being revived as a paradoxical sign of the good old days when all we had to worry about were psychological problems, momism, and whether television would ruin American culture. I would argue, for instance, not only that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a typical fifties nostalgia film, which revives all of the stereotypical protests of that bygone individualistic era, but also that, virtually a Czech film in disguise, it reduplicates that particular time lag by another, more characteristically Central European form of “unequal development.”

Method acting was the working out of the ideology of the anti-hero in that relatively more concrete realm of theatrical style, voice, gesture, which borders on the behavioral stances and gestural idiom, the interpersonal languages, of everyday life, where it is indeed the stylization and effect of elements already present in the parts of the American community, and also the cause and model of newer kinds of behavior that adapt it to the street and to the real world. Here for the first time perhaps we can understand concretely how what is best about *Dog Day Afternoon* is also what is least good about it: for Al Pacino's performance by its very brilliance thrusts the film further and further back into the antiquated paradigm of the anti-hero and the method actor. Indeed, the internal contradiction of his performance is even more striking than that: for the anti-hero, as we suggested, was predicated on non-communication and inarticulacy, from Frédéric Moreau and Kafka's K's all the way to Bellow, Malamud, Roth, and the rest; and the agonies and exhalations of method acting were perfectly calculated to render this asphyxiation of the spirit that cannot complete its sentence. But in Pacino's second-generation reappropriation of this style something paradoxical happens, namely, that the inarticulate becomes the highest form of expressiveness, the wordless stammer proves voluble, and the agony over uncom-

municatability suddenly turns out to be everywhere fluently comprehensible.

At this point, then, something different begins to happen, and Sonny's story ceases to express the pathos of the isolated individual or the existential loner in much the same way that the raw material from which it is drawn—that of marginality or deviancy—has ceased to be thought of as anti-social and has rather become a new social category in its own right. The gesture of revolt and the cry of rage begin to lose their frustration—the expression “impotent rage” had been a stereotype of American storytelling from Faulkner, indeed from Norris and Dreiser, on—and to take on another meaning. Not because of any new political content to be sure: for Sonny's robbery, the politics of marginality, is not much more than part of the wild-cat strikes of contemporary everyday life; but rather simply because the gesture “projects” and is understood. We mentioned the support of the crowd (both in real life and in the Lumet movie), but that is only the most conventional inscription of this tangible resonance of Sonny's gesture within the film. More significant, it seems to me, is the manifest sympathy of the suburban movie-going audience itself, which from within the tract housing of the *société de consommation* clearly senses the relevance to its own daily life of the reenactment of this otherwise fairly predictable specimen of urban crime. Unlike the audience of the Bogart films, who had to stand by and watch the outcast mercilessly destroyed by the monolithic and omnipotent institution of Society with a capital S, this one has witnessed the collapse of the system's legitimacy (and the sapping of the legitimations on which it was based): not only the war, least of all Watergate, most significantly surely the experience of inflation itself, which is the privileged phenomenon through which a middle-class suddenly comes to an unpleasant consciousness of its own historicity—these are some of the historical reasons for that gradual crumbling of those older protestant-ethic-type values (respect for law and order, for property, and institutions) which allows a middle-class audience to root for Sonny. In the longer run, however, the explanation must be sought in the very logic of the commodity system itself, whose programming ends up liquidating even those ideological values (respect for authority, patriotism, the ideal of the family, obedience to the law) on which the social and political order of the system rests. Thus the ideal consumer—compared to his protestant-ethic ancestors, with their repressive ethics of thrift and work and self-denial—turns out to be a far more doubtful quantity than they were when it comes to fighting foreign wars or honoring your debts or cheating on your income taxes. “What kind of a crime,” Brecht once said, “is the robbing of a bank, compared to the founding of a bank?” And it is clear that for the citizens of some multinational stage of post-monopoly capitalism, the practical side of daily life is a test of ingenuity and a game of wits waged between the consumer and the giant faceless corporation.

These, then, are the people who understand Sonny's gesture, and whose sympathies are strangely intersected and at least arrested by the whole quite different countercultural theme of homosexuality. Yet they have their counterpart within the film, not so much in the street crowd, which is only a chorus-like sign of this implicit public for Sonny's act, as rather in the hostages themselves, the women

employees of the branch bank, whose changing attitudes towards Sonny thus become a significant part of what the film has to show us. I would argue that in that second reading of the film I want to suggest, the relationship of form and background reverses itself, and the Sonny character—the hero, as we have seen, of a more conventional anti-hero plot—now becomes a simple pretext for the emergence and new visibility of something more fundamental in what might otherwise simply seem the background itself. This more fundamental thing is the sociological equivalent of that wholesale liquidation of older ideological values by consumer society on which we have already commented: but here it takes the more tangible form of the ghettoization of the older urban neighborhoods. The phenomenon is not an historically extremely recent one; nor is it unknown either to sociological journalism or to literature itself, where in one sense its representation may be said to go all the way back to Balzac's description of the corrosive and solvent effect of the money economy and the market system on the sleepy *Gemeinschaften* of the older provincial towns.

What is less well understood is the degree to which this process, which in the United States was significantly accelerated after the end of World War II and was thus contemporaneous with the introduction of television and the launching of the Cold War, was the result of deliberate political decisions that can be identified and dated. The post-war federal highway program and the momentum given to the construction of individual family dwellings by veterans' housing bills are essential components in the new corporate strategy:

The 1949 Housing Act introduced the idea of federal assistance for private development of the center cities, an approach to urban renewal vigorously pushed by the General Electric Company, large banks and insurance companies. The center cities were not to be the site of housing redevelopment for working class people. . . . These political and economic decisions effectively determined the pattern of individual and residential development for the next generation. The white working class was fated for dispersal; the center cities were to be reserved for the very poor and the relatively affluent. In the circumstances, durable goods purchases—cars, washing machines, one-family houses—began to absorb an increasing proportion of workers' incomes and had an enormous impact on work patterns.²

We may add that this vision of the future was first systematically tried out on Newark, N. J., which may thus fairly lay claim to something of the ominous and legendary quality which surrounds the names of the targets of World War II strategic bombing experiments.

Now my purpose in summarizing these facts was not only informational, although I believe we need never apologize for anything which helps to put an only too frequently ahistorical experience of the present into something like historical perspective; rather, I want to underscore a fundamental distortion in the way in which we have traditionally tended to deplore such developments in contemporary American society as the destruction of the inner city and the rise of shopping center culture. On the whole I think it would be fair to say that we have

²Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 383.

thought of these developments as inevitable results of a logic of consumer society which neither individuals nor politicians could do very much to reverse; even radicals have been content to stress the continuity between the present-day atomization of the older communities and social groups and Marx's analysis of the destructive effects of classical capitalism, from the enclosure stage all the way to the emergence of the factory system. What is new today, what can be sensed in the excerpt from *False Promises* quoted above just as much as in *Dog Day Afternoon* itself, is the dawning realization that someone was responsible for all that, that such momentous social transformations were not merely part of the on-going logic of the system—although they are certainly that too—but also and above all the consequences of the decisions of powerful and strategically placed individuals and groups. Yet the reemergence of these groups—the renewed possibility of once again catching sight of what Lukács would have called the subject of that history of which the rest of us are still only just the objects—this is not to be understood as the result of increased information on our part, nor as the consequence of a more polemic and skeptical history-writing on the part of so-called revisionist historians; rather, our very possibility of rewriting history in this way is itself to be understood as the function of a fundamental change in the historical situation itself, and of the power and class relations that underlie it.

Before we say what that change is, however, we want to remember how vividly *Dog Day Afternoon* explores the space which is the result of these historical changes, the ghettoized neighborhood with its decaying small businesses gradually being replaced by parking lots or chain stores. It is no accident indeed that the principal circuit of communications of the film passes between the mom-and-pop store in which the police have set up their headquarters, and the branch bank—the real-life original was appropriately enough a branch of Chase Manhattan—in which Sonny is holding his hostages. Thus it is possible for the truth of recent urban history to be expressed within the framework of the bank scenes themselves: it is enough to note, first, that everyone in the branch is nothing but a salaried employee of an invisible multi-national empire, and then, as the film goes on, that the work in this already peripheral and decentered, fundamentally colonized, space is done by those doubly second-class and underpayable beings who are women, and whose structurally marginal situation is thus not without analogy to Sonny's own, or at least reflects it in much the same way that a Third World proletariat might reflect minority violence and crime in the First. One of the more realistic things about recent American commercial culture, indeed, has been its willingness to recognize and to represent at least in passing the strange coexistence and superposition in the America of today of social worlds as rigidly divided from each other as in a caste system, a kind of post-Bowery and or permanent Third World existence at the heart of the First World itself.

Yet this kind of perception does not in itself constitute that renewed class consciousness we evoked at the beginning of this essay, but as such merely provides the material for a rhetoric of marginality, for a new and more virulent populism. The Marxian conception of class, indeed, must be distinguished from the academic bourgeois sociological one above all by its emphasis on relationality. For academic

sociology, the social classes are understood in isolation from each other, on the order of sub-cultures or independent group "life styles": the frequently used term "stratum" effectively conveys this view of independent social units, which implies in turn that each can be studied separately, without reference to one another, by some researcher who goes out into the field. So we can have monographs on the ideology of the professional stratum, on the political apathy of the secretarial stratum, and so forth. For Marxism, however, these empirical observations do not yet penetrate to the structural reality of the class system which it sees as being essentially dichotomous, at least in that latest and last social formation of prehistory which is capitalism: "The whole of society," a famous sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* tells us, "is increasingly split into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly confronting one another: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat." To which we must only add, 1) that this underlying starkly dichotomous class antagonism only becomes fully visible empirically in times of absolute crisis and polarization, that is to say, in particular, at the moment of social revolution itself; and 2) that in a henceforth world-wide class system the oppositions in question are evidently a good deal more complicated and difficult to reconstruct than they were within the more representational, or figurable, framework of the older nation state.

This said, it is evident that a Marxian theory of classes involves the restructuring of the fragmentary and unrelated data of empirical bourgeois sociology in a holistic way: in terms, Lukács would say, of the social *totality*, or, as his antagonist Althusser would have it, of a "pre-given complex hierarchical structure of dominant and subordinate elements." In either case, the random sub-groupings of academic sociology would find their place in determinate, although sometimes ambivalent, structural positions with respect to the dichotomous opposition of the two fundamental social classes themselves, about which innovative recent work—I'm thinking, for the bourgeoisie, of Sartre's Flaubert trilogy; for the proletariat, of the Aronowitz book already quoted from—has demonstrated the mechanisms by which each class defines itself in terms of the other and constitutes a virtual anti-class with respect to the other, and this, from overt ideological values all the way down to the most apparently non-political, "merely" cultural features of everyday life.

The difference between the Marxian view of structurally dichotomous classes and the academic sociological picture of independent strata is however more than a merely intellectual one: once again, consciousness of social reality, or on the other hand the repression of the awareness of such reality, is itself "determined by social being" in Marx's phrase and is therefore a function of the social and historical situation. Thus a remarkable sociological investigation has confirmed the view that these two approaches to the social classes—the academic and the Marxist—are themselves class conditioned and reflect the structural perspectives of the two fundamental class positions themselves. Thus it is those on the higher rungs of the social ladder who tend to formulate their view of the social order, looking down at it, as separate strata; while those on the bottom looking up tend

to map their social experience in terms of the stark opposition of "them" and "us."³

But if this is so, then the representation of victimized classes in isolation—whether in the person of Sonny himself as a marginal, or the bank's clerical workers as an exploited group—is not enough to constitute a class system, let alone to precipitate a beginning consciousness of class in its viewing public. Nor are the repeated references to the absent bank management sufficient to transform the situation into a genuine class relationship, since this term does not find concrete representation—or *figuration*, to return to our earlier term—within the filmic narrative itself. Yet such representation is present in *Dog Day Afternoon*, and it is this unexpected appearance, in a part of the film where one would not normally look for it, that constitutes its greatest interest in the present context, our possibility of focussing it being as we have argued directly proportional to our ability to let go of the Sonny story and to relinquish those older narrative habits that program us to follow the individual experiences of a hero or an anti-hero, rather than the explosion of the text and the operation of meaning in other, random narrative fragments.

If we can do this,—and we have begun to do so when we are willing to reverse the robbery itself, and read Sonny's role as that of a mere pretext for the revelation of that colonized space which is the branch bank, with its peripheralized or marginalized work force—then what slowly comes to occupy the film's center of gravity is the action outside the bank itself, and in particular the struggle for precedence between the local police and the FBI officials. Now there are various ways of explaining this shift of focus, none of them wrong: for one thing, we can observe that, once Sonny has been effectively barricaded inside the bank, he can no longer initiate events, the center of gravity of the narrative as such then passing to the outside. More pertinently still, since the operative paradox of the film—underscored by Al Pacino's acting—is the fundamental likeability of Sonny, this external displacement of the acting can be understood as the narrative attempt to generate an authority figure who can deal directly with him without succumbing to his charm. But this is not just a matter of narrative machinery: properly interrogated, we can understand it as an ideological problem as well, as part of the internal needs of present-day legitimation, as a narrative answer to the fundamental question: how to imagine authority today, how to conceive imaginatively—that is in non-abstract, non-conceptual form—of a principle of authority that can express the essential impersonality and post-individualistic structure of the power structure of our society while still operating among real people, in the tangible necessities of daily life and individual situations of repression?

It is clear that the figure of the FBI agent represents a narrative solution to this ideological contradiction, and the nature of the solution is underscored by the characterological styles of the FBI agents and the local police chief, whose

³Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 280-289.

impotent rages and passionate incompetence are there, not so much to humanize him, as rather to set off the cool and technocratic expertise of his rival. In one sense of course this contrast is what has nowadays come to be called an inter-textual one: this is not really the encounter of two characters, who represent two "individuals," but rather the encounter of two narrative paradigms, indeed, of two narrative stereotypes: the clean-cut Efreim-Zimbalist-type FBI agents, with their fifties haircuts, and the earthy urban cop whose television embodiments are so multiple as to be embarrassing: the FBI story meets *Dragnet* or *Kojak*! Yet one of the most effective things in the film, and the most haunting impression left by *Dog Day Afternoon* in the area of performance, is surely not so much the febrile heroics of Al Pacino as rather their stylistic opposite, the starkly bland and emotionless, expressionless, coolness of the FBI man himself. This gazing face, behind which decision-making is reduced to (or developed into) pure technique, yet whose judgements and assessments are utterly inaccessible to spectators either within or without the filmic frame, is one of the most alarming achievements of recent American movie-making, and may be said to embody something like the truth of a rather different but equally actual genre, the espionage thriller, where it has tended to remain obfuscated by the cumbersome theological apparatus of a dialectic of Good and Evil.

Meanwhile, the more existential and private-tragic visions of this kind of figure—I'm thinking of the lawman in *Bonnie and Clyde*—project a nemesis which is still motivated by personal vindictiveness, so that the process of tracking the victim down retains a kind of passion of a still recognizable human type; Penn's more recent *Missouri Breaks* then tried to make an advance on this personalized dramatization of the implacability of social institutions by endowing its enforcer with a generalized paranoia; but it is not really much of an improvement and the vision remains locked in the pathos of a self-pitying and individualistic vision of history.

In *Dog Day Afternoon*, however, the organization man is neither vindictive nor paranoid; he is in this sense quite beyond the good and evil of conventional melodrama, and inaccessible to any of the psychologizing stereotypes that are indulged in most of the commercial representations of the power of institutions; his anonymous features mark a chilling and unexpected insertion of the real into the otherwise relatively predictable framework of the fiction film—and this, not, as we have pointed out earlier, by traditional documentary or montage techniques, but rather through a kind of dialectic of connotations on the level of the style of acting, a kind of silence or charged absence in a sign-system in which the other modes of performance have programmed us for a different kind of expressiveness.

Now the basic contrast, that between the police chief and the FBI agent, dramatizes a social and historical change which was once an important theme of our literature but to which we have today become so accustomed as to have lost our sensitivity to it: in their very different ways, the novels of John O'Hara and the sociological investigations of C. Wright Mills documented a gradual but irreversible erosion of local and state-wide power structures and leadership or authority networks by national, and in our own time multinational, ones. Think

of the social hierarchy of Gibbssville coming into disillusioning contact with the new wealth and the new political hierarchies of the New Deal era; think—even more relevantly for our present purposes—of the crisis of figurability implied by this shift of power from the face-to-face small-town daily life situations of the older communities to the abstraction of nation-wide power (a crisis already suggested by the literary representations of “politics” as a specialized theme in itself).

The police lieutenant thus comes to incarnate the very helplessness and impotent agitation of the local power structure, and with this inflection of our reading, with this interpretive operation, the whole allegorical structure of *Dog Day Afternoon* suddenly emerges in the light of day. The FBI agent—now that we have succeeded in identifying what he supercedes—comes to occupy the place of that immense and decentralized power network which marks the present multinational stage of monopoly capitalism. The very absence in his features becomes a sign and an expression of the presence/absence of corporate power in our daily lives, all-shaping and omnipotent and yet rarely accessible in figurable terms, that is to say, in the representable form of individual actors or agents. The FBI man is thus the structural opposite of the secretarial staff of the branch bank: the latter present in all their existential individuality, but inessential and utterly marginalized, the former so depersonalized as to be little more than a marker—in the empirical world of everyday life, of *faits divers* and newspaper articles—of the place of ultimate power and control.

Yet with even this shadowy embodiment of the forces of those multi-national corporate structures that are the subjects of present-day world history, the possibility of genuine figuration, and with it, the possibility of a kind of beginning adequate class consciousness itself, is given. Now the class structure of the film becomes articulated in three tiers: the first, that newly atomized petty bourgeoisie of the cities whose “proletarianization” and marginalization is expressed both by the women employees on the one hand, and by the lumpens on the other, Sonny and his accomplice, but also the crowd itself, an embodiment of the logic of marginality that runs all the way from the “normal” deviancies of homosexuality and petty crime to the pathologies of Sal’s paranoia and Ernie’s transsexuality. On a second level, the impotent power structures of the local neighborhoods, which represent something like the national bourgeoisies of the Third World, colonized and gutted of their older content, left with little more than the hollow shells and external trappings of authority and decision making. Finally, of course, that multinational capitalism into which the older ruling classes of our world have evolved, and whose primacy is inscribed in the spatial trajectory of the film itself as it moves from the ghettoized squalor of the bank interior to that eerie and impersonal science fiction landscape of the airport finale: a corporate space without inhabitants, utterly technologized and functional, a place beyond city and country alike—collective, yet without people, automated and computerized, yet without any of that older utopian or dystopian clamor, without any of those still distinctive qualities that characterized the then still “modern” and streamlined futuristic vision of the corporate future in our own recent past. Here—as in the

blank style of acting of the FBI agents—the film makes a powerful non-conceptual point by destroying its own intrinsic effects and cancelling an already powerful, yet conventional, filmic and performative language.

Two final observations about this work, the one about its ultimate aesthetic and political effects, the other about its historical conditions of possibility. Let us take the second problem first: we have here repeatedly stressed the dependence of a narrative figuration of class consciousness on the historical situation. We have stressed both the dichotomous nature of the class structure, and the dependence of class consciousness itself on the logic of the social and historical conjuncture. Marx's dictum, that consciousness is determined by social being, holds for class consciousness itself no less than for any other form. We must now therefore try to make good our claim, and say why, if some new and renewed possibility of class consciousness seems at least faintly detectable, this should be the case now and today rather than ten or twenty years ago. But the answer to this question can be given concisely and decisively, it is implicit in the very expression, "multinational corporation," which—as great a misnomer as it may be (since all of them are in reality expressions of American capitalism)—would not have been invented had not something new suddenly emerged which seemed to demand a new name for itself. It seems to be a fact that after the failure of the Vietnam War, the so-called multinational corporations—what used to be called the "ruling classes" or later on the "power elite" of monopoly capitalism—have once again emerged in public from the wings of history to advance their own interests. The failure of the war "has meant that the advancement of world capitalist revolution now depends more on the initiative of corporations and less on governments. The increasingly political pretensions of the global corporation are thus unavoidable but they inevitably mean more public exposure, and exposure carries with it the risk of increased hostility."⁴ But in our terms, the psychological language of the authors of *Global Reach* may be translated as "class consciousness," and with this new visibility capitalism becomes objectified and dramatized as an actor and as a subject of history with an allegorical intensity and simplicity that had not been the case since the 1930's.

Now a final word about the political implications of the film itself and the complexities of the kind of allegorical structure we have imputed to it. Can *Dog Day Afternoon* be said to be a political film? Surely not, since the class system we have been talking about is merely implicit in it, and can just as easily be ignored or repressed by its viewers as brought to consciousness. What we have been describing is at best something pre-political, the gradual rearticulation of the raw material of a film of this kind in terms and relationships which are once again, after the anti-political and privatizing, "existential" paradigms of the forties and fifties recognizably those of class.

Yet we should also understand that the use of such material is much more complicated and problematical than the terminology of representation would suggest.

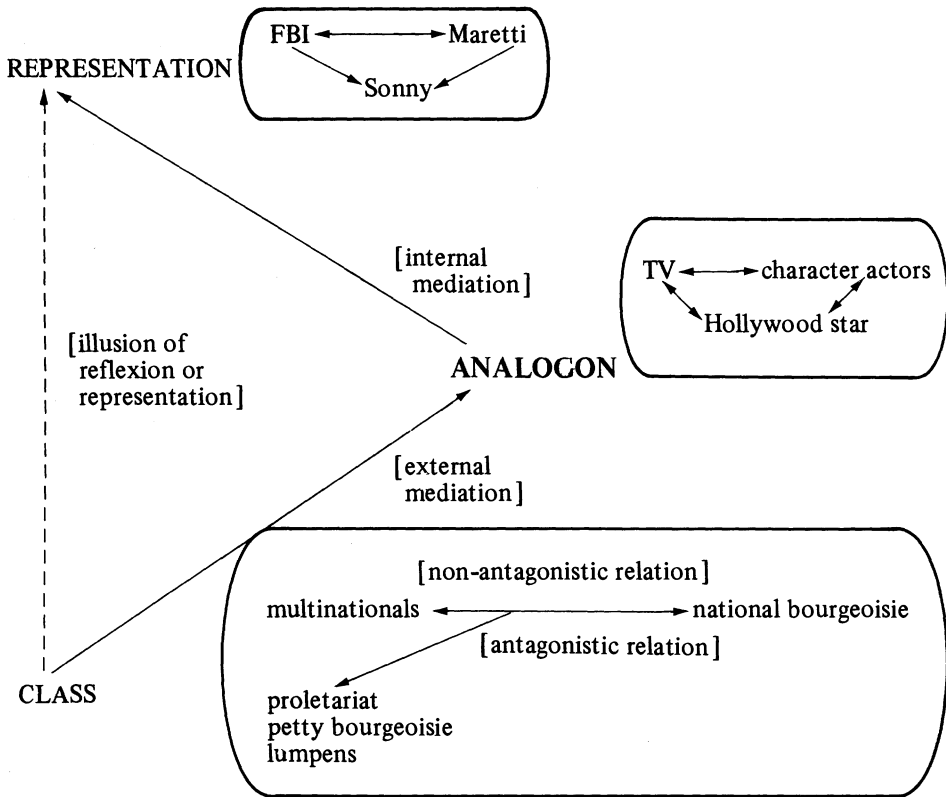
⁴See Richard J. Barnet & Ronald E. Muller, *Global Reach* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 68.

Indeed, in the process by which class structure finds expression in the triangular relationship within the film between Sonny, the police chief and the FBI man, we have left out an essential step. For the whole qualitative and dialectical inequality of this relationship is mediated by the star system itself, and in that sense—far more adequately than in its overt thematics of the media exploitation of Sonny's hold-up—the film can be said to be about itself. Indeed we read each of the major actors in terms of his distance from the star system: Sonny's relationship to Maretti is that of superstar to character actor (Charles Durning), and our reading of this particular narrative is not a direct passage from one character or *actant* to another, but passes through the mediation of our identification and decoding of the actors' status as such. Even more interesting and complex than this is our decoding of the FBI agent, whose anonymity in the filmic narrative is expressed very precisely through his anonymity within the framework of the Hollywood star system. The face is blank and unreadable precisely because the actor is himself unidentifiable. In fact, of course, it is only within the coding of a Hollywood system that he is unfamiliar, for the actor in question, in another world, is a permanent feature of a durable and well-known television series. But the point is precisely that in this respect television and its system of references is another world; not merely that the television actor becomes an unknown in a Hollywood production, but even more, that television comes itself to figure, with respect to Hollywood films, that new and impersonal multinational system which is coming to supercede the more individualistic one of an older national capitalism and an older commodity culture. Thus, the external, extrinsic sociological fact or system of realities finds itself inscribed within the internal intrinsic experience of the film in what Sartre in a suggestive and too-little known concept in his *Psychology of Imagination* calls the analogon:⁵ that structural nexus in our reading or viewing experience, in our operations of decoding or aesthetic reception, which can then do double duty and stand as the substitute and the representative within the aesthetic object of a phenomenon on the outside which cannot in the very nature of things be "rendered" directly.⁶ This complex of intra- and extra-aesthetic re-

⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968, pp. 21-71, analogon here translated as "the analogue."

⁶At this point I should formulate the basic presupposition of the present study which is that of a radical incompatibility between the possibilities of an older national language or culture which is still the framework in which literature is being produced today) and the transnational, world-wide organization of the economic infrastructure of contemporary capitalism. The result of this contradiction is a situation in which the truth of our social life as a whole—in Lukács' terms, as a totality—is increasingly irreconcilable with the possibilities of aesthetic expression or articulation available to us; a situation about which it can be asserted that if we can make a work of art from our experience, if we can give experience the form of a story that can be told, then it is no longer true, even as individual experience; and if we can grasp the truth about our world as a totality, then we may find some purely conceptual expression for us, but we will no longer be able to maintain an imaginative relationship to it. In current psychoanalytic terminology, we will thus be unable to insert ourselves, as individual subjects, into an ever more massive and impersonal or transpersonal reality outside ourselves. This is the perspective in which it becomes a matter of more than mere intellectual curiosity to interrogate the artistic production of our own time for signs of some new, so far only dimly conceivable, collective forms which may be expected to replace the older individualistic ones

relationships might then schematically be represented as follows:



Here then we find an ultimate formal confirmation of our initial hypothesis, that what is bad about the film is what is best about it, and that the work is a paradoxical realization in which qualities and defects form an inextricable dialectical unity. For it is ultimately the star system itself—that commodity phenomenon most stubbornly irreconcilable with any documentary or ciné-vérité type of exploration of the real—which is thus responsible for even that limited authenticity which *Dog Day Afternoon* is able to achieve.

(those either of conventional realism or of a now conventionalized modernism); and it is also the perspective in which an indecisive aesthetic and cultural phenomenon like *Dog Day Afternoon* takes on the values of a revealing symptom.