



***L'avventura* (The Adventure) is a forthcoming LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that film.**

**Italy 1960 black-and-white 143 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Director: Michelangelo Antonioni Producer: Amato Pennasilico
Cino del duca (Roma) / Produzioni Cinematografiche Europee (P.C.E.) /
Société Cinématographique Lyre (Paris) a Criterion Collection Janus Films dvd**

Key: * = outstanding technical achievement or performances

16 total points = a minor classic

Points:

- 2 Direction: Michelangelo Antonioni***
- 0 Editing: Eraldo de Roma**
- 2 Cinematography: Aldo Scavarda***
Still Photography: Enrico Appetito
- 2 Lighting:**
- 0 Screenplay: Michelangelo Antonioni, Elio Bartolini, Tonino Guerra**
Script Supervision: Elvira D'Amico
- 2 Music: Giovanni Fusco***
- 2 Production Design: Piero Poletto***
Costume Design: Adriana Berselli
Makeup: Giuseppe Peruzzi
- 2 Sound: Claudio Maielli***
Dubbing Direction: Mario Maldesi
Sound Recording: Léon Rousseau*
Sound Mixing: Paolo Ketoff* and Nino Renda*
- 2 Acting**

2 Creativity

16 total points

Cast: Gabrielle Ferzetti (Sandro), Monica Vitti* (Claudia), Lea Massari* (Anna), Dominique Blanchar* (Giulia), Renzo Ricci (Anna's father), James Addams* (Corrado), Dorothy De Poliolo (Gloria Perkins), Lelio Luttazzi* (Raimondo), Giovanni Petrucci (Young prince Goffredo), Esmeralda Ruspoli* (Patrizia), Giovanni Danesi (Photographer), Renato Pincioli (Zuria, the journalist), Angela Tomasi di Lampedusa (The Princess), Professor Cucco (Ettore), Jack O'Connell* (the old islander), Isa Bellini (voice of Dominique Blanchar), Clara Bindi (voice of Lea Massari), Pino Colizzi (voice of Giovanni Petrucci), Ivo Garrani (voice of Renzo Ricci), others

Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (*The Adventure*) is very much what the British term a curate's egg. With gorgeous, painterly cinematography of the first order and a meandering, childish threadbare plot, it hovers somewhere between the Louvre and a third-rate telenovela. The director's fixation on broken relationships, alienation from society, and suffocating ennui are given full treatment here. So is identity transference. Perhaps the latter was suggested by Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 drama *Vertigo*, in which one female character's outward identity is eventually imprinted on another.

Initially, the film appears concerned with the unhappy engagement of a restless, possibly suicidal young woman named Anna to a philandering playboy architect, Sandro. The pair is about to leave Rome for an Aeolian island holiday, with third wheel Claudia in tow for no discernible reason other than to act as the director's surrogate in a witness role that transforms improbably into that of screen protagonist.

Much later viewers learn Claudia comes from an impoverished background. She's an outsider in relation to the story's moneyed characters. Is she Anna's best female friend? Or Anna's bisexual lover? Both? Or merely a convenient obstacle to toss in the path of Sandro whenever he becomes too possessive of his independent-minded fiancée? If the latter, is Anna's unexplained disappearance the result of consciously overplaying her hand, thereby opening a gateway for Anna to replace her as Sandro's romantic partner? Antonioni has no intention of providing an answer.

After a ridiculously unlikely detour for an unscheduled private coupling, Sandro and Anna join their involuntarily stranded accompanist in a hectic car ride from Rome to the seacoast. There they board a yacht which transports them eventually to a rock-bestrewn volcanic island. The sole attraction of this wilderness must lie in isolation from civilization they find there. Why these adventurers should seek to play hide-and-seek from the rest of society is another of *L'avventura's* Pandora's box of mysteries.

Unwilling to leave the primary troika to themselves, screenwriters doubled the cast of characters, bringing scorned wife Giulia, her admirer Raimondo, and Giulia's husband Corrado to this same desolate locale on the same vessel. A seventh member of their party, the sailor Mario, finds himself likewise situated on barren wasteland. He, though, has a vested interest in being there. Mario's salary hinges upon humoring caprices of Patrizia, spouse of his employer.

Before ultimately choosing one island for further study, younger members onboard a seemingly goalless cruise resolve on some aquatic larking about, led by impetuous daredevil Anna, ringleader to a band of more conservative aristocrats. After splashing about with Giulia, Claudia, and Sandro, Anna suddenly claims to spot a shark. Yes, there's some kind of fin in water not too distant. But whether that fish is within visual range of any swimmer, or solitary diver Raimondo, is unclear. Equally ambiguous is its exact species.

Newly alerted to potential danger, Sandro closes the gap between himself and Anna. Giulia and Claudia hasten back to shipboard safety.

Later on, having landed on a sharkless shore, the exploratory company subdivides into pairs. That leaves Claudia unattached, wandering from group to group, or engaging in solitary hikes. Giulia and Corrado manage to simultaneously stay more or less together a marked distance apart. Rather like opposite ends of a magnet.

Sandro and Anna form another twosome, Sandro lazily resorting to a nap on rocks while his partner restlessly goes off to investigate livelier alternatives.

Shots of craggy cliffs and seething breakwater alternate with those showing visitors randomly searching an encompassing rockscape for they know not what. Something to fill internal emptiness matching, in complimentary fashion, surrounding bleakness.

A boat's motor sounds somewhere nearby. With the possible exception of Anna, nobody sees it. Yet several definitely hear a mechanical noise that will play a huge role in what follows.

Soon thereafter Mario urges departure. Sea turbulence is menacingly increasing. All passengers seem to be present and in view except Anna.

Where is she?

Antonioni elected never to answer that question, instead using tantalizing enigma as a pretext for disengaging Sandro from Anna and attaching him instead to Claudia. For her part, the newbie to this circle is forced to assume a degree of initiative. Her friend's no longer available to prod or protect. She must act independently now, for better or for worse.

Prolonged rounds of Lisca Bianca produce no comforting results. Anna remains either hidden or provocatively missing. What to do next?

Always pragmatic Patrizia favors return to their yacht. Then motoring off to the nearest police station. Of course, that would mean submission to questions and possibly fending off implications about criminal behavior on the part of informants. A situation particularly sticky for Sandro, whose conduct smacks of downright negligence, at the very least. Still, he would have a cluster of likely defenders to reinforce an alibi for him if interrogation turned nasty.

So at first he accepts their hostess's plan. But when Corrado volunteers himself to stay behind on an individual scouting mission, Anna's fiancé must join him to save face.

Conscience-stricken at this point, Claudia declares her intention of remaining on Lisca Bianca also to look for a wayward companion. Mario, Raimondo, and Patrizia decide on immediate exit, taking along grateful Giulia, who makes the most of fortuitous unexpected separation from supercilious mate.

The next sections of this film are devoted to growing passion between Sandro and Claudia as the latter assumes Anna's role in absentia.

When the truant female's father later arrives on the scene he's presented two books found in his daughter's sea bag. One is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, a novel in which a teenage vamp wriggles her way between settled husband and wife, disrupting their relationship by seducing the male. Might Anna have found in this plot a route out of the dead-end relationship with Sandro? The other book is a Bible. None of Anna's conversations or actions

suggest looking to it for guidance. Still, the notion she may have done so is entirely credible and quickly latched onto by anguished parent.

Subsequent scenes reveal the inability of Anna's substitute to permanently adopt her predecessor's identity. This is underlined by Claudia's returning a dark brunette wig Giulia leaves her to Patrizia, after momentary hesitation. She is *not* Anna, no matter how much she annexes of the other's leftovers. Ultimately outsider remains outlier. Until at last Claudia is compelled to become more maternal than conjugal. For Sandro is naught but an overgrown child.

Before reaching that point his new conquest toys with at least two other character roles.

Watching Giulia flirt with seventeen-year-old Goffredo finally elicits nothing but disgust and rejection in voyeuristic Claudia, who refuses to do as the faithless spouse requests and report the event to Corrado. That leaves the requester more self-inflicted victim than victorious avenger. No, playing at homewrecker is even less fulfilling than copycatting Anna.

Likewise, sorties into aping Patrizia's glacial self-absorption fail miserably as well. Consider the mirror mugging episode in which Claudia passes rapidly through a succession of moody facial expressions, unable to satisfy herself with any of them. Inability to restrain internal passion always reemerges, no matter how hard she tries to exhibit total coolness. This blazing ember cannot aspire to wrap herself inside herself in the manner of Ettore's elegantly aloof wife, becoming oblivious to all temptation because utterly beyond any love except sheer vanity. For Patrizia is emotionally dead, though still physically alive. Her slowly maturing houseguest comes to realize such frozen vitality is neither comfortable nor attainable.

Religious images are embedded throughout the film as point-of-view character and her innamorato are offered repeated chances for redemption. However, both regard churches as mere architecture and those affiliated with them simply antiquated, tradition-bound zombies. They have left behind traditional articles of faith without unearthing any new ones to take their places. Being spiritually blind, Claudia and Sandro overlook every opportunity to live more fulfilling lives serving others, chasing instead self-accommodating sensual pleasures of a hedonistic lifestyle.

Note a succession of background characters pursuing productive endeavors: workmen tending to construction, a hired hotel maid washing furniture, police

rescue divers risking their own lives on the slim chance of uncovering Anna's remains, a chauffeur providing convenient transport for guests of his boss, the teen boy making a last-moment delivery to a departing train and smiling triumphantly afterwards into the camera. Those are folks Claudia could be using for exemplars, rather than ogling wannabe Sicilian Lotharios, twice highlighted during the course of her journeys, and various upper-crust associates thoroughly ensnared in sticky, eventually paralyzing amber of social convention.

Few films before this cast adrift so completely proscenium arch, manufactured scenery, obligatory happy ending, underlining dialogue, and static two-shot formulas beloved of Hollywood. Antonioni established groundwork for a less blatantly didactic cinema built around optic inference. His creative ambiances weren't reliant upon craftsmanship. They sprang instead from the concrete preexisting world.

Unfortunately, his achievement was vitiated partially by Ionesco-like theatre of the absurd interludes prolonging an already attenuated movie. More judicious editing would have resulted in cutting about thirty minutes off total runtime, further adding to impact of key scenes. Brutal, blackmailing treatment of laborer class young Sicilians at the preposterously ornate palace serving as headquarters for island security forces could also have been deleted as irrelevant to this story.

Giovanni Fusco's suspenseful theme music, inconclusive, yet lyrical, meshes perfectly with the atmosphere Antonioni desired. It's a spare and telling score heard as aural bookends to more vapid conversations featured between them.

Lighting, sound recording, cinematography, and production design are beyond reproach. This is true also of acting by the leads, who are credible and assured in creation of memorable characters. This despite a fearsomely handicapping screenplay devoid of all but minimal motivations for action and overloaded with uninformative, banal dialogue.

Unapologetically returning cinema to its silent film roots by telling a story primarily through what is seen rather than heard, *L'avventura* challenges contemporary viewers to hone both observational and deductive faculties. It is a gift which, as repeated screenings prove, keeps giving more each time it is presented.

The Criterion Collection release of *L'avventura* includes that company's usual abundance of bonus features.

Readings by actor Jack Nicholson of assorted Antonioni claims concerning philosophical underpinnings of his films, along with a couple anecdotes about encounters with the director, constitute one of these. What the Italian master says about his work is frequently contradictory and must be taken as evasions rather than revelations.

A second bonus, director Olivier Assayas's dissection of the film into three parts, runs fifty-six minutes and floats the thesis Antonioni was creating a film devoid of dialogue-communicated meaning. His argument rests on the purposely misleading first third of the drama, which gives an impression of introducing a standard mystery thriller. Unfortunately for Assayas, the remaining thirds squash that interpretation utterly flat. Not only do screenplay and narrative remain ordered in linear chronology, but the essential foundation set in place by the Anna character herself continues to propel developments forward until very nearly the concluding scene. It's Claudia's unsuccessful test run at becoming Anna that Antonioni maps. He does absolutely nothing whatsoever to disguise that primary purpose.

Gene Youngblood's audio commentary outlines both where *L'avventura* fits in the Antonioni corpus of works and the assortment of technical means the director employed, ranging from location shooting to occasional dissolves, as well as frequent insertions of character close-ups sandwiched between long shots of the same individuals posed against impressive, overarching natural backdrops or looming architectural masses. He fails to comment effectively, however, on insistent obtrusions of religious symbolism into the story. They cannot be shrugged off as incidental or insignificant.

A 1966 documentary highlighting Antonioni and associated crew actually both shooting and preparing to shoot film is more instructive and far more objective than either the Youngblood commentary or the Assayas hypothesizing. Watching how the director worked reveals much about why he operated so obliquely with regard to story development. The runtime of *Antonioni: Documents and Testimonials* is fifty-eight minutes.

A typically 1950s-style trailer focused on erotic elements of the film round out extras supplied with the double dvd release.

L'avventura's content is inappropriate for audiences below college age due to pretty extreme sensuality and radically complicated reliance on optical clues to carry its storytelling burden.