

DIVORZIO ALL'ITALIANA

Divorce Italian Style

Pietro Germi, Italy, 1961

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Divorce did not become legal in Italy until 1970, although it was not until 1974, when a majority of voters defeated a proposal to repeal legalisation, that the issue was settled once and for all. Italy was among the very last Western European countries to legalise the civil termination of marital union. Only Spain (1981) and Ireland (1996) came later. The tardiness in changing the law stemmed from the fact that much of Italy's legal code went unchanged after World War Two, despite the transition from fascist dictatorship to representative democracy. Many laws regarding women and family life were holdovers from the Fascist period, and changing them during the stagnation that set in during the long reign of the conservative Christian Democratic Party (DC) in the post-war period proved difficult. Legalisation became a reality thanks to the tireless campaigning of feminist political activists (most connected to the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) as well as to other smaller parties) and to the general loosening of the political and cultural climate after the events of 1968. The subject of legalisation, however, had been in the air for some time and had notoriously been given a public airing of sorts some years before thanks to the efforts of a filmmaker not renowned for his progressive politics. That filmmaker was Pietro Germi and his film, *Divorzio all'italiana* (*Divorce, Italian Style*, 1961).

The film is set in modern-day Sicily, although one of the film's operative ironies is the oxymoron implied by the very phrase 'modern-day Sicily.' Like many Italian films set in Sicily, from Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948) to Germi's own *In nome della legge* (*In the Name of the Law*, 1949), to name but two, *Divorzio all'italiana* takes as its subject the backwardness of Sicilian culture and its social and religious values. And like its 'Sicilian' predecessors, *Divorce, Italian Style* suggests implicitly that the Sicilian condition (here, specifically the gender inequality endemic to the region) is perhaps only an exaggerated version of the state of things throughout the entire country. In Gian Piero Brunetta's words: 'The film, as underlined by the title ... means to demonstrate that the underdevelopment of the South is of a piece with the history of the whole nation.' What is remarkable about the film is that it summons the conventional wisdom and received prejudices about Sicilian life and investigates

them by means of raising everything to the level of cultural caricature. By so doing, the film achieves a seriousness of purpose: the bitter laughter the film elicits echoes profoundly across not just the Sicilian, but the entire Italian cultural landscape.

Divorce, Italian Style was produced and distributed during a period of abundance in the Italian film industry. The previous year had seen the spectacular success of Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960), not only in Italy, but in the European and North American art-house cinema markets as well. The same year saw the release of Michelangelo Antonioni's cool, modernist *L'avventura* and Luchino Visconti's operatic *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*), both international art-house successes. The Italian film industry and debates within Italian film culture had by this time moved beyond the preoccupation with neorealism and its legacy. Leading Italian filmmakers were concerned with sifting through the wanton excesses and broken promises of Italy's 'economic miracle' (roughly 1958–63) a period of immense economic growth and prosperity, in full swing when Germi set about making *Divorce, Italian Style*.

The film has often been recognised as a leading example of the *commedia all'italiana* genre – in fact, the film's very title seems to make a nod towards its affiliation with the genre. The *commedia* is a very loose genre whose heyday was in the 1950s and 1960s. Its best known practitioners, apart from Germi, were Mario Monicelli and Dino Risi, however, even a neorealist auteur like Vittorio De Sica made films that fit into the genre (for example, *Il boom* (*The Boom*, 1963)). The films are rich in stereotypical Italian characters, and the plots often follow the difficulties these characters have in meeting the peculiar, sometimes exasperating demands of Italian life. Germi's film participates both in this generic context and in the culture of stylistic innovation so remarkable in the films of Antonioni and Fellini; *Divorce, Italian Style* is nothing if not stylish and stylised. And yet despite its corrosive comedy and stylistic artifice, the film also shares some of the key attributes of neorealist filmmaking, chiefly a concern with social justice and an interest in everyday life.

The film opens with its main character Barone Ferdinando Cefalù travelling by train to return to his native city of Agramonte (a fictional name). Most of the film is an extended flashback told from this point in time, narrated by Barone Ferdinando, or Fefè, as he is affectionately known to his family. Fefè, masterfully played by Marcello Mastroianni as a narcissistic, spoiled aristocrat, complete with a rich lexicon of facial tics and affectations, lives with his noble but impoverished family in the ancestral palazzo. Half of the building is occupied by the family of his coarse but rich uncle, Calogero, who has been floating Fefè's father's debts. Fefè has grown tired of his wife, the voluptuous but moustachioed Rosalia (Daniela Rocca) whose constant

requests for and displays of affection now only repel him. Instead Fefè's attentions focus on his young cousin Angela (played by future star, then sixteen-year-old, Stefania Sandrelli), a comely but insipid girl on whom Fefè spies each night as she lies sleeping across the courtyard of the palazzo. The plot kicks into gear when Fefè reads of a murder case in Catania in which a woman is being tried for killing her lover whom she had surprised *in flagrante delicto*. According to an antiquated article in Italy's byzantine penal code (number 587 – an actual law not repealed until 1981), disgraced husbands and wives who have been cheated on by their partners and have killed them in retaliation can be cleared of murder charges if they can prove they acted out of passion and in defence of their honour. (A person's honour is an especially charged issue for Sicilians, more so than for other Italians.) Instead of going to the gallows, those to whom article 587 applies serve only three to seven years in prison. This revelation sets Fefè – diabolically, absurdly – in motion. He reckons if he can get Rosalia to compromise herself he can then promptly dispatch her, plea for the mercies of 587, do his time and return to Agramonte to marry Angela who will by that time be of age.

Fefè sets about finding a lover for the unsuspecting Rosalia, parading her around the town in unusually revealing clothes he has bought for her. Eventually he finds his man in the person of Carmelo, a painter who, Fefè discovers, was Rosalia's lover before their marriage. On the pretence of having him restore some mediocre ceiling frescoes in the palazzo, Fefè connives at throwing Rosalia and Carmelo into each other's company. His plan works, and the two former sweethearts take flight while the rest of the household has gone to the cinema (to see *La dolce vita*, no less!). After enduring the expected (indeed, for his purposes, desired) humiliation of the townspeople, Fefè manages to murder Rosalia, although in rather bungling fashion. All goes according to plan: the court administers a light sentence, and the film catches up with the point in time from which Fefè's voice-over narration commenced at its beginning. He returns from prison to a hero's welcome in Agramonte and marries Angela. The film's final images are of the newlyweds on a sailing yacht, Fefè kissing his lithe, bikini-clad wife while, unbeknownst to her husband, she plays footsy with the young handsome sailor steering the boat.

This skeletal summary does little to convey the film's interest. Perhaps *Divorce, Italian Style*'s greatest achievement is its clever use of point-of-view narration which is amplified and even sometimes undermined by a range of experiments in sound and image relations. Fefè begins his tale as he looks out from his train window at the barren Sicilian landscape scudding by. As he gazes out the soundtrack introduces the strains of Sicilian folk music (plaintive mandolins and strings). Fefè's voice-over begins, as if commenting on the extra-diegetic music: 'Ah,

the southern serenades. The hot, sweet, languorous Sicilian nights.' The film obviously plays with exactly those tropes of Sicily one would most expect to encounter in mainstream Italian cinema and popular culture: Sicily as a place of privation and yet of sensual delights, a place out of step with history and exceptional in its difference. The foregrounding of these regionalist clichés prepares the audience to engage its scepticism for the rush of clichés that follows. For Fefè's musings immediately turn to a whirlwind introduction to his hometown of Agramonte, where his story takes place.

As the camera offers an overhead shot of the town of Agramonte, we hear Fefè's sardonic voice-over intone: 'Agramonte: 18,000 inhabitants, 4,300 illiterates, 1,700 unemployed...' Next, as the image track reveals a montage of church facades, the voice-over continues breathlessly, 'twenty-four churches, among which there number some notable examples of late seicento baroque...' The rapid fluctuation between contemptuous irony and civic pride captures the familiar sense in which Sicily is object of both pity and envy. Next Fefè's voice-over and the accompanying image track introduce us to the following: the Cefalù family palazzo; the various members of his family; the men of the town arguing about their 'favourite subject', women; the women of the town, represented metonymically only by the blinds behind which they are hidden; Agramonte's rather hapless and apolitical-seeming PCI cell; a priest demanding allegiance to the DC from his pulpit; and last Angela, the forbidden object of desire. All of this rushes by in what Mario Sesti has called 'a nervous and torrential outburst' of sound and image.

This brilliant and hilarious sequence introduces us to the diegetic world of the film and serves as a thumbnail illustration of the social tensions not just in Sicily, but in Italy, circa 1961. The camera's method of zooming in on the unnamed faces of Agramonte's inhabitants and on the members of Fefè's family with almost equal interest suggests the interpenetration of the wider social and historical context with the fictional Cefalù. In other words, this frothy mixture of satire, formal play and historical reference asks to be read, at least partially, as historical and political allegory. The exaggerated, offhand tone in which the polarities of male and female, PCI and Church, public life and private fantasy are announced suggests that Fefè's account relies on established tropes that, despite their shop-worn appeal, still describe the actual historical situation of Sicily's (and Italy's) backwardness. Or, as Marcia Landy has argued, the film's comedic subject (the lack of divorce rights) is 'the pretext to examine intersections among marriage, patriarchy, femininity and masculinity'.

The voice-over that features so significantly in baptising viewers into the world of the film is of crucial significance in interpreting the film. Voice-over narration played a special part

in Germi's filmmaking prior to *Divorce, Italian Style*. But as Sesti has claimed, in earlier films, such as *Il ferroviere* (*The Railroad Man*, 1955), the voice-over narration always emanates from 'an invisible and neutral place'. Here, instead, the voice-over is intimately attached to the image track. The image track may visualise something enunciated by the voice-over, only to have the voice-over revise, as it were, that possibility and posit another, more suitable, which concomitantly appears as the subject of the image track. For instance, when introducing the familial palazzo, he first mentions the wing his family lives in which the camera reveals in a pan right. As he goes on to explain that his uncle's family occupies the adjacent wing, the camera pans left, dutifully revealing that wing as well. In this way, Fefè's voice-over has slightly demiurgic powers: his voice-over seems to summon forth the film's images. As such, the voice-over would seem to enact the male, patriarchal authority so at issue in the film's narrative. Fefè authors the film's diegetic world just as he authors Rosalia's death.

Yet the film also seeks to undermine Fefè's authority as narrator at several key moments. The first is when his voice-over begins. The sentimental Sicilian folk music that accompanies his recounting, as mentioned above, casts our belief in the objectivity of his account in some doubt. Later, in the furious introductory montage, we see Fefè at mass with Rosalia in the family pew alongside his mother and father. Angela and the rest of the Calogeros are across the aisle. As Fefè stares at Angela, his voice-over begins to explain that she attends a convent school in Catania; however, as he begins, Rosalia looks over her shoulder to smile at him. He interrupts his commentary, only to resume it, *sotto voce*, once Rosalia turns away. This intersection of the present of the narrating voice-over with the temporality of the diegesis narrated suggests a troubled relation between the temporalities of past and present, perhaps consonant with the troubled relationship of old and new in Sicilian culture.

The authority of Fefè's voice-over is undermined most prominently in the film's final shot. As he concludes the tale, exulting that 'Life really does begin at forty', he is unaware that Angela is already cheating on him under his nose. The image track has fully usurped the authority of the (now rather smug) voice-over. Of course, we might simply interpret Angela's infidelity as yet just another stereotype – the lustful young wife, stock-in-trade of Western representation of the female. There remains, however, a strong impression of the film's having both boldly asserted and ruthlessly parodied the function of the male narrator.

Of course, Mastroianni's portrayal of Fefè renders the character absurd throughout. His scheming to kill off Rosalia and marry Angela hardly registers as a murder plot, more like a schoolboy prank. But here again, in the domain of comic absurdity, lies some of the film's seri-

ousness. Because Fefè sets such a clear narrative itinerary early on (kill Rosalia; marry Angela), however much we may disapprove of his actions and motivations, the machinations of the plot coerce us into rooting for his success. Thus every potential obstacle to the completion of his goal (for instance when the maid Sisina threatens to fall in love with Carmelo and thereby prevent his and Rosalia's adultery) we register with slight alarm the possibility that Fefè's plan may be derailed. These same potential disruptions also force on us the recognition that we have been cheering on an amoral villain as he pursues the consummation of a hideous act. The film creates an ironic subject position from which viewers must consume it: in identifying with its charming but ridiculous protagonist we perforce bestow legitimacy on his unsavoury actions. Again, this is always happening in a comic key, and the film is not actually trying to persuade its viewers of the legitimacy of uxoricide. Nonetheless, much of what allies us to Fefè is undoubtedly his Sicilian-ness, or *sicilianità*, this being an exaggerated version of *italianità*. He is attractive, well-groomed, preening, clever, enjoys his *caffè* with great relish and adores women. While these characteristics might be just the thing to inspire a schoolgirl's (or boy's) affection for the Italian male, they are also traits – the coffee drinking excepted – that have colluded with the oppression of women in Italian culture. The film seduces us into laughing complicity with Fefè. We will have missed the point, though, if we do not see that such winking approval at corruption and inequality is also what kept divorce laws on the books until the 1970s. The film's comedic strategies are identical with its moral and political critique.

In regards to the legalisation of divorce in Italy, Stephen Gundle notes that *Divorce, Italian Style* 'undoubtedly propelled the issue to the forefront of public debate'. Germi seems to have imagined exactly this role for his film. He himself is quoted as saying: 'Sicily is a part of Italy and its shameful blackspots [sic] are blackspots for all Italians; it is our duty to speak out against them...' This sort of rhetoric strongly recalls the rhetoric of neorealism, of Cesare Zavattini's belief, articulated in his *ars poetica*, 'A Thesis on Neo-Realism', that 'the world continues to evolve towards evil because we do not know the truth: we remain unaware of reality. The most necessary task for a man today consists in attempting to resolve, as best he can, the problem of this lack of knowledge and lack of awareness.' Such resonance with the spirit of neorealism does not surprise us; Germi was, after all, active during the high season of neorealism and his films from that period are generally counted as part of the neorealist canon. Even his films from the mid- to late 1950s, especially *Il ferroviere* (*Man of Iron*, 1956) and *L'uomo di paglia* (*A Man of Straw*, 1957), might be seen as continuing the neorealist concern with documenting a specific proletarian or lower-middle-class milieu and posing concrete moral questions to the films'

audiences. *Divorce, Italian Style*, however, with its clever montage sequences and formal play, would seem miles away from the concerns of a film movement associated with the political left and the misery of the immediate post-war period and rather closer to the vacuous plenitude of the economic miracle.

We might recall, though, that the film's narrative catalyst – Fefè's discovery of the murder trial in Catania via the newspaper – resonates precisely with the neorealist imperative of finding film subjects in the commonest of places, in the chronicle of everyday life of contemporary Italy. When Fefè visits the murder trial of Mariannina Terranova, there is a feeling of the world of the comedy having run smack into the world of neorealism; Mariannina might well have stepped out of the background of a scene from Visconti's *The Earth Trembles*. In fact, Germi seems to savour the delicious irony of having his protagonist's ignoble plans set into motion by the pitiful spectacle of 'neorealist' squalour that is the woman's story. Furthermore, all the squalour is not on Mariannina's side. Inside the Palazzo Cefalù, Germi's (and cinematographers Leonida Barboni's and Carlo di Palma's) camera frames Fefè with overflowing ash-trays, half-empty liquor bottles and the like, creating a *mise-en-scène* similar to that of the famous kitchen scenes in Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943). The film also pays close attention to the register of the body (characters are often pictured in various states of slovenly *déshabillé* and to the business of everyday life (the many coffees that punctuate each day, the splitting of firewood for making soap, and so on), no matter how silly. All of this is not to assign the film to neorealism; certainly its unrelenting black humour and fantastic elements would prevent us from doing this. Rather, it should simply be noted that *Divorce, Italian Style* has its feet planted in two worlds: the sober morality of neorealism and Germi's own moral cinema of the 1950s and the modernist experimentation common to Italian film culture of the late 1950s and 1960.

This second world, the world of the economic miracle and its chronicling in the work of Fellini, Antonioni, *et al.*, bears further consideration in regards to *Divorce, Italian Style*, especially given that one of the film's central episodes concerns the exhibition of *La dolce vita* in Agramonte. Rosalia and Carmelo plan their escape for the night that Fellini's 'scandalous' masterpiece has its Agramonte debut; they know that the whole family, not to mention the entire town, will be in attendance at the cinema, giving them a better opportunity to slip away. Leading up to the scene at the movie theatre, the film offers a brief montage of local men almost salivating in anticipation of the film's putatively salacious material (wife swapping, orgies and striptease are mentioned by one excited local). On the night of the premiere, the

cinema is packed. Citizens are seen carrying chairs from nearby bars into the cinema to make up for the lack of seats in the packed auditorium. As the film is projected, the body of Anita Ekberg dancing across the screen, the audience sits spellbound, far more rapt than if they had been at mass.

While the motivation for such intense spectatorship is perhaps only prurient, nonetheless, the episode suggests the powerful position that film could occupy in the Italian public sphere at this point in Italian history. Certainly *La dolce vita*, in Paul Ginsborg's words, 'marked a watershed in public statements on Italian society'. Apart from its critique of the bourgeois hedonism of the economic miracle, Fellini's film and the discourses surrounding its reception did much to chart shifts on the map of Italian cultural values. By granting such a central place to Fellini's controversial film inside his own, Germi almost seems to anticipate the similarly unsettling effect that *Divorce, Italian Style* would have on the cultural scene. Both films exemplify the role that films could claim in shaping debates in the Italian public sphere, a role that has for the most part diminished in years since.

Like *La dolce vita*, *Divorce, Italian Style* became an international hit, managing to win in 1962 the Academy Award for Best Screenplay and the prize at Cannes for Best Film Comedy. Its enormous success, however, raises an important point. Surely its popularity abroad had more to do with its humour, inventiveness and style than with its critique of Italian society. *Divorce, Italian Style* is an immensely likeable film. As suggested here, much of what makes it funny as a film comedy is also what makes it serious as a political intervention. But the pleasure it gives threatens to overwhelm its seriousness of intent. Considered thus the film is an interesting object lesson in Italian film history. If its stylish charm occludes its political and moral charge, then we might see it bearing the seeds of future trouble. For from the vantage point of the present, we observe with regret that the recent history of Italian cinema is rather over-replete with internationally successful films that are 'charming' and 'amusing'. Yet the film is best served by being judged in relation to its own historical horizon. In that context the film seems singular in its success at so deftly marrying tradition to innovation, humour to seriousness, and pleasure to politics.

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