DIVORCE ITALIAN STYLE
OR THE FICTION OF MARRIAGE

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Voted one of the twelve best film comedies of all time in 1968, Pietro Germi's *Divorce, Italian Style* (1961) was originally conceived as a drama.[1] Even after its conversion into comedy, however, the political intent of the finished product remains a satiric indictment of a male-dominant society that arrogates itself the right to "divorce" its women (or, in actual fact, to eliminate them in a fit of passion) if and when these women sully the family honor. The article in the Italian penal code on which Germi the director builds his farce stipulated that certain types of homicide must be treated with more clemency than others: murders of one's daughter, sister or wife, if and when these women enraged the men of the family by engaging in carnal relations outside the sanctioned bond of marriage. The penalty in these cases would be reduced from the standard twenty years in prison to a variable three to seven. Pictured in the film, Article 587 reads as follows:

> *Omicidio e lesione personale a causa di onore.* –Chiunque cagiona la morte del coniuge, della figlia o della sorella, nell'atto in cui ne scopre la illegittima relazione carnale e nello stato d'ira determinato dall'offesa recata all'onor suo o della famiglia, è punito con la reclusione (23) da tre a sette anni.

The article in question is thus explicitly gendered. As old as the Romans themselves, and resuscitated in the 1920s by the fascists, the law was put into place to defend the patriarchal authority of men.

To be sure, the protagonist of our film, Baron Fefé Cefalu, takes advantage of this law to rid himself of his wife *not* because she has offended him, but because he wants to

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[1] See Mario Sesti, …* and interviews with the film casts in The Criterion Collection DVD edition of the film.

marry his young cousin Angela. Since divorce is not yet illegal in Italy (we are in 1961), the easiest way for Fefé to attain his wish is to kill his wife in a feigned fit of rage, spend a couple of years in jail, and then be free to do as he wishes. Despite the difficulties he encounters in orchestrating his wife's betrayal (for she is sickeningly faithful) everything eventually falls into place—all the way up to the final scene of the film, where, just a few months after his marriage to Angela, we see her dallying with another man. With this final scene of the film, all of Fefé's machinations prove useless, and we can only conclude that he would have been much better advised to *keep* his original wife.

Now, as the title suggests, Germi's satiric indictment of this Article 587 is also an appeal for another, more liberal way of settling sexual disputes: divorce, as most European nations had practiced it for decades.[2] We could thus say that Germi's comic film has two, related targets: (1) the sexism of traditional Italian society (Sicilian in particular), which virtually sanctions certain kinds of masculine violence, and (2) the resistance of that same society to liberal, progressive institutions. Concerning the first target, at the time of the film's making in 1961 it is estimated that Italy was averaging 1,000 honor killings per year.[3] How does one turn such a serious issue into comedy? Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997), which draws laughter from the context of the Holocaust, shows how this happens year after a Italian tradition. In Germi's case it was enough for the production team to convince the director that a drama about honor killings would fail miserably at the box office, and the ball was set in motion.

I imagine they started their discussions by asking the proverbial question, "What If…?" In 1908 Luigi Pirandello had singled out this principle as the basis for a type of comedy he called "humorous," which indeed leads straight to the cinematic *commedia all'italiana* to which Germi's film belongs. The hypothetical imagination ("What if this strange thing happened …?") needs only alter one detail in a picture and the whole reality—the whole "normal" situation—suddenly starts looking absurd: "What if Cleopatra's nose had been an inch longer?" All of those Marc Anthony battles would have been farcical, or perhaps never occurred. To convert a social tragedy into something laughable, Germi and his screenwriters needed only ask, "What if a Sicilian man used this statute of the law providing lenient sentences for honor killings, *not* because he was truly offended by his wife's infidelity, but because it was just the easiest way to free himself up to marry someone else?" What you would have at that point is a perverse and grotesque situation. And one can go further, as the screenwriters did. What if, to make the grotesque ridiculous, our hero had to go through the most absurd maneuverings to get his wife in bed with someone else, in order to appear rightfully outraged in killing her? And, finally, to turn the ridiculous into farce, What if, after all these efforts, the man achieved his heart's desire *only* to find that she—the new wife he has dreamed of—betrayed him at the very first opportunity? That is the film we get, after this clever conversion: a farce, which despite everything else remains a potent political critique, drawing attention to honor killings no less than proposing a *solution to* this atavistic practice. In fact, Germi's film was instrumental in rallying public opinion in favor of the right to divorce, which was accepted in 1970 and definitively enacted into law four

[2] See the now quaint-sounding report of *The New York Times* in 1911 on the Italian government's attempt "to suppress the strange anomalies that exist here," namely, the absence of divorce: http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9D03E1DA1431E233A25752C2A9639C946096D6CF. By the time of this article, *five* different bills introducing divorce had been repeatedly defeated in the Italian legislature between 1878 and 1892.

[3] See Sesti…*

years later. The film also brought the honor-killing provision of Article 587 into discussion and got it abrogated in 1981.

Germi's next film, *Seduced and Abandoned* (1964) pursued a similar strategy. It attacked a backward law in the books—one annulling charges of rape if the victim of a rape married her perpetrator.[4] Back in the Sixties, when many Italians had a friend or a cousin or an uncle who was a priest, it was probably not all that difficult to drag a girl into a church and get the job done. "What if," this other film asked, "a man seduced a young girl and the family forced him to marry her to protect their own honor and to spare him the charges of rape?" But that doesn't yet make the film comic. One would have to go further. "Given the social premium on female virginity, what if this seducer then refused to marry his victim, since she was no longer a virgin?" This absurd law about exonerating a rape when it is followed by a socially sanctioned marriage, like the lenient honor-killing penalty, was also thrown out of the books thanks, in part, to Germi's film.

Related to these two serious targets of Germi's satire—the condoning of violence upon women built into the Italian law and its forbidding of divorce—was a third, which provides the true comic fodder of *Divorce, Italian Style*, enabling the first two to appear absurd. This third target is the *hypocrisy of the subjects*—the Italian subjects—that these laws were designed to serve. Fefé, the husband, is their representative. Very simply put, he who in the eyes of the law is ostensibly enraged by his wife's adultery *has no problem with it* whatsoever. On the contrary, he plans and masterminds her betrayal. Once it has happened he appears all but impervious to the dishonor it causes him, to the jibes and taunts and humiliations rained down on his head by the community. That which his Sicilian society deems to be the gravest possible offense to a man's honor (losing his wife to another man), he cheerfully supports for the sake of affective gain—a relationship with his nubile, sixteen-year-old cousin. The "cuckold" that this honor-killing law is designed to protect shows himself to be the person least offended. How many other men in Italy would have had just as little need of Article 587?

This discrepancy between the spirit of a law and its letter is at the heart of the comedy and is driven home by a comic subplot of the film involving the engagement of Fefé's sister (Agnese) to a young undertaker (Rosario). The subplot itself is singularly static and has no purpose whatsoever in the film except to show how little this patriarchal head of a family cares about the carnal misbehavior of the women under his supervision. No fewer than three scenes, too many to be coincidental, show Agnese engaged in socially inappropriate behavior while her older brother (defended by a legal system that finds it comprehensible that a man should kill his wife, daughter, or sister for dishonoring his name) is perfectly indifferent to it. Each time Fefé stumbles across the couple—once in the bushes of the beach, hastily trying to redress—he receives Rosario's assurance of his good intentions, and Fefé replies, "Fine, fine, there is plenty of time to talk about it!" Of course, as long as the misbehavior of the couple has not become public no dishonor has been created; but still, Germi insists on the older brother Fefé *witnessing* this improper rapport, in order to contrast his reaction with the quite different one envisioned by Article 587. Fefé is an utterly liberal man, but takes advantage of a law that is not. The only thing that concerns him is his own erotic desire.

The inconsistency revealed by Fefé is not personal, but systemic—the glitch of a society that is not self-coherent. The problem has a series of other manifestations in the

[4] Cite the Article.*

film—for example, in the behavior of Fefé's father. On the surface he is a stock figure of a dirty old man with which Italian comedy is filled; but what makes this figure so pertinent to the interests of *Divorce, Italian Style* (more so than to Fellini's *Amarcord*, where we find a similar old man) is that here he reinforces a dilemma in the society that he inhabits—in which the women are supposed to remain sexually pure despite the fact that the men surrounding them give them no peace; despite the fact that the men's lechery raises hardly an eyelid *even among their wives*. Three scenes show Fefé's father harassing the fifteen-year-old servant girl Sisina in front of Fefé and his wife with utter impunity. The longest one shows Fefé walking into the kitchen as his father is groping Sisina:

> SISINA (to Fefé): Baron, tell him to keep his hands to himself!
> FEFÉ'S MOTHER: Watch out, or I'll tell your father! And you know how he is!
> SISINA: But how can I help it?
> FEFÉ'S FATHER: Shut up! You are a tease (*tu provochi*)!
> SISINA: Last night I even put a drawer up against my door. But he, the minute I turn my back, …! Don Fefé you tell him yourself!
> MOTHER: Well, you shouldn't be turning your back!

Fefé remains silent throughout.

Then there are the two or three quotations of the principle proudly displayed on Italian courtroom walls to the effect that in this country "the law is equal for all" (that is to say, it makes no class or gender distinctions). Yet the film is at pains to show the opposite. Fefé is sentenced to three years in jail for his honor killing (the minimum), while Mariannina Terranova, who inspired his crime by shooting her faithless lover, receives eight years: one more than the maximum. One can only assume that the judge intended to convey a message to the fairer sex. After all, *the provisions of Article 587 were not designed for them*. With Ms. Terranova the law simply ran into unimagined new terrain. In any event, Article 587 gives the lie to the grander principle the law is equal for all, showing that gender is inscribed within it.

This particular opposition between the letter of the law and its discretionary application results from the co-existence of progressive and regressive tendencies in one and the same country. The pledge of Italian justice to treat all citizens equally was laid down by the centralized, egalitarian nation-state. Its fate, however, lies in the hands of local, and often less liberal traditions. A national, European, Enlightenment ideology comes into conflict with a more ancient and rooted one. Moreover, this announcement, "La legge è uguale per tutti," is not itself a law; it is an advertisement, a purely theoretical promise. It just happens to clash with more reactionary articles inscribing sexual discrimination into the penal code.

Divorce, Italian Style is very clearly about a culture at a moment of transition, contending with itself. No better example could be found of this than Sicily in the 1960s, when all the rest of Western Europe was moving firmly toward liberal conceptions of *la dolce vita*. It is enough to contrast the dress and mannerisms of Fefé and his beloved Angela at the beginning of the film (in 1960), so weighed down by Sicilian prudery, with their demeanors in the final scene some three years later, when they are suddenly a nuclear couple, cruising in the privacy of their pleasure yacht, she dressed in a bikini, he in a Bermuda shirt. The good life of *l'America* has taken over.

Speaking of *la dolce vita*, the crisis of this social transition is most humorously figured in the sequence where the men (with some upper class women) of this provincial town of Agramonte—meaning literally "bitter mount" (a bitter way to mount)—rush off to see the licentious new film by Federico Fellini called *La dolce vita*, where they are utterly mesmerized by the overweening sexuality of Anita Ekberg. While this screening is a signifier of "progress" on the town folk's part, it does not last very long. When the Northern Italian communist delegate asks these peasants to apply some of the film's lessons to an impartial assessment of Fefé's wife, who has eloped with her lover, they shout out in unison, "Puttana! Puttana!" (Whore! Whore!).

The tension here involves the men's lack of self-awareness about the opposition between their own sexual desire and the mores by which they repress it. What these men *imaginatively desire* is exactly what they do not allow in everyday life. Against the backdrop of this company, Fefé is the clearly most progressive man in the town. He is fully on the side of Fellini—and Rome, and the incipient Sixties, along with its sexual revolution. In fact *he is played by the very same actor—Marcello Mastroianni—who stars in the film the Sicilians are watching.* And, perfectly symbolically, Fefé-Mastroianni exits the movie theater as they view *La dolce vita* and peers in on the spectacle from outside. Germi is allowing us to reflect that his own film, the film we are watching, extracts his character Fefé from Fellini's film and resituates him in a considerably more problematic community down south.[5] The film hypothetically asks, "What if a man tried to pursue the objectives of *la dolce vita* down in Sicily? What kind of resistance would a Mastroianni type meet in another part of this heterogeneous country?"

If Fefé is the most progressive man in the town—and this is proved by the pains to which he goes to actualize his desires—it is because he recognizes completely that he is victimized by the system he inhabits. In fact his duplicitous machinations are nothing other than a perverse and ingenious means of overcoming the duplicity enforced by the society to which he belongs. The discrepancies with which he struggles—between appearance and reality, between constriction and freedom—are imbedded in the soil from which he grows.

Most of the examples of this discrepancy pertain to the third target of Germi's film, the one that arises from his *comic* treatment of the material: the duplicity of this culture at odds with itself, where one thing goes for one sub-group, but another for another; where even what goes *for one subgroup* at a given point in time (say, the men), doesn't go for them at another (the attractiveness/offensiveness of female carnality). All of this is only one level of the film, however: the manifest message, the sociological satire. Beneath that level lies something broader and more universal: a philosophical critique, not of social manners, but of *the desire that rules those manners*, or struggles against them. And its regime extends far beyond the geography of any given society. This is the fourth target of Germi's film, and ultimately it takes precedence over all the others. By the end, the film argues that the root of desire *feeds* these social contradictions, crossing class and gender bounds in the process.

We encounter this final target deductively, retroactively, at the conclusion of the film when we discover Fefé's angel" (Angela), now his wife, playing footsies with a sailor. Now Fefé went to immense pains to realize this love—killing his wife and spending time in jail—

[5] Indeed, the image of Marcello Mastroianni does not appear in the scenes from *La dolce vita* that we see in *Divorce, Italian Style*. Nor does his name appear on the otherwise prominently displayed poster of the film. Where his name would presumably have appeared next to that of the other actors is plastered the announcement "Domani." The task of bringing about the social implications of Fellini's Mastroianni character is relegated to "tomorrow."

and all that he got for his efforts was a tart. A romantic passion as deep as his proved to be delusional. Clearly, this exotic ending casts an ironic cloak over all the events that have transpired so far, especially the crystallization of the object of desire and Fefé's idealization of his own amorous passion. The discovery of her infidelity acts as the master joke of the film: Was it really worth getting rid of such a faithful and doting wife of twelve years to exchange her for the conquest of this unreliable substitute? We suddenly realize that Fefé has misled himself throughout the course of his labors. But, more importantly for the reading of the film, *the joke is on us*, the spectators and interpreters of the plot. Captivated by Mastroianni-Fefé's likeability, his good looks, and his guileful intelligence, we never really questioned the *authenticity* of the passion by which he was driven. We may have laughed at the extremes to which it drew him, but we hardly questioned the credibility of his desire. By the end of the film, we do; by proxy we become the jury that needs to "review the facts" to assess his actions and motivation.

The ending of this film provides persuasive circumstantial evidence to the theory of desire or feeling expressed spontaneously one day by Fefé's wife Rosalia on the stairs of the local church.

> ROSALIA: Here's what I mean, Fefé, it's as if I feel an intimate dissatisfaction inside. For instance, you how much I like grapes… Well, I like grapes more when they're not in season than when they are. When we have grapes I feel like eating pears, Fefé, do you know what I mean? … You see what's important for me is not so much the grapes themselves as the desire I have for them, a bit like that poem I like so much, which says that Saturdays are so much better than Sundays.

"The grass is greener on the other side," we say; and Rosalia's idea about our "internal dissatisfaction" with the grapes in season and the attraction for pears that are not is a humorous paraphrase of a philosophy of desire which has held sway since the time of Plato's *Symposium*. We want what we lack; we want what we feel to be wanting. Reality in its actual constitution, as it is, is not what captivates our imagination. We imagine, and hanker after, what is *not* actual, what we do not possess. Would Fefé have wanted Angela if he really knew her true nature? we ask after the film. Would Angela have desired the sailor if it weren't for Fefé? And so on.

The final joke of the film is on us because it makes us see that it was not just Fefé who took his intentions too seriously, but *we too*. He finally looks like the victim of a comedy of desire that could occur just as easily in America as in Italy, as in Rio de Janeiro or Hong Kong. Before fleshing out this reading, however, let me situate it in the context of the other elements of the social satire we have already discussed. It ends up seeming that the film *begins* with social contradictions—sexist social practices, the advisability of divorce, the incoherence of the Italian justice system, the duplicity of a travailed, unself-conscious society, and so on. But the film ultimately attributes these social contradictions to *emotional* contradictions. And these emotional contradictions are presented as fairly irreducible, as belonging to the very nature of human being.

But let us stick to the twist that this ending of the film adds to our reading of the plot. When this ending makes us rethink the film, we find signs strewn everywhere warning us *not* to take this overweening, forlorn passion of Fefé at face value. Here, for example, is just one scene among many that undercuts the authenticity of Fefé's passion (Fefé and father

in bathroom). "Like father, like son," we say. In fact, the father is much better at this voyeuristic fantasy than Fefé, even if more cynical. He brings binoculars. And both men scream at their wives in exactly the same manner, only the father more gruffly. He is Fefé thirty years down the road. Fefé, in the light of this scene, is not an autonomously free-thinking, free-feeling subject; his frustrations and yearnings are social symptoms.

But even so, there is a good reason why so many of us are duped into "suspending our disbelief" in front of this romantic passion. It is because *he*, Fefé, is giving us the story; almost all of the events are filtered through his consciousness. The story is recounted in the form of a flashback; Fefé is our voice-over narrator. Only when we compare the facts about Angela at the end of the film to what Fefé believes about them do we realize how completely *subjective* this film is—how antithetical, for example, to a neorealist film, where people and events are portrayed from the outside, or from the ideal perspective of an objective camera. This subjectivism of the film is precisely what makes it a film about desire and fantasy (rather than about true need, or real social fact, assuming these can ever be properly represented in film).

Fefé is one of the most subtle examples of the unreliable narrator in film. And to undercut him the film continually measures his perspective against a disinterested one. In the bathroom scene we just saw, for example, we get the first half of the story from him (how he felt in the bathroom) and the rest from the implied narrator behind him (who reveals us the behavior of Fefé's father, which Fefé could not have been privy to.) In retrospect the film takes exception to its main character from the very opening scene on the train.

Notice here what a rakish dandy Fefé is—with his ostentatious smoking, his contempt for the guards on the train, his eying of the women he passes in the compartment. Consider how unlikely this type of character would be to fall immoderately in love. In the second part of the scene, the film almost explicitly asks us to contrast what we hear from this narrator to what we see. As we listen to his picturesque, romantic account of Sicilian evenings what we see are only desolate and burnt-out plains.

The main way the film affirms the unreliability of Fefé as a narrator is precisely by splitting the audial from the visual track. Just as Angela's game contradicts Fefé's final voice-over of the film—"Ah, it is true, life begins at forty!"—so are the audial and visual tracks at variance throughout the film. Here, for example, is how we see Fefé happening on the lawyer who will defend him in court. Fefé is so thoroughly moved by this chance encounter that he is blind to what he has before him. "What a nice man! What a pretty face!" This reality of the lawyer *appears* to Fefé in a certain way (but not to us).

Then, in a more subtle example, we have Fefé reading a letter from Angela and expressing to us the way she intones it, tears and all. Now, there is no way for us to know how Angela was really feeling when she wrote this letter; but given her behavior at the end of the film, the chances are high that it was not exactly as Fefé imagined.

The next example is more dramatic—showing the audial and visual tracks in explicit contrast, the voice transcribing how his feelings and actions should be perceived by the court, and the visual image giving us something utterly different. Fefé needs to conceal a revolver in the room where his wife's adultery is likely to take place; that way, when he catches the lovers he can lunge for the pistol without the time to consult his moral conscience. What we see here, essentially, is Fefé *rewriting* the script *before* it has happened, to assure that the court will perceive his crime in the right key. You will have noticed that the scene he imagines playing in court is revised mid-narrative—the sound going blank—at the moment Fefé hits

on an important signifier—the old Rococo table. Instead of the ordinary end table, it will enable the lawyer to give a whiff of Fefé's aristocratic standing, enhancing his chances of a lenient sentence.

This man who spends most of his day in pajamas also spends most of his day imagining things. And sometimes he can't keep them apart. Soon after the film's opening scene on the train he voices over his story by introducing all its main characters. Notice how he hushes when he thinks his wife might hear what he is telling us:

> "And this at last is Angela… Angela attended a high … [*pause, as Rosalia catches Fefé's eye; then he continues whispering*] … attended a high school run by nuns in Catania. She spent her summer vacations at home. [*pause*] I was in love with Angela."

Even allowing for grotesque colorings and characterizations (such as Rosalia's faint moustache), the visual track represents the external, objective conditions referred to by Fefé while the audial track stands for the voice of desire, of the imagination, of possibility and fantasy. Fefé in this scene confuses them. He (his voice), who is outside the story as he is relating it, is *inside* it by mistake. It is the same inside/outside story created by the episode about Mastroianni the actor being in both films, one film (Fellini's) representing the imaginary and the other (Germi's) exploring just how that imaginary registers in life. Fefé as Mastroianni in Sicily is viewing an ideal or alter self, metonymized by the art of Fellini. Germi's film, instead, addresses the clash between the imaginary and the real *in which* the self-fantasy takes place.[6]

And here I conclude, proposing that a film that began as a comedy of manners ends up as an essay on the root nature of desire, leading grapes in season to be brushed over for the sake of pears that are not. (To test this hypothesis just look at well it works for Fefé's wife Rosalia, who starts ignoring Fefé's displays of affection the very minute she covets Carmellino.) When you add it all up, there are no less than five instances of infidelity in this film, and they redirect the film's attention away from honor-killings and the inordinate possessiveness accompanying them to the question of why such adulteries occur in the first place. Italian marriage, in this conservative manner, in parts of the country in 1961, is a theoretical fiction. It is a stop-gap measure, and perhaps even, in its constrictiveness, the cause of such excessive yearning for greener pastures (that keeps these characters fanning themselves throughout the film). And this brings us back to the question of how much of a comedy of manners this film is, or instead a philosophical essay; for certainly not every form of social organization will show the type of symptoms of desire and fantasy that are so parodied in this film. As Michel Foucault notes in his *History of Sexuality*, the more pressure a society exerts to contain sexuality, the more it evades that control. "When sex becomes a secret," he writes, "it becomes an open secret."* The repression of sexuality floods its imaginative venues. The Italian style of divorce that Germi satirizes in this film has more to do with the marriage that precedes it and the desires this marriage cannot fulfill.

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[6] Indeed, the early-Sixties bikini look in the film's final flashforward actually represents *future* life, posterior to the release of this film in 1961, considering that Fefé is jailed after *La dolce vita* is released (1960) and gets out two to three years later. The scene on the yacht then stands for a future condition of liberation, an "actualized" culture of Sicilian "sweet life," with its sensual abandon. Obviously Germi critiques this fantasy as much as Fellini does.