

"A Tale Told by an Idiot": Comic Neorealism in Divorce Italian Style

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Student comment: Winter quarter 1994, my fifth and final year at Davis. At last, I was at my leisure to take a class simply because it interested me—Italian 50—The Neorealist Film. Time was on my side . . . almost. Although the light at the end of the tunnel was within viewing distance, I had begun a senior thesis project in the fall that still loomed rather large. What better way to procrastinate than to take a class where going to the movies was required? I immensely enjoyed those Monday nights at Hart Hall with Rossellini, Fellini, and, of course, Germi. It was a welcome escape to tromp across the swamp-like quad in the January fog and lose myself in a film in a foreign language. Of course, the world asserted itself again after that brief pause, but upon each return I was once again happy to be there. The movies give us that chance to escape, to live in another world, if only for a brief moment. They let us live other lives and then return to our own. To live solely in fantasy to the exclusion of the "real world" is dangerous. Pepe Cefalu of Divorce Italian Style is a good example of this. But to live without stories, without fantasy, is also dangerous. When we lose our ability to hypothesize, fantasize, and dream, we also lose an essential part of what makes us wonderfully human.

—Amy T. Silveira

Instructor comment: Italian 50 is a survey of Italian cinema from neorealism to the present. The course begins with a discussion of the neorealist masterpieces Open City and Bicycle Thief. These Italian neorealist films share an ethical dimension: filmmakers set out not merely to entertain but to effect social change. Amy Silveira's essay departs from the premise that the social criticism inherent in early neorealist films was not abandoned in the apparently escapist "comedy Italian style." Ms. Silveira argues convincingly that Divorce Italian Style exposes the absurdity of the unwritten codes of behavior which govern male-female relationships in Sicily. The author demonstrates that Germi's use of comedy to ridicule and critique Sicilian customs and sexual relationships is particularly effective. Her analysis becomes most subtle and original when she examines the way the viewer is implicated in the film's critique of voyeurism and theatricality. "A Tale Told by an Idiot: Comic Neorealism in Divorce Italian Style" is a persuasive and thoughtful analysis of Pietro Germi's film.

—JoAnn Cannon, Department of French and Italian

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

—*Macbeth*

Pietro Germi's *Divorce Italian Style* achieves the neorealist film ethic of a morally responsible cinema through the use of satirical comedy. Germi's comedy exposes the disparities and double standards that exist between what is proscribed in society and what actually occurs in reality, and how these disparities may be exploited for individual gain. Although Germi's film is notably more commercial because of a surface comic appeal, it nevertheless succeeds in maintaining its status as social critique because it reveals what lies behind carefully constructed social facades. Furthermore, by using the comic genre to explore issues such as class and gender, Germi is able to disarm his viewers. In doing so, he forces an examination of assumptions without instigating a reaction of defensiveness. In *Divorce Italian Style*, Germi shows how custom and morality are often invoked as a disguise for hypocrisy and prejudice. He demonstrates how absurd and arbitrary notions become common cultural standards when accepted uncritically. Here everyday reality is revealed as an insubstantial fantasyland masking as morality and law. The satiric style of Germi's comedy depends upon an intimate knowledge of the conventions of the culture he chooses to satirize, in order that that culture may be subverted and ridiculed. This is notable in that it creates a critique that is inclusive and spares no one, including the filmmaker and audience. In this way, the community may join together to enact social change, rather than languish in the isolation of personal guilt and despair. With the use of satire, Germi has moved the confessional into the open air of the piazza; he has fashioned a carnival in order to ordain a period of communal repentance and abstinence in which all may take part.

Much of the comedy found in *Divorce Italian Style* covertly implicates the viewer in the social critique it propounds by engaging us from the start on an intuitive comic level, as opposed to an appeal to intellect. Germi exploits our generic expectations and our willingness to "go along for the ride" in something as apparently harmless as a madcap marital comedy. He certainly does provide this comedy, yet he also intimates at our eventual realization that a love of spectacle makes us somewhat unsuspecting bedfellows with the likes of Pepe Cefalu. He thus instructs us on the insidious quality of comedy—that our desire to laugh reduces our ability to think critically, and that it is only after an abrupt cessation of the joke that we are brought back to a critical stance, enacted here with the force of irony.

It is the film's pervasive use of comedy that has its base in irony that allows Germi to create the necessary distance between emotion and intellect, resulting in the triumph of a critical perspective. For like Pepe with his manipulative machinations that attempt to fulfill a type of existential void, our time at the theater is often a means to escape the mundanity of everyday life: the theater is a refuge of romance and glamour amidst an all-too-real reality. Like Pepe with his surreptitious spying, we engage in forms of

voyeurism to satiate our curiosity and desire for titillation. The voyeurism of the film that is enacted both by the characters of the film and the audience is a kind of leitmotif that reveals the basic troubles of the society the film serves and represents. The peep-show atmosphere of the film shows a desire to see and act the truth, but with an unwillingness to face any consequences truth may require.

The voyeurism practiced by many characters in the film is shown in several scenes: the multiple scenes of spying on Angela from the bathroom by the men of her family; the perpetually fascinated spectators at the trials of both Marianina and Pepe; and the town's silent adulation at the showing of *La Dolce Vita*, despite the priest's admonishments against "lewd movies" and a "lascivious atmosphere." This love of spectacle even effectively quells the political interloper, whose call to communism is ignored because of the men's preoccupation with Baron Cefalu's cuckoldry. The voyeurism in the film also illustrates the type of selective consciousness that is chosen by the citizens of Agramonte. Their desire to watch reveals a covert interest in transgressing the traditional honor code. Merely watching is viewed as harmless and natural; many characters throughout the film are self-consciously theatrical, as if they sense they are being watched already. Pepe is the prime example of this, with his ongoing address to an imaginary audience composed of the jury of his future trial. Ironically, this self-conscious sense of histrionics that composes the world view of the characters often renders them incapable of perceiving the contradictions in their conduct. Like Pepe, they believe all the world is a play that may be stopped, fast-forwarded, put on rewind, or otherwise altered to suit their needs. The sense of unreality this creates also diminishes any sense of responsibility—everything is literally "play." Thus, recognizing disparities between actions and words is unnecessary; it is a form of literal poetic license not to do so. By choosing a form of selective consciousness, they are able to fulfill a desire for titillation while maintaining an honorable appearance.

Another example of this deliberate manipulation of society is shown in the sneaky sexuality of Agnese and her fiance that is continually being interrupted by a disinterested Uncle Pepe. The lovers' apparent distress at being discovered, coupled with the fiance's repeated assurances that he will marry Agnese, demonstrate their interest in maintaining the semblance of social compliance. However, since these scenes of covert intimacy occur several times, their actions present the more accurate view of their beliefs. Pepe, for his part, pays lip service to, but does not truly care about the status of his sister's sexual purity and ruined honor. This shows the hypocrisy of the society that engages in constant voyeurism while requiring sexual purity of its women and the upholding of a sexual honor code. Furthermore, while Pepe ignores the honor code as it applies to his sister, he invokes this same principle in order to avoid punishment for murdering his wife.

Thus Pepe is able to manipulate the standards of society according to his needs because he understands they are all facade and pretense, providing mere background to the theater of his life. This attitude is apparent when Pepe destructively takes a drill to the family walls of the Cefalu mansion to make a spy-hole through which to observe his wife. He regards the mansion as mere backdrop scenery for his exploits, to be altered

at whim to suit his will. Yet such an attitude requires constant attention to detail, as the set must be continually changed for the next scene of the drama. The result is a type of decadent, existential void in which he loses himself in the scene and costume changes. He often regards himself searchingly in the mirror, as if he can only peep at his true image. Pepe often reassures himself ("I really am attractive"), as he gazes at himself obliquely.

Although we may recognize Pepe as a comic exaggeration, we nonetheless identify on some level with his voyeurism and escapist desires. Pepe's actions act as a kind of release for the audience—he literally acts out the dramas which remain for us as mere daydreams or nightmares. His outrageous fantasies of doing in his wife—boiling her in a vat of soap, drowning her in sand, and rocketing her off to the moon—exaggerate this process of release, allowing us to indulge in the most selfish of desires without fear of guilt or punishment. Yet his fantasies also highlight his ineffectiveness. They render him a foppish Hamlet, who can't kill his wife when the moment at last presents itself. Instead, he is upstaged by Carmelo's wife, the true "man of action" in the film, while Pepe is left wondering, "What about my honor?" Even though the history of Italian legislation rewards male virility and potency, Pepe can't quite live up to this standard. He is metaphorically impotent, without children and unable to initiate explicit action.

In the character of Pepe, Germi shows us how the prejudices that permeate all aspects of society may be exploited by the individual who is able to perceive them but who uses these insights for selfish, egocentric concerns rather than to promote social change. Pepe's exploitation of his society is not based on any sense of political rebellion or personal integrity. On the contrary, it is a means to reach an end for his own personal gain—as well as a way to while away those ponderously long days in the crumbling, aristocratic mansion beset with family strife and mundane money worries. The mansion and its coat of arms are metaphors for the facade of class that literally is able to shield Pepe from public censor and prevent any outside influence from entering the sealed environment. Pepe accounts for this explicit class favoritism as he plots the murder of his wife and its punishment. He compares himself to the celebrated case of Marianina: "... but then she's a coachmaker's daughter, a vulgar, ignorant, ugly slut. Whereas I am a well-bred, college graduate, a model husband for almost fifteen years ... and an aristocrat." Yet Pepe's life behind the crumbling family coat of arms (the only family relic his father hadn't sold off to pay gambling debts) is a sham of what it once was. It has been literally split in half, taken over by his lower-class uncle, who is able to buy out Pepe's father with his earnings as a butcher. Thus the mythical threat of the aristocracy mixing with the working class is no longer abstract; it has up and moved in with Pepe.

The arguments over soap-making again highlight this familial class struggle. Despite Pepe's refined, rarefied social class, he is forced to confront unfamiliar utilitarian concerns. His suggestion to just buy soap rather than argue over making it pointedly ignores the obvious and shows his unwillingness to acknowledge his straitened circumstances. His denial renders him ineffectual for any practical purposes. It is notable that his boiling fantasy occurs immediately after the soap confrontation—its

inherent mundanity is quickly conjured into the realm of secure fantasy. Here he takes the role of a dandified Don Quixote. He retreats into a world of romance and fantasy, unwilling to know the world that changes outside the decaying shutters of his home unless he is able to exploit it for his own use. Ironically, Pepe's fantasy is focused on his cousin Angela, the butcher's daughter. Thus the degeneracy of the aristocracy, with its stereotypical thin blood due to incestuous relationships, is here combined with the threat of the watering down of family blood lines with a misalliance of the lower classes. This creates a double sense of irony in that Pepe is attempting to finagle precisely what will destroy the last vestiges of power his aristocratic class is able to cling to through the invocation of birth right.

Pepe's story is a cautionary tale, an example of the adage, "Be careful what you desire, you just may get it." This is articulated by his wife, Rosalia, and her metaphor of the grapes: "You know I love grapes. Well, I like them even better when there aren't any. When there are grapes I lose my taste for them. The grapes aren't as important as craving them. They say that wanting something is better than getting it." Characteristically, Pepe is not able to benefit by such musings. He is too distracted by his calculations of murder statistics on his way to church, in order that he may better exploit them: "Last year Agramonte had a homicide rate of 21 per 1000. Rather high." Rather than being shocked into social action by the prevalence of murder and crime, Pepe ponders upon how murder is now commonplace, and consequently how one more would no longer be a newsworthy event. This acceptance and exploitation of crime is further highlighted by the mention of his future brother-in-law in the undertaking business, and by the way in which the Mafia deals with Don Cicco ("The Killer") are arranged outside the church.

It is notable that the irony of Pepe's situation at the end of the film is experienced by the viewer rather than by Pepe himself. Thus the parable of the grapes is shown to be intended primarily for the audience, who may benefit from such instructions, rather than the callous Pepe. Of course, we did get the antics and excitement we came for, just as Pepe gets his girl. Yet also like Pepe, who becomes oblivious to reality once his machinations have resulted in an apparent fulfillment of his desires, the audience has also been blunted into experiencing a sense of satisfaction that is quickly shown to be false. Yes, we have the traditional comedy with a happy ending in marriage; both the hero and the audience have achieved what we set out to gain. Yet Angela's flirtation with the boatman on her honeymoon hints of infidelities to come and interrupts the audience's sense of satisfaction with a distinct tone of unease and ambiguity. The film's circularity asserts itself here by showing a type of moral retribution that enacts a perverse twist upon the Christian golden rule of "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."

The fact that Pepe, the ridiculous yet cunning hero, remains ignorant and becomes a dupe, while the audience is let in on the joke, increases the sense of unease. For it is here that we are forced to acknowledge our affinities with Pepe, with whom we have identified through the course of the film, regardless of his obvious absurdity. Like Pepe, we have chosen a form of selective consciousness, choosing to see only what we desire

to see—and yet what is ignored is precisely what eventually comes back to rob us of pleasure. Thus the film's comic repetitions illustrate a type of "immobile present" (Marcus 40), where actions are doomed to cycles of endless repetition without the hope of transformation that social change provides. This ironic circularity is the film's primary movement, framed by its narrative device of presenting the plot as one long flash-back sequence. It shows a world condemned to an eternal, static present that has the appearance and characteristics of movement as enacted through accepted behaviors but is really only an antic spinning-of-wheels that produces nothing. Thus Pepe's aristocratic existential void is seemingly filled by his wild plottings and his subsequent marriage; yet the void is revealed to be firmly in place at the end of the film as we see the cycle set in motion once again with Angela—same story, different players.

Thus the audience's willingness to comply with the status quo as presented throughout the film is called into question as we realize we have become dupes and will remain so if we refuse to acknowledge reality and learn from our experiences. The film in retrospect takes on a reflective, multiple quality. The misunderstandings that occur highlight this multiplicity; Angela, for example, sends letters sealed into envelopes addressed to the wrong people. Here it is the lower-class, utilitarian butcher who unintentionally receives the truth. Again we are shown truth that is revealed only by accident and is quickly subverted—the butcher dies from shock, and Pepe restores the illusion by switching the letters. We are only in hindsight able to recognize in the constant madcap motion and misunderstandings that pervade the Cefalu mansion a literal representation of what results when choosing a familiar, reactionary impulse over a more deliberate, critical action. It is in this way that Germi joins the neorealist call to responsibility—by depicting both the disaster that occurs when we follow our inclinations towards easy, pat solutions and the general tendency, regardless of knowledge or experience, to choose the easy way out. He also demonstrates the regenerative power of comedy; we are able to apply the irony that befalls Pepe as a form of wisdom in our own lives.

By not attempting to persuade us through logical, intellectual arguments concerning the benefits of social and moral responsibility—which are easy to simply acknowledge, rationalize, and ignore—by showing us instead the process by which our penchant for romance and glamour will lead us somewhat fatefully and predictably into a corrupt and false paradise, Germi is able to educate on a more instinctual level, appealing precisely to the part of human nature that ignores reason and intellect. This functions as social criticism because Germi abruptly calls our attention to when the joker himself is duped and played upon, culminating the film's many instances of self-conscious play (the deliberate fast-forward of the love scene between Rosalia and Carmelo; the de-contextualized love exchanges of the same couple when played back on Pepe's tape recorder, often comically fast-forwarded, rendering their passion into sounds of frantic mice; and the voice-over of Angela when Pepe is reading her letter that is interrupted when Rosalia enters the room and is resumed from the beginning in the same breathy, dramatic tone when he begins reading again). This revelation of Pepe as fool acts in several ways. It reminds us of our first, and consequently

suspended, appraisal of Pepe—an appraisal that was temporarily revoked as we begin to identify with his crazy plotting against our better judgment. It reminds us also that it is Pepe who has, in fact, related this story to us—an unreliable narrator *par excellence*—one who is unknowingly duped by his own story, a story that is highly constructed and confined to a singular point of view. Thus what we regarded as truth is now shown to be play, both in the theatrical sense (it is a drama, deliberately constructed and acted out) and in that it has played upon our viewing desires. Yet the audience, unlike Pepe, perceives that their expectations have been tricked, thus gaining a type of knowledge in the process.

Freud's *Jokes and the Unconscious* explains the process the viewer experiences in Germi's film: "Play with words and thoughts, motivated by certain pleasurable effects of economy, would thus be the first stage of jokes." This occurs in the film's opening sequence where we are bombarded with frantic camera angles and swift narration telling us absurd factual details, resulting in a strange, conflated sense of meaning. "The 24 churches of Agramonte," for example, effectively confuses our judgment by combining the quantitative with the spiritual, as if the number of churches could somehow define or measure the meaning of the churches. Yet this hectic quality cannot be sustained throughout the film, and it becomes "a question of prolonging the yield of pleasure from play, but at the same time of silencing the objections raised by criticism which would not allow the pleasurable feeling to emerge" (Freud). Freud refers to this as the *jest*, the "meaningless combination of words or the absurd putting together of thoughts [which] must nevertheless have a meaning." It is here that we begin our identification with Pepe and adapt to his perspective as valid and acceptable. We relate to his disgust concerning the mundane quality of everyday existence and his escape into a world of fantasy: "In jests what stands in the foreground is the satisfaction of having made possible what was forbidden by criticism" (Freud). Thus when we watch Pepe's plotting, we delight in his "sense in nonsense." Yet, as again noted by Freud, "We do not know what is giving us enjoyment and what we are laughing at . . . the thought seeks to wrap itself in a joke [and] . . . seem more significant and more valuable, but above all because this wrapping bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them." Thus in our identification with Pepe's plight, we suspend our ability to judge it.

This is ultimately effective for Germi's intentions and his method of appealing to our instincts: "Where argument tries to draw the hearer's criticism over on to its side, the joke endeavors to push the criticism out of sight." Our identification with Pepe also allows liberation of pleasure "by getting rid of inhibitions." In this way, Germi has removed the barrier of what we know we ought to think as civilized adults and allows us to be free of the contradictions between our desires to be both socially acceptable and self-fulfilled.

Germi demonstrates the danger of a circumscribed reality by following it to its absurd, yet logical, conclusion. This may be read as a comment on the neorealist movement. Neorealism manufactured quality films that nevertheless lacked in public appeal, thus relegating itself somewhat to a circumscribed, ivory-tower existence.

Germi's comedy allows the ethical slant of neorealism to be exposed to a wider audience, while retaining its role as critic of society. For this purpose, comedy may be more practically effective in disseminating neorealist values. The comedy of *Divorce Italian Style* acts as criticism against all specialized, exclusive thoughts and actions. This critique may apply to neorealism, where good intentions may nevertheless have resulted in a form of redundant "preaching to the converted." Film comedy, with its roots in vaudeville and silent-film melodrama, is essentially democratic—it is understandable by all. It subverts the need for classification and dogma, instituting a carnival-like ritual anarchy. At a time when perhaps even neorealism had become a set of conventions, Germi infused it with the open communication system of comedy.

According to Picasso, "Art is the lie that reveals the truth." Germi's distortions paradoxically produce an accurate reflection of a society that, like Pepe, needs to "cut down on the fats and sweets," as it has grown thick around the middle. *Divorce Italian Style* is a wonderfully light film that never stoops to polemics to achieve depth in the all-too-typical sacrifice of style in the name of weighty substance. Germi is a true master, the quintessential example of a sage who knows how to laugh. With *Divorce Italian Style* he lets us in on the joke and invites us to share in his wisdom.

Works Cited

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