

WILKINS, BUDD E., M.A. "To Each His Own Bastard": A Viewer's Guide to *The Seduction of Mimi*. (2010)  
Directed by Anthony Fragola. 50 pp.

This thesis examines the theory and practice of comedy in Lina Wertmüller's film *The Seduction of Mimi* (1972), as well as emphasizing its social and historical context, with a special focus on its depiction of the Sicilian Mafia. The author seeks to provide a framework for understanding the different registers of the film's meaning by drawing from works of social and political history, as well as film history and criticism.

The first chapter serves as an introduction, discussing previous interpretations of the film and suggesting new areas of exploration. The second chapter examines the implications of the film's title and enumerates the film's major themes. The third, fourth and fifth chapters explore the social and political background of the film's Sicilian setting. The sixth and seventh chapters detail the interrelation between social and sexual politics as exemplified in Wertmüller's film. The eighth chapter deals with the film's depiction of the Sicilian Mafia and its influence on society. And, finally, the ninth, tenth and eleventh chapters delve into the film's complex use of stereotype and caricature.

“TO EACH HIS OWN BASTARD”: A VIEWER’S GUIDE  
*TO THE SEDUCTION OF MIMI*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Greensboro  
2010

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge Anthony Fragola, David Cook and Jeffrey Adams for their invaluable assistance on this Thesis.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Considerations of Lina Wertmüller's *The Seduction of Mimi* (1972), guided primarily by the auteur school of film criticism, place it thematically and stylistically within the series of films she made in collaboration with actor Giancarlo Giannini over the course of the early 1970s—including *Love and Anarchy* (1973), *Swept Away* (1974) and *Seven Beauties* (1975). As a result, other avenues of interpretation have not been pursued. For instance, in the bulk of English-language criticism, the film has not been viewed in the context of Mafia and anti-Mafia films, a subset of the *cinema politico* genre inaugurated by the release of Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* in 1962. Apart from the recent work of Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, Wertmüller's film has seldom been considered as part of the *commedia all'italiana* (or "Comedy Italian Style"), a number of topical comedies by directors such as Mario Monicelli and Pietro Germi, which emerged in the late 1950s, addressing social issues in new and uncompromising ways. Wertmüller's films—and *The Seduction of Mimi* in particular—have innovative things to say in both contexts. Like many anti-Mafia films, *The Seduction of Mimi* examines the collusion between the Mafia and entrenched social and economic interests within Italian national politics, with an emphasis on the possibility (or lack thereof) of resistance. It also employs an arsenal of comedic techniques to interrogate the contemporary social scene,

much like its forerunners in the *commedia all'italiana*.

Commenting on her practice as a filmmaker, Wertmüller has stated that one of her foremost desires is “to communicate and entertain and hoping...that people would leave my films with problems to think over and analyze” (quoted in Marcus 313). However, many critics have perceived a certain tension between her films’ populist aspirations (not to mention popular success) and their potential for social criticism. Millicent Marcus, for example, questions whether Wertmüller’s comic technique, founded on what she calls “the politics of polarity,” can ever lead to social change. For Marcus, this technique involves “an inevitable reduction, distortion, and exaggeration of the issues in order to heighten...our comic delight in [the dialectic play of polarities]...allowing no complexity or ambiguity to distract us from the comic tug-of-war” (Marcus 314). Ultimately, according to Marcus, “the question...is whether the two infinitives—‘to communicate’ and ‘to entertain’—can coexist on equal terms in her aesthetics, or whether comic pleasure will prevail, suppressing the doubts and anxieties that her cinema purports to raise” (ibid).

Not surprisingly, Marcus’ essay posits the ultimate triumph of mere comic delight in Wertmüller’s films, whereby ambiguity and anxiety are abolished. Seeing in distortion and exaggeration merely a reduction to absurdity, she downplays these time-honored comic techniques. Similarly, according to her reading, Wertmüller’s use of stereotypes “validates them by insisting, finally, that they cannot be overcome, not even through the most potent erotic and political means” (Marcus 315-16).

Nevertheless, after watching the film, the viewer might wonder whether it is Wertmüller's use of stereotypes—and, by extension, her entire comedic arsenal—which cannot be overcome, or whether it is the domination of social forces arrayed against the struggling individual, “who arrives unprepared, naïve, and is confronted with the machinery of a certain society, which he is forced to make peace with” (quoted in Russo Bullaro 2). The abiding question is whether Wertmüller's style of comedy enables or impedes this confrontation with the forces of conformity and submission and, as its aesthetic corollary, whether or not comic pleasure banishes the problematic aspects of social existence.

In fact, there has been a long tradition of nonconformist comedy native to Italy, having its roots in popular theater (*commedia dell'arte* narratives featuring stock characters and elaborate set pieces) and light comic opera (*opera buffa*). In the late 1950s, with the release of films by Mario Monicelli (*Big Deal on Madonna Street*) and Dino Risi (*Love and Larceny*), these traditions contributed to the development of *commedia all'italiana*, or Comedy Italian Style, a genre which blended broad comedy and potent social satire. Concerned with outmoded aspects of Italian social customs and mores, films like *Divorce Italian Style* (1962) and *Seduced and Abandoned* (1964) paved the way for later legal reform. The demand for such reform can be attributed in part to the widespread popularity of these films.

The sensibility of these comedies makes frequent use of the “grotesque and carnivalesque” style as defined by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Its ethos can best be described as “the world turned upside down”—the inversion of social order through

“the debasement of the sacred and serious, and the comic elevation of the lowly and vulgar” (Magretta 26). Compare this to Wertmüller’s statement: “Cheerful vulgarity is the wit of the poor, their last and extreme defense” (quoted in Biskind 10).

Such vulgarity expresses a fundamental “drive to anarchy and freedom” (quoted in Magretta 43), which “liberates from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted...[and] offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world” (Bakhtin 34). This style of comedy, by its very form, embodies elements of social criticism, offering the filmmaker the opportunity to explore the social factors behind commonly held stereotypes, and attempt to ask questions for which there may be no easy answers.

## CHAPTER II

### TITLE AND THEMES

The film opens with a prolonged shot of an arid wasteland—unidentifiable at first, soon revealed to be a sulfur quarry, symbolizing the infernal conditions of the Sicilian workers. The Italian title superimposed over this harsh environment—*Mimí metallurgico ferito nell'onore*, which translates as “Mimi the metalworker, wounded in honor”—draws attention to two of the film’s major themes. The first, the importance of roles and role playing, influences both the way that characters identify themselves (metalworker, Communist), as well as the roles that are imposed on them by society (husband, Sicilian). These prescribed roles dictate how characters relate to one another and what they expect from each other, and often the distance between expectation and actuality provides comic fodder. Over the course of the film, two of the central characters—Mimi and his wife Rosalia—discover the consequences of acting according to, and against, their assigned roles. For example, Mimi often makes social capital out of his standing as a “skilled laborer” who has worked abroad in the industrial North, lording it over the less fortunate upon his return to Catania. People come to him for advice on the basis of his supposedly mind-expanding travels. Nevertheless, when his cuckoldry comes to light, Mimi responds in a way which conforms to antiquated Sicilian social roles, wherein the male must answer a perceived “wound” to his honor with a retributive act of violence. As for Rosalia, she seems trapped at first by Mimi in her role as wife, but her “emancipation”

later in the film provides her not only with the opportunity for infidelity, but also the chance to use the legal system to legitimate the offspring of this liaison.

The second half of the film's title places it within a tradition of so-called rustic chivalry, made famous in 1890 by Pietro Mascagni's opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, based on the short story and play by Giovanni Verga, one of the leading exponents of late nineteenth-century *verismo*, a variety of Naturalism which explored Sicilian folk customs in a language closer to the regional dialect than "literary" Italian. Verga's story culminates in a duel to the death between two villagers, owing to a perceived "wound in honor," which is parodied in the climax of Wertmüller's film. Interestingly, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part III* (1990) uses a performance of Mascagni's opera as its climactic set-piece, although in that film the operatic tone and themes are played straight for tragic effect.

Wertmüller's film makes its connection to this longstanding tradition clear in the scene where Mimi informs his mistress Fiore about his plan for revenge on the man who has cuckolded him and she tauntingly responds, "You want to act out *Cavalleria Rusticana*?" (It is no coincidence that *The Seduction of Mimi*'s opening scenes and entire second half take place in Catania, the birthplace of Giovanni Verga.) Mimi's eminently "practical" solution to his situation, a piece of open air theater (literalizing the film's emphasis on roles and role-playing), backfires horribly when the Mafia takes the "direction" of the piece out of his hands.

Finally, the film's English-language title draws our attention to its last major theme: seduction. Seduction – derived from the Latin – means to lead astray, to exert

undue influence upon another. Over the course of the film, there are at least five attempts at seduction. Mimi's seductions of Fiore and Amalia are played out for the audience and form a kind of matched pair: Techniques used in the (seemingly sincere) seduction of his mistress Fiore become exaggerated and ridiculous—are treated as parody—in his later seduction of Amalia, the wife of the man who cuckolded him. Both Rosalia and Amalia recount for Mimi the story of their seduction at the hands of Sergeant Finocchiaro, so that the viewer learns of the events at the same time as he does. The last seduction—the inexorable process of Mimi's incorporation into the Mafia—underpins the course of the entire film.

### CHAPTER III

#### A POLITICAL EDUCATION

On one level, the film—especially in the first half—constitutes the political education of its title character. As Grace Russo Bullaro points out, the level of political discourse within the film—never particularly sophisticated or nuanced—does not reflect the director’s own ideology or beliefs (as critics have often assumed), but rather shows the partial understanding of Mimi and the various characters he encounters (Russo Bullaro 6). The piecemeal knowledge of the proletariat—Mimi’s family, for example—finds its reflection in the doctrinaire level of discourse espoused by members of the Communist Party—the little speech about buying underwear, for instance. The film deploys political ideas and imagery to emphasize the pernicious political and economic influence of the Mafia in its collusion with Italian national politics, as well as industrial capitalism. These combined forces were responsible for the so-called economic miracle, or “*Il Boom*,” experienced in Italy throughout the late 1950s and 1960s.

After the opening credits, we see a sound-car packed with Mafiosi descending on a small group of workers at the sulfur quarry. Initially, we do not know its purpose and the music cues us to suspect something violent will follow. But then, to blaring patriotic music, megaphones declaim, “Workers! For a future of well-being, Cannamoza is your

man, vote for freedom, vote for Cannamoza! Do you know who Cannamoza is?" A worker rises into frame, muttering, "A son of a bitch." This impertinence constitutes our introduction to Mimi and draws the notice of the caretaker (identified in the script as Ntoni) standing over the workers. The shotgun slung over his shoulder serves as a tacit witness that his authority is based on the threat of violence and, furthermore, hints at his membership in the Mafia, holding a position similar to a *compieri* or foreman on one of the vast feudal estates (*lattifundi*). Ntoni warns Mimi that disrespect toward Cannamoza is tantamount to disrespect toward Don Calogero, who will be introduced as the local Mafia *capo*. Mafia oversight extends down to the smallest unit of the work force. Its emphasis on respect, keeping everyone in line, demonstrates the extent of the Mafia's political control.

In the brief scene that follows between Mimi and his younger brother Vito, Mimi serves as role model, initiating him into the nonverbal lexicon of "body language": Mimi clucks his tongue and tilts his head back. This expression of defiance recurs at several points in the film, every time expressing the same mute urge to resistance. The exaggerated expressiveness of Giancarlo Giannini's face also serves as a vehicle for much of the film's humor. While it may partake of stereotype, it uses these types as masks, as in ancient and popular theater, further emphasizing the film's theme of roles and role-playing.

Mimi's friend Pippino, a member of the Communist Party (PCI), advises him, "They're trying to scare you into submission. Vote how you like. What's there to lose?" Mimi retorts, "My job." "With the wage they pay you? Call that a real job?" Though

conditions are poor—the facilities are clearly antiquated—and the pay is below average, Mimi runs the real risk of total displacement if he votes in opposition to Mafia wishes. Acting as middlemen in politics as well as business, the Mafia controls blocs of votes by controlling access to employment. The group of sulfur miners—the lowliest of the low in Sicilian society, as dealt with in another Giovanni Verga short story, “Rosso Malpelo”—thus represents the bottom rung on the ladder of Mafia influence.

The scene shifts in an abrupt cut—one of Wertmüller’s techniques of distortion, disrupting the smooth transition between scenes indicative of Hollywood-style “invisible editing”—to the Marzucheo home, catching Mimi’s father in mid-tirade, attacking his son’s political naïveté: “Stupid, ignorant, arrogant animal! Secret ballot here? They know everything down to the hairs on our asses!” The language of abuse and invective keeps the tone comedic, though the political insinuation is clear. The pretence to privacy for the human body, as well as the body politic, is fictitious. Mafia oversight reaches everywhere.

The family has pledged its six votes to the Mafia’s preferred candidate. “Your father’s a man of honor,” one of the aunts tells Mimi. “He keeps his word. Want him dead in a ditch, his guts in his hand, his ears round his neck?” This admonition reveals another Mafia tactic to ensure compliance—the threat of violence. Though his designation as “a man of honor” links the father to the Mafia code, he is subject to the same brutality as anyone else if he cannot keep his family in line.

When his father asks Mimi why he doesn’t want to vote for Cannamoza, he replies that he doesn’t like him. That is, he believes personal preference should play a

role. His father quickly disabuses him: “You don’t have to marry him. Vote for him and shut up!” Although it’s played for a joke, this line provides the initial link between sexual and social politics, another of the film’s prominent motifs, which the following scene serves to amplify.

Secluded in a tiny alcove, only a thin curtain separating them from the room where the rest of the household dozes fitfully, Mimi attempts to make love to his wife beneath the disapproving gaze of the family portraits. The scene employs the rhythms of slapstick, but the laughter can’t mask the seriousness of its social criticism. Frustrated by his wife’s passive compliance, Mimi complains, “Rosalia, you’re a wife, you’ve got to do your bit.” He regards her as nothing more than her role as wife, provider of sexual services—her needs and desires don’t enter into consideration. He ridicules her reluctance: “What a face! That same scared expression. Like a lamb to the slaughter.” Finally, admitting sexual defeat, Mimi asserts his patriarchal authority: He forbids Rosalia from voting for Cannamozza, thereby establishing the film’s link between sex and politics—fleshed out most fully in the relationship between Mimi and Fiore—as one of reciprocal repression.

The last reference to the election cues the shift to voting day. The scene plays out in the piazza which also stands in as the backdrop for the film’s climactic confrontation between Mimi and Sergeant Finocchiaro. The church serves here as a voting station, pointing to the indissoluble link between religious and political authority. Mimi stands in the lower corner of the frame, flanked by Pippino and his friend Pasquale, another PCI member, who reassures him that the ballot is secret. Nevertheless, on a balcony

overlooking the scene, a group of Mafiosi are gathered, including Don Calogero, the first of several characters (all played by the same actor, Turi Ferro) to sport a constellation of three moles on his cheek. (The script refers to this as a birthmark, so from now on this character will be called “the man with the birthmark.”) The moles trace out a *trinacria* or triangle, the traditional symbol of Sicily, once known as the Kingdom of Trinacria.

These characters serve several purposes within the narrative: 1) to provide a measure of continuity in a film that otherwise moves spatially and temporally with little in the way of orientation; 2) to link a series of authority figures (Mafia *capo*, head of the Sicilian Brotherhood Association in Turin, a bigwig in the Communist Party, a Chief of Police, even a cardinal of the Catholic Church) and 3) to suggest that these structures of authority—whether legitimate or illicit—are interchangeable, even related. (At the end of the film Mimi tells Fiore: “They’re all cousins!”) This interchangeability is emphasized, albeit ironically, by the soundtrack, which plays “Brothers of Italy” (*Fratelli d’Italia*), the Italian national anthem, whenever one of these men with the birthmark appears (Wertmüller 13).

Cutting rapidly between multiple points of view (Mimi’s, Don Calogero’s, as well as several “omniscient” camera setups), the *mise-en-scène* traps Mimi between the Communist Party and Mafia influence. The same rhythm and style of editing recur in the film’s climactic scene, set in the same locale, serving as a reference back to this earlier scene. After weighing his allegiances, Mimi makes a point of joining his family as they enter the voting station. The next shot shows Mimi walking down the street alone, a Vote Communist banner visible behind him, aligning him with the party he voted for, against

the admonitions of his father and the threats of the Mafia. He is hailed by Ntoni, standing on a balcony above him. Particularly relevant is the manner in which the *mise-en-scène* consistently elevates the Mafia in these early scenes over “normal” society, emphasizing their literal and figurative power of oversight. Ntoni tells Mimi he need not go back to the quarry. Making the sign of the cross with his pocketknife, Ntoni says, “It’s over between us.” Anyone standing up against Mafia decree faces similar circumstances—alienated from friends, family and the possibility of making a living.

In an ironic coda, Mimi confronts Pasquale about the ballot. “Well, I guess it wasn’t all *that* secret,” Pasquale informs him. Mimi storms out. His course takes him back through the streets and piazza, a visual summary of the film so far, as various characters confront him and attempt to change his mind. They offer him employment, advise him to stay and fight for the cause; in a word, they attempt to seduce him. But his refusal is complete. He remains determined to move to Turin, where, as he says, “they pay workers. They treat them right too. They’re free and respected. There’s no Mafia there. Not one of the bastards.” In the scene’s final shot, the camera zooms in on a laughing Ntoni. Obviously, Mimi still has a lot to learn.

CHAPTER IV  
THE BROTHERHOOD

Mimi's arrival in Turin plays out entirely without dialogue. An aria from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* mourns, "We have arrived... This is the land where the political prisoners weep. Ah! This is where the poor man was brought to" (Wertmüller 12). William and Joan Magretta refer to this nondiegetic use of the soundtrack as "musical commentary" (Magretta 37): Rather than serving the traditional function—providing emotional cues—this usage comments on the narrative in often ironic fashion. Viewers familiar with Verdi's work gain an immediate thematic context—that Mimi is a kind of political prisoner, prey to economic forces imposed upon him by his unemployment—while those who are not familiar with the opera still detect the plaintive quality of the music, providing a glimmer of its significance.

Mimi stands adrift on a traffic island, like an urban Robinson Crusoe, alone and anonymous. The montage takes us further into the urban milieu—the crush of pedestrian masses, the disorienting rush of the traffic, stalls of vendors lining the streets and traffic islands—culminating in a shot of a man who reminds us of a mustache-free Ntoni, posed against a travel poster advertising the lure of Turin. While his goggle-eyed expression may elicit a chuckle from the viewer, he is the harbinger of dark events to come.

The scene shifts to the interior of a garage—the meeting-place of the Sicilian Brotherhood Association, an organization, despite its benevolent designation, for the exploitation of unregistered workers. Another man with the birthmark, Salvatore Tricarico, asks the huddled laborers upfront, “Anyone in a political party or trade union?” The Brotherhood, he informs them, won’t tolerate any “shit-stirrers”—anyone who might agitate for better conditions or wages. The workers will be “paid double what you’d get in Sicily for a day of threshing”—five hundred lire—in exchange for working as unregistered labor on a construction site. A bed at the “Hotel Trinacria” (run by another Brotherhood member, the mustache-less Ntoni) will cost them two hundred lire a night. The Mafia thus recuperates forty percent of the pittance they’re willing to pay. Although the conditions are apparently better than in Sicily, the next scene will reveal just how the workers fare under the auspices of the Brotherhood. Tricarico advises them, “We’re all brothers. But you do as we say and keep your mouth shut. Because I’m doing you a favor.” The favor—a cornerstone of Mafia networks of obligation—identifies Tricarico as a Mafiosi as readily as his prominent birthmark.

At the construction site, Mimi converses with one of his fellow laborers, who advises him how to wear his paper hat. Adapting to different normative behaviors, adopting new models of self-presentation (clothes, hairstyle, mustache), becomes central to Mimi’s self-concept, his role or persona. From now on, Mimi will change to conform to his idea of the role he’s playing: slicked back hair, trim mustache and a suit when he’s acting the paterfamilias with Fiore and Carmelo Jr., or a corduroy jacket and jeans when he’s playing the workingman with Don Vito on the rooftop.

The foreman castigates a worker for relieving himself against the wall, telling him, “Piss on your lunch break.” As soon as the foreman’s back is turned, the man says he’d like to piss on his head. This type of “earthy” invective—another characteristic of grotesque comedy, according to William and Joan Magretta—serves to degrade the spiritual (or superior) and reduce it to the level of the material (Magretta 23). It signifies an attempt to subvert the hierarchy of the workplace through humor and profanity, and stands as a sign of solidarity between the workers and against their employers, who even seek to control their bodily functions. The humor delivers a concrete political message, serving more than mere comic delight.

When the worker then falls to his death, the men gather around his broken body. Tricarico and the foreman ask whether anyone knows him. As far as they’re concerned, the workers are anonymous and replaceable, having no more value than a beast of burden. Their habit is to load him into a truck and dump him along the road somewhere, like a heap of garbage. When they find Mimi in the back, they threaten to kill him and he runs away.

They quickly find Mimi and bring him back to Tricarico. This bit of exposition, however, is elided from the narrative, emphasizing the inevitability of Mimi’s recapture. We cut directly to a vast and empty garage, where Tricarico stands alongside his posh Mercedes as his henchmen drag the captive Mimi before him. Tricarico asks if he’s been sent by a syndicate, another term for a trade union. They suspect him of being a spy. In a last ditch bid for survival, Mimi claims that his wife is the godchild of Don Calogero Liggio. “Liggio of Corleone?” asks Tricarico. “No,” Mimi replies. “His cousin.” At the

time of the film's release in 1972, Luciano Liggio (or Leggio), the *capo* of the Mafia's Corleonesi faction, was a fugitive from justice, his elusiveness earning him the nickname of the "Scarlet Pimpernel." Not only had he been involved in the infamous March 1948 murder of trade union leader Placido Rizzotto (the subject of a biographical film released in 2000), he had also masterminded the assassination of the former head of the Corleonesi faction, Dr. Michele Navarro, ten years later (Dickie 262). Referring to such a prominent and powerful Mafioso in the midst of an apparently innocuous comedy required some fortitude, as reprisals for this sort of publicity were often fatal.

Mimi's appeal to relations—being family with a Family (or Mafia organization)—changes everything. Tricarico grudgingly takes an interest in him, and Mimi uses this leverage to wangle a new factory job "either at Fiat or Pirelli. A nice, comfortable position." Tricarico agrees, but admonishes him, "If you're having me on, you'll be in shit up to your neck, boy." Mimi blackmails him not only for his own survival, but for a better job that assures Mimi certain rights and privileges. The scene with Don Vito on the rooftop indicates that the Mafia respects such tactics, taking them as a sign that Mimi could potentially be one of them, a "man of honor," according to their definition of that term.

## CHAPTER V

### MIMI THE METALWORKER

The next sequence begins with another dialogue-free montage detailing the beginning of a working day: “The enormous industrial machine begins operating” (Wertmüller 20). We see Mimi’s arrival, taking up his position at a machine, establishing the equivalence between the two. The scene continues with a voiceover narration, a letter home to his wife, detailing Mimi’s response to his new living and working conditions. The use of the voiceover links several shifts in time and place and also provides a moment of comic juxtaposition between the letter’s contents and the reality of Mimi’s situation.

Mimi avows: “I’m Marzucheo, Carmelo, metalworker, now.” His new position as a legal worker—complete with insurance, sick pay and other benefits—entitles him to a new identity. It’s “a whole new ballgame,” as he says in the letter. He laments the time it took him to discover a “native” at the factory, since most of the labor force are “from down our way”—that is, immigrants from southern Italy as well as Sicily. This comment identifies Mimi as part of a vast wave of unskilled labor from the agricultural (and still feudally-conditioned) regions of Southern Italy seeking better conditions and higher pay in industrialized Northern cities such as Turin or Milan. This labor force constituted the

backbone of the “Economic Miracle” (or *Il Boom*, as it was known) experienced throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s.

Nevertheless, participation in labor-intensive industrialization reduces the human worker to the level of an automaton or machine much like the one he operates. To become “a cog in the machine” serves as a metaphor, not only for industrial capitalism, as these scenes in the factory make obvious, but also for Mimi’s ultimate role within the Mafia organization. Later scenes reveal how these twin forces—capitalism and the Mafia—interpenetrate one another.

The letter in voiceover continues. Mimi attends a meeting at the PCI headquarters: “I’ve made some friends and learned a lot about politics and the plight of the worker.” The scene shifts to a tavern where the meeting continues in a more informal vein. We hear a different voice, a Party member’s, regaling Mimi, “Politics is everyday life, everything you do. Buying a pair of underwear is politics. You’re making a choice. If it’s right, you help everyone. If it’s wrong, you help the bosses screw us.” Though this states the matter rather baldly, it emphasizes the recurring theme of choice. Mimi’s choices early in the film express his refusal to follow the Mafia’s decree, but as the film progresses, he makes a concerted effort to side with the patriarchal social order, with the bosses and businessmen, and against collective solidarity with the working class. This second refusal makes his incorporation into the Mafia machine both inevitable and irrevocable.

Another shift in scene occurs, back to Party headquarters. As Mimi hands out leaflets, we hear, “I can just see Papa’s face! Not only did I join a trade union but I’ve

joined the Communist Party as well” Another cut shows us the Marzucheo home to illustrate his father’s irate response: “Communist? Turd, more likely.” Meanwhile, the women discuss the term “trade unions.” Mimi’s wife, Rosalia, isn’t sure about its meaning. “They’re subversive organizations!” one of the aunts assures her. The level of political discourse reflects the uncertainties and misinformation of the characters. Mimi’s assimilation of Communist ideology, for instance, amounts to the few slogans he’s been spoon-fed by other party members, such as the notion that all life boils down to the simple choice not to let the bosses screw the workers. On the other hand, the proletariat has been conditioned by political propaganda coming from the center-right government, the Christian Democrat (DC) party, to view all organizations for the protection of the working class (such as trade unions) as subversive and thus suspicious.

At the end of the scene, Rosalia turns back to the letter. The voiceover continues, “As for your coming here, I must say no. Lodging’s expensive. Especially for us Southerners. These sons of bitches consider us animals.” In counterpoint to the narration, the *mise-en-scène* shows Mimi walking down a drab hallway and entering a tiny, shabby room. The letter continues: “It’s a sad life. No place for a wife.” Now we see why. Mimi leaves his room and knocks on the door across the hall. An older woman, reading and smoking in bed, greets him, “Hey, Latin lover! Ready for the orgy?” Mimi closes the door and the letter concludes, “Love and kisses, your husband, Carmelo.”

The gap between Mimi’s role as husband—dutifully writing home to his wife about his experiences in the big city—and as “Latin lover”—taking advantage of a fling in a foreign city—supplies the scene with a certain measure of comic relief. However,

this disparity also reveals the deceit and deception upon which Mimi's conception of his own role as husband is founded. He will go so far as to use the very stereotypes which malign him in order to keep his wife in her place. This complicated—and self-reflexive—use of stereotypes points to Wertmüller's awareness of the material she uses in comedic fashion, demonstrating that to use these labels as fodder is not necessarily to succumb to their reductive and polarizing influence.

In the final scene of this sequence, Mimi testifies to the wretched conditions of the illegal worker before a gathering of the Communist Party. Someone must name names in order to accomplish anything against the Sicilian Brotherhood. But the workers are afraid. The Party member from an earlier scene says, "Fear's a drug. You don't see what's there, you see what's not there." The opiate of the masses turns out to be fear, which (like ideology) distorts the true nature of social relations. To overcome fear, to effect any real change, requires solidarity. But when one of the prominent Party members, who calls on Mimi to name names, proves to be another man with the birthmark, there is no escape from their corrosive influence. Positioned within even the Communist Party—the only political alternative at the time to the Christian Democrat's center-right coalition, which was largely funded by (and thus answered to) the Vatican—these men compromise every organization they infiltrate.

CHAPTER VI  
THIS INSANE LOVE

Proceeding from the politics of labor to the politics of sex, the next sequence brings to the fore the notion of seduction. The undue influence of fear gives way to the balance of power within a sexual relationship. For Mimi sex equals possession. The loved one is property, to be guarded jealously. Therefore sex also equals capitalism, with its emphasis on the basic inalienable value of property and its accumulation. As their relationship progresses, Mimi aspires more and more to be the paterfamilias, the patriarch, exercising his masculine privilege over Fiore's body and mind.

At an open-air market, to the strains of Verdi's *La Traviata*, Mimi discovers Fiore and her friend selling hand-knit sweaters, political pamphlets and posters. The music—an aria called “Sempre Libere” or “Always Free”—comments on Fiore's point of view, even before the dialogue supplies us with any information about her and her philosophy of life. Fiore is a freethinker, demanding to make up her own mind about basic matters of love and politics. Though at the end she loves Mimi and bears his child, when he violates the terms of their “marriage” by his infidelity, Fiore does not hesitate to abandon him for an alternative life with Pippino, truer to her values and beliefs.

Preparing to close in for the kill—the hunting metaphor entirely in keeping with his overall technique—Mimi takes off his wedding ring, indicating his commitment to

serial infidelity. Though he is outraged when informed about his wife's subsequent adultery, Mimi has no problem with committing the act himself. This reflects Sicilian notions of the male prerogative, a deep-seated double standard. In true comic fashion, however, his initial attempt at seduction fails when a carload of thugs—objecting to the radical pamphleteering—descend on the trio, beating them and breaking up their display tables.

After adjourning to the tavern, Mimi and Fiore begin a comic political discussion. Fiore identifies herself as a Trotskyite, which confuses Mimi. Later, he will mistake the word for “trollop.” Fiore says that a Trotskyite is “left of the left,” to which Mimi retorts, “There is nothing left of the left. The only true left wing is the 8 million workers of the PCI.” Mimi recites this with all the earnest thoughtlessness of the catechism, which becomes a joke when Fiore thinks the way he pronounces “PCI” sounds like a sneeze. Organized politics are a joke for Fiore, whose fundamental precept is: “Man musn't exploit man. That's the core. As for the rest...we've won a few things off the bosses in 100 years.” This aphorism might just supply one of the canniest instances of political discussion in the film so far. Nonetheless, however fundamental it seems that the basis of capitalism is exploitation, the details of the struggle remain unclear, as well as the possibilities for a viable alternative. Winning “a few things off the bosses” provides cold comfort compared to a real revolution: a significant restructuring of human society. The film ultimately says little about the chances for revolution, functioning more as a cautionary tale about making the wrong choices than a positive prescription for social change.

Fiore opines that Russia won't turn out like the US where "the individual is stifled by industry, machines, like here." Although this remark casually assesses the state of current events, it also refers to Mimi's position as a "cog in the machine," where he, too, is literally stifled by industry and machines. It also points to his ultimate fate as a functionary within the Mafia's machinery.

Mimi and Fiore walk through a park as she tells him about her experiences with sexual harassment at the workplace: an occasion when a supervisor used his position to force her to "put out or get out." Ironically, later in the scene, Mimi conducts himself in a similar manner, when he first attacks and only then attempts to seduce her. The scene links sex and consumption: like a predatory animal, Mimi wants to devour her. Sexual conquest is equivalent to sexual possession, a key theme in the film's depiction of their relationship.

Fiore's viewpoint is more heterodox. When Mimi tells her he's married, she professes unconcern: "Free or married, it's all the same to me. I believe in love." When all else fails, Mimi attempts a trick he might have learned from Salvatore Tricarico. "Do it as a favor," he pleads. Fiore responds, "As if it's a thing done out of kindness!" She claims to be a virgin and says she's saving herself for the man she loves. When Mimi attacks her, she too uses the usual stereotypes, calling him an animal and a Southern brute. Once again, these stereotypes function as a tactical weapon in the balance of power between Mimi and Fiore, and cannot be reduced to unquestioned, unproblematic fodder for comedy.

The aria from *La Traviata* plays over a montage of scenes showing the “slow and steady” pursuit which will finally win her over. The final scene in the montage consists entirely of exaggerated facial expressions and the nonverbal language of hand gestures, comprising a mock disquisition on seduction and rejection. This set piece serves as a form of pantomime (known as a *lazzo*) that stems from popular theater, identified by William and Joan Magretta as one of the characteristic techniques of grotesque comedy (Magretta 38).

At last, sensing utter defeat, Mimi confesses, “This insane love means I no longer respect anything.” He feels humiliated by his failure. But he is saved by Fiore’s own confession that she loves him, although this love comes with conditions: “This can be your home. It’s all or nothing and goodbye. If you as much as touch another woman, even your wife, you’ll never see me again. Because while love lasts, I want it to be perfect.” Mimi breaks down in tears. His gratitude and humility, however, are short-lived: “When I recover, I’m going to smother you. Smother you with love.” Giannini’s expressive features convey a mood of burlesque, which mitigates the scene’s equation of possessive love and physical violence.

Finally, given the chance to perform sexually, Mimi finds that he cannot and so vows to kill himself. The cornerstone of his identity as a sexual being must be constantly proven through performance. Failure leads to despair: for Mimi, selflessness, rather than coming across as altruism or generosity, results in the cancellation of his identity. Thus sexual possession means total immersion, the urge to devour. The script establishes a clear link between this urge and its bestial undercurrent—as Fiore’s tender words revive

him “the beast wakes up and he throws himself on her” (Wertmüller 34).

Mimi’s conquest of Fiore allows him to adopt a new identity. He stands in front of a mirror, his once unruly locks restrained by a hairnet, trimming his mustache. Each new persona requires its corresponding mask, a theatrical metaphor later literalized when Mimi refers to the hand-knit sweater he’s wearing as a “Harlequin suit”—the character of Harlequin being one of the most popular stock personae in the *commedia dell’arte*.

While Fiore sleeps, Mimi surreptitiously reads a letter from his wife Rosalia back home. Her letter parallels and parodies Mimi’s earlier one: “The woman writing you is no longer plain Rosalia, but Marzucheo, Rosalia, worker.” In her new capacity as laundress—she’s quick to reassure Mimi—her coworkers are all other women and she handles only women’s things. What’s more, she’s started smoking and has learned to ride a motorcycle “after taking all moral and physical precautions”: festooning the bike with religious stickers and taking her seat without showing off her underpants. Nevertheless, this new behavior (“pretty emancipated for a Sicilian woman,” as Mimi puts it in a later scene) draws the ire of Mimi’s father: “If anybody sees you, I’ll disown you. Whore!” In succinct fashion, this small scene illustrates the traditional Sicilian prejudices women must overcome if they want to establish a measure of economic autonomy.

When Fiore makes fun of Mimi’s new “look,” he asserts his masculine prerogative: “You’ve got to learn to show me more respect. You were born to knit, to make these Harlequin suits you make me wear. And you were born to make love.” Fiore, on the other hand, remains interested in the political demonstrations going on outside their love nest. She wants to participate, to proclaim her support for the workers. But

Mimi tells her, “I’m a metalworker. I march with metalworkers. You’re a metalworker’s woman. Your solidarity’s with me,” using talk of solidarity to mask his possessiveness, a perversion of political language which reduces the workers’ struggle to the private and individual. He doesn’t even see them as workers anymore, but rather as a gang of 30,000 Calabrians and Sicilians: “They won’t be marching, they’ll be feeling up the women.” In his cynical appraisal, political demonstration exists only as an alibi for sexual indiscretion.

Fiore’s response to this attitude, “Communists can’t be jealous,” corroborates the idea that sexual ownership puts the same importance on private property as capitalist ideology, encouraging the collapse of political commitment into the strictly personal. When Fiore complains, “I can’t go out dressed like a Turk,” Mimi responds, “What’s wrong with the Turks? No wonder they conquered the world. With their wives locked away, they could fight without worrying.” Later in the film, upon their arrival back in Catania, the family in fact will be dressed up like Turks, Fiore swathed from head to toe in black. This offhand remark subtly draws attention to the impact of Islamic culture on Sicily over the course of its occupation by the Ottoman Empire, especially in regard to the separation of the sexes and the relegation of the women to the domestic sphere.

This sequence, taking place almost entirely in Fiore’s apartment (apart from the brief shift to Rosalia’s activities back in Catania), concludes with another reference to the events of the so-called “Restless Autumn” (*autunno caldo*) of 1969, “a short period of social unrest characterized by spontaneous movements among students, workers, and trade unions” (Lanzoni 140). A series of massive strikes broke out across Northern Italian

cities—in every major center of industrialization and commerce—wherein workers and students joined together to protest for improved conditions, increased wages and a shorter work week. For a brief moment, these strikes brought Italy’s Economic Miracle to a grinding halt. Nevertheless, as in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers*—likewise set against a period of tumult, in this case May 1968 in Paris—the lovers pass the time in role-playing and erotic games, while major political turmoil takes place right outside their window.

Mimi’s plans for the son he has conceived with Fiore indicate his complete acquiescence to individualism, the wellspring of modern capitalism, and his retreat from the solidarity with the proletariat called for in Communist and Socialist philosophies: “Your daddy will buy you everything you need. My son will never want for anything. He’ll have everything I never had. My son will be a king.” Capitalism reduces needs to things that can be owned, material possessions to be accumulated. Mimi’s comment also hints at his acknowledgement of social hierarchy—in this case, monarchism—in complete contradistinction to the social leveling required by socialist ideology. The rallying cry of progress—that each generation will find itself more prosperous than the previous—finds its answer in Fiore’s acerbic reply, “It’s in the consumer society before it’s even born.”

Another abrupt transition takes us into the midst of a celebration. Rapid cuts (accompanied by camera flashes) emulate a photographer capturing Mimi and Fiore and their guests as they celebrate the infant’s christening amid elaborate baroque décor, replete with ornate moldings and colorful ceiling frescoes. Everyone is dressed to the

nines: Mimi has his hair slicked back, wearing a tailor-made suit. Swelling opera music plays. When the fancy French champagne runs out, Mimi heads downstairs and enters a war zone, “a Mafia showdown, in true traditional style” (Wertmüller 42). Salvatore Tricarico guns down a number of Mafiosi, including his former right-hand man, the mustache-less Ntoni. Though Mimi pleads with him “Don’t shoot, I know nothing...” Tricarico pulls the trigger anyway. Protestations of ignorance will not save Mimi this time but, in true comic fashion, he escapes death by falling down at the precise moment Tricarico fires his gun.

When the police investigate the shootings, they realize Mimi must have seen his attacker and they encourage him to name names (shades of the early meeting of the Communist party members). Initially willing to assist them, Mimi turns uncooperative when he discovers that the Chief of Police is another “man with the birthmark.” With the same tongue-clucking gesture of defiance he taught his brother early in the film, he refuses to answer any of their questions.

The complex use of montage in this scene permits it to be read in two different, but not mutually exclusive, ways. On the one hand, the events upstairs—the bourgeois christening with its attendant glitz and glamour—depend upon the bloodbath downstairs. To paraphrase Marxist terminology, the violence and extortive practices of the Mafia provide the base which supports the superstructure of industrial capitalism. The activities of the Mafia, with their control over political machines and access to employment, dovetail with the concerns of both politicians and businessmen. On the other hand, the recapitulation of the narrative serves to orient the viewer (flashbacks showing earlier

appearances of the man with the birthmark) and remind them of previous events (parallel editing that rehashes the shootings and their aftermath).

CHAPTER VII  
DELICATE MATTERS

At the factory, a group of former comrades confront Mimi about his recent absence at meetings. He makes an excuse, saying that he has to do better for his son. One of them replies, “We all have children, damn it. Some of us give a shit. Some of us don’t. That’s all.” As elsewhere in the film, the Party members function like a Greek chorus, the voice of Mimi’s conscience, reminding him at every step that he has a choice. In this light, his ultimate defeat by the Mafia stems from his refusal to commit to political solidarity, opting instead to pursue individual advancement.

Called into the head office, Mimi’s boss tells him he’s been “promoted” whether he likes it or not. The boss says, “As far as we’re concerned, you’re in Catania already.” Like a pawn in a chess game, Mimi exerts no real autonomy, manipulated by the caprice of those in power. The perfunctory nature of the announcement suggests the Mafia has arranged this promotion in return for his silence about the Tricarico killings.

The scene shifts to the streets of Catania viewed through a car window. Mimi and his family ride in silence, dressed alike in black, wearing dark sunglasses. Fiore wears a turban wrapped around her head like the Turkish woman mentioned in an earlier scene. Their matching attire harkens back to the christening scene, emphasizing their cohesion

as a family unit. “Even the walls have eyes and ears here,” Mimi counsels Fiore, “especially in delicate matters.” These delicate matters—infidelity and its “reparatory” redress—now come to dominate the narrative. Whereas the first half of the film examined shifting social and sexual roles against contemporary political turmoil, the second provides an extended comic meditation on outmoded social customs and mores, the so-called rustic chivalry of Sicily. In contrast to the supposed anonymity of Northern metropolises, there is the common perception that in Sicily everyone knows everyone else’s business, that someone is always watching and/or listening. This idea also features in Alberto Lattuada’s *Mafioso* (1962)—likewise concerned with exploring the contrasts between industrial North and rural South—where it, too, receives comedic handling.

CHAPTER VIII  
THE MANAGING DIRECTOR

Barely established in their new apartment, Mimi is summoned away by the Managing Director, “the head building contractor” of Catania, according to the script (Wertmüller 48). The encounter takes place on a rooftop with the view of the city’s skyline littered with construction cranes. Next to the Managing Director on a tabletop stands a scale model of a new apartment building. The *mise-en-scène* surreptitiously alludes to another source of Mafia power and profit: their utter domination of building contracts. In Palermo, Sicily’s capital, this trend came to be known as the Sack of Palermo: “When the building boom ended, a good portion of the city centre still lay in ruins; much of the rest was a half-abandoned slum; and some of its finest private homes—baroque and Liberty [style] alike—had been demolished” (Dickie 222).

The Mafia’s tentacular reach dominated every phase of these operations, according with the organization’s popular moniker, *La Piovra* (The Octopus). Labor was provided by unions which the Mafia controlled. Contracts were doled out by politicians whose election had been assured by Mafia influence. Contractors were often Mafia fronts, whose business practices guaranteed maximum profit even when it might affect public safety—it was not uncommon for Mafia-owned contractors to skimp on materials, even on occasion leading to the collapse of recently constructed buildings.

For this meeting, Mimi assumes the pose of the working man. Hence he wears a corduroy jacket and work clothes. His feeble protestations for the cause of the working classes provoke only a contemptuous screed from Don Vito Tricarico, the Managing Director, yet another man with the birthmark. Early in the conversation, Don Vito tells Mimi, “You’ve behaved like one of us to the end.” The phrase “one of us” (in Italian *picciotto d’onore* or, literally, child of honor) indicates that Tricarico considers Mimi to be a child (*picciotto*) or low ranking soldier in the Mafia family.

“I’m for decent people, workers,” Mimi protests. “For the record,” the Managing Director responds, “I’ve always worked.” He points to the skyline. “This represents struggle, blood, work for wretches.” “Exploitation of the wretches,” Mimi counters. “How else could you have built all this? I’ll tell you—by burning down the orange groves so you could build this monstrosity, where for a stinking two-room apartment and kitchen you have to put down a 900,000 lire deposit. And what about the elections? We know how they’re rigged, especially down here. But you, you’re the real slaves” (Wertmüller 50: this little speech is only partially translated by the film’s subtitles). Mimi refers to the Mafia as “the bosses’ lackeys”: that is, he assumes that true power resides with the politicians.

The situation, as Don Vito indignantly points out, is precisely the reverse. The Managing Director wonders rhetorically why Mimi didn’t name Salvatore Tricarico to the union or to the police. “Because deep down inside you know you can trust us but not the police.” The irony here is that, as the viewer already knows, the Mafia has infiltrated the police as well as the trade unions. Mimi has never had any real choice about whom he

can trust. Don Vito tells him, “Communist dreams aren’t for you. We need bosses here. There’s things to organize.” In other words, side with “the bosses” (whether capitalist or Mafiosi) against the workers, who, like Mimi, are seen as feckless dreamers, who need a strong hand to guide them.

“Organize what? A coup?” Mimi asks. “There’s no need for that,” Don Vito says. “A person with know-how could have things under control in a flash. All that’s needed are a few professionals. Bag-snatching, robberies, kidnappings, pin a few bombs on the anarchists, slander interfering politicians and you’re set. Hordes of people are clamoring for protection and order.”

Wertmüller makes reference here to an insidious phenomenon in Italian political history—a technique for social control known as the “strategy of tension.” “[T]he objective was clearly to destabilize the democratic process in which the Christian Democrat government had committed after the mid-sixties [the “historic compromise” between the DC and the PCI]. The so-called ‘strategy of tension’ aimed to foment terror and paranoia in the streets of Italy through carefully prepared violent bomb attacks, all of which led to the belief in a revolutionary coup perpetrated by Communist terrorists and extreme-left radical organizations” (Lanzoni 141). In other words, selected acts of violence, breeding disorder and fear among the average citizenry, could be blamed on the far-left, generating a demand for “protection and order,” which the far-right (and often neo-Fascist) political parties used to consolidate their power base. Wertmüller suggests that the Mafia was more than willing to assist these forces within Italian society, as long as it solidified their own hold on the reins of power.

When Don Vito contemptuously tosses a hundred lire coin on the ground and asks Mimi to fetch it for him, saying, “I’m asking you for a favor,” Mimi knows full well what this entails. Locked into a battle of wills, Mimi hesitates, then reluctantly picks up the coin when he senses the threat behind the stony gaze of the Managing Director’s henchman. Realizing that this act binds him more tightly in the Mafia’s web of obligation, he tosses it back down. Nonetheless, the damage has been done. The favor will be returned when the Mafia sends one of their “professionals” to assist him when he’s been “done a discourtesy”—the public humiliation surrounding the revelation of his cuckoldry.

CHAPTER IX  
INDELICATE RUMORS

When Mimi returns to the apartment he shares with Fiore, he finds her feathering their love nest. She asks him where to put an imposing portrait of Lenin. “Above the bed?” (In her apartment in Turin, smaller photos of Marx and Engels stood over her bed, an ironic echo of the family portraits in the Marzucheo household.) “Look at the way he’s looking at me,” Mimi protests, “as if he’s always criticizing. He shatters my nerves. Put him out of sight.” The portrait serves as a sort of secular icon, the unsettling voice of his class conscience, instilling him with guilt and self-consciousness.

Discussing the situation in Sicily, Fiore tells Mimi, “If they didn’t have people like you to help, people who’ve traveled, who’ve seen other things and broadened their minds, otherwise these people couldn’t defend themselves.” At a rooftop party in an ensuing scene, Pippino asks Mimi, “Were you in the Autumn Campaign?” (Another term for the “Restless Autumn” of 1969, discussed above.) Mimi replies equivocally: “More or less.” Encouraged by this falsehood, Pippino tells him, “You must talk to the comrades. Broaden our minds.” These scenes stand as two sides of the same coin, reinforcing Mimi’s privileged status as a well-traveled and educated worker in the minds of his lover and friends, while serving to ironically undercut and question this role in the eyes of the viewer, who knows more than the characters about Mimi’s actions.

The intervening scene shows Mimi at home with his wife Rosalia, where he cannot perform his marital duty, though he swears to her he has never been unfaithful. A nasty rumor arises among his friends that, owing to his “incapacity,” Mimi might be a homosexual. Several of them—including Pasquale, whose information is never particularly accurate—approach Mimi at the rooftop party, taking him aside to let him in on these rumors. His response is immediate: “This insult should be paid for with buckshot. But I’m a civilized man, not a peasant like you lot.” Buckshot refers to the use of a shotgun called a *lupara*, the kind Ntoni carried slung over his shoulder, the traditional weapon of Sicilians and Mafiosi alike. Though he resists the impulse to violence, owing to his aggrandized sense of his social position, his words betray the fact that it remains his first response. Instead of giving in to this urge, he takes the men on a field trip to show off his mistress, thereby reaffirming his manhood in their eyes. “It’s your fault,” he tells them, turning the tables on his accusers, “your backward mentality. That Rosalia is a good woman. How could I abandon her, knowing what you lot think of divorced women?”

This settles the matter with his friends. Standing on a corner, discussing Mimi’s situation, one of them opines, “Now Mimi’s a real man. Metalworker, automobile, wife, child and mistress. Perfection.” Duplicity and material possessions go hand-in-hand in a traditional conception of masculinity. A man’s prerogative is to have his cake and eat it too.

All does not remain well for long. Another rumor makes the rounds and Mimi’s friends—this time Pippino, Pasquale and his wife Elena—must take him aside again. At

first, Mimi misunderstands, thinking Rosalia wants a child. The truth is otherwise: she's already three months pregnant and, owing to his incapacity, it's obvious to everyone that Mimi isn't the father. "You're intelligent, a metalworker, Communist," Pippino advises Mimi. "So forget the vengeance stuff. Show everyone how to be civilized, with no fuss." Mimi's response is the opposite of civilized. Picking up a large wrench, he exclaims, "Destroy the honor of my family, whore!" Though parked in the middle of the sulfur quarry, he storms off on foot to have his revenge, before he thinks better of it. "A Communist would never do this!" Pippino rebukes him. For the second time, Mimi's actions are compared to their detriment with an ideal of ethical conduct. His response indicates the chasm between the two, as well as his reevaluation of the role he wants to play, "Screw your Communism! I'm a cuckold!"

Back home, Mimi confronts Rosalia, who has forsaken her "emancipated" clothes in favor of the traditional black peasant attire. (Mimi is not the only one who adopts the wardrobe appropriate to the role.) "You've dragged my family name in the mud. And my mother's name too. This insult must be wiped out." Wiping out the insult means violence. But Mimi is disarmed by her acquiescence: "Don't tell me I'm right. Otherwise I can't do anything to you." The violence always simmering at the bottom of Mimi's worldview now erupts. Although the tone of the scene approaches slapstick, with its antic rhythm and abrupt last-minute role reversal, there is nothing funny about the blows and kicks Mimi rains down on Rosalia. In this scene, whatever sympathy the viewer may feel for Mimi—especially given Giannini's charismatic performance—begins to sour. Our initial empathy was garnered by his attempts to evade and refuse Mafia control, and now

it ebbs away as his actions ally him with the inflexible and moribund outlook of rustic chivalry. As the French philosopher Henri Bergson knew, one source of comedy springs from depictions of man's "rigidity"—the way we come to resemble the machines we have created—and so the more rigidly Mimi adheres to these outdated codes of conduct, the more the comedy comes at his expense.

During her tale of seduction, Rosalia mentions the movie that Sergeant Finocchiaro took her to see: *Bell'Antonio*, a 1960 sex comedy based on a novel by Vitaliano Brancati, also set in Catania, Sicily. Its story—concerning a serial philanderer (Marcello Mastroianni) who suffers public ridicule when he's rumored to be homosexual due to sexual exhaustion—partially mirrors the action of Wertmüller's film. This intertextual citation works on two levels: 1) it provides an in-joke for Italian audiences familiar with the film, and 2) it places Wertmüller's film in the context of Italian comedies of social criticism, the "Comedy Italian Style" discussed above.

In keeping with the storytelling theme, Mimi's revenge takes the form of another narrative: He tells Rosalia about Fiore and the child. An unexpected moment of comic reversal follows when an incensed Rosalia tosses a knife at him. Mimi's sense of triumphant indignation turns to terror. Even playing the patriarch, Mimi cannot get the best of the situation.

By hauling Mimi into the magistrate's office, Rosalia shows her willingness to involve the legal system in their domestic dispute—despite the injunction of *omertá*, the Sicilian code of silence and non-cooperation with the forces of law and order. She wants to give her bastard child Mimi's name and, at the same time, deprive his own bastard son

of its legal recognition. This state of disequilibrium forces Mimi to fabricate his own restitution plan—the “reparatory” seduction of Sergeant Finocchiaro’s wife Amalia.

CHAPTER X  
“REPARATORY” SEDUCTION

As discussed above, Mimi’s pursuit of Signora Finocchiaro parallels and parodies his earnest seduction of Fiore. While he stalks her through the streets of Catania like some beast of prey, an exaggerated tango plays on the soundtrack, offering sardonic “musical commentary” with its sudden cries of pleasure and plaintive moans. Mimi’s attire, his slicked-back hair, his predatory body language all serve as a parody of the Latin lover type he played earlier for the woman in Turin. When he accosts Amalia in public, she protests, “What do you take me for? I’m a wife and mother. People will talk,” reinforcing the theme of identity as social role.

Cornered at her workplace, Amalia breaks down and agrees to a meeting, where she tells Mimi her history: her loveless marriage to a scoundrel who seduced and attempted to abandon her, who had to be threatened into marriage, and who eventually saddled her with five children. This tale of woe establishes Amalia’s motivation for participating in Mimi’s revenge scheme, even though she initially succumbs to his advances only at the threat of violence. At the seaside home of a prostitute, they dance to the same tango music. Mimi drags her into an adjacent bedroom and threatens her: “Either you give in to me or I’ll kill you.” “Well, I give in to violence, do your worst,” Amalia replies.

Keeping time to the tango, they undress. Throughout the ensuing action, Wertmüller cuts away to a doll looking on, its gaze a joking echo of the Virgin Mary portrait over the bed. To signal their consummation, Wertmüller cuts to the doll closing its eyes. Reference to photos and portraits—with their uncanny power of surveillance—recur throughout the film: Viewer and image have a reciprocal relationship, going beyond passive consumption, where engaging the image changes the viewer.

Wertmüller shoots their encounter with a fish-eye lens, distorting the image and making Amalia's body appear enormous and grotesque. Many critics take this scene to task, seeing in it only an act of cruelty on Wertmüller's part, an anti-feminist assault on the female body. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the *mise-en-scène* presents the viewer with a highly subjective point-of-view. As Mimi forges ahead with a plan that is clearly disgusting to him, the woman grows larger and more powerful, and he grows smaller and more helpless. He cuts a ridiculous figure, trapped within the frame as well as within an inflexible code of conduct, imposed by a repressive social order.

Post coitus, Amalia sings an operatic aria, clutching Mimi to her bosom in a headlock. In complete control of the situation, she demands a confession of love from Mimi, which he refuses. To put the shoe on the other foot, he tells her the truth, that the whole affair has been orchestrated for revenge: "I'm a metalworker now. I've become civilized. I know how to use my head now." In another moment of comic role reversal, she attacks Mimi in an almost identical manner as he used to have his way with her.

After an intervening scene set at the factory (discussed below), the film returns to the seaside house. The tone of their relations has changed: everything is clinical,

rigorously planned with the sole purpose of getting pregnant. Amalia consults a medical chart indicating her most fertile days. Mimi has abstained from sex to increase his potency. But there can be no pleasure involved, as Amalia makes clear, invoking explicitly religious language, “I have my cross to bear...I’m making this sacrifice to spite my husband, who disgusts me even more [than Mimi does], but I can’t participate.” Amalia assumes a passive role, although she maintains control of the situation, in a comic permutation on prescribed gender roles.

These encounters between the two ersatz lovers bookend a short scene at Mimi’s factory. Mimi’s group of workers tells him they want a slowdown, but he wants nothing to do with it: “We need order around here. There has to be profits or the plant won’t function. I’m going to make those profits.” In his role as foreman, Mimi sides with the bosses, espousing the need for order and profit, but his loyalties aren’t so clear-cut. With his next breath, he complains: “Progress has confused everyone. It’s a swindle. It was simpler when you just shot someone.”

CHAPTER XI  
TO EACH HIS OWN BASTARD

The film's climactic scene opens with an establishing shot of a statue of Cupid, a mordant comment on the role of both desire and babies in Mimi's restitution scheme. Mimi and Pippino stand at the edge of the piazza, now almost unrecognizable as a result of the out-of-control urban construction, a major highway running along what used to be a fishing wharf. As Mimi describes his plan to Pippino, "Every detail's been planned. Every element has been prepared, organized, checked. The day of reckoning is here," the film flashes back to what he has stage-managed: a shot of Amalia on the phone, then removing the clip from her husband's gun and emptying it. Mimi concludes with a typically theatrical metaphor: "It's all going to plan. The show has begun."

The cast of characters come on the scene: Rosalia and her bastard child, Fiore and her love child, while the piazza fills up with the assorted townsfolk who serve as extras in Mimi's production. Finally Sergeant Finocchiaro and his obviously pregnant wife appear at the door of the church, which provides a proscenium for the piece of theater about to unfold. Mimi treats the confrontation as performance art—playing to the audience with his exaggerated body language and broad gestures. As he acts out the exchange, the *mise-en-scène* often frames him with these extras in the background—calling to mind an

operatic production. The rapid-fire editing alternates between players and audience, cutting away at key moments for reaction shots.

Mimi declares his intention to “settle all this muddle of honor and emotions” by proposing a fair exchange: “As they say, ‘To each his own bastard.’” He wants to trade his bastard child, sired with the Sergeant’s wife, Amalia, for the one the Sergeant fathered with own wife, Rosalia. Eschewing the violent form of vendetta prescribed by Sicilian custom, Mimi utilizes the techniques of rationalization to arrive at a “legitimate” redistribution of illegitimacy. His news has the expected result: Sergeant Finocchiaro pulls out his gun. Slowly ascending the church steps, his jacket flung wide open, Mimi makes an easy target, informing the audience with mock solemnity, “Ladies and gentlemen, Sergeant Finocchiaro is going to shoot!” The gun, of course, isn’t loaded. What Mimi hasn’t counted on, however, is that the “professional” sent by the Mafia to assist him will spring to his defense, shooting and killing the Sergeant, then thrusting the gun in Mimi’s hand. As the attendant crowd reacts with panic, the bishop arrives with his motorcade—the last in the series of men with the birthmark who stand apart and above, gazing with disdain on the lives of the others.

This scene bears a strong resemblance, down to the framing and editing, to the conclusion of Coppola’s *Godfather Part III* (1990) and may have served—whether intentionally or not—as a prototype for the later film. Except that in Coppola’s film, the theatrical event takes place on a real stage and the attendant violence happens after the performance, on the steps of the famous Teatro Massimo in Palermo. It’s interesting to

note that the work being performed is Mascagni's opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, which (as in Wertmüller's film) serves as a link to the tradition of rustic chivalry.

## CHAPTER XII

### WELCOME TO THE MACHINE

A letter from Fiore to Mimi in voiceover bridges the transition from the aftermath of the killing to the scene of Mimi in prison: “Today little Mimi asked me what honor was. ‘Rubbish,’ I said. ‘Like playing war, forgetting it’s a game and getting hurt.’” Very likely, this comes as close to the director’s voice as any statement in the film. For a woman, the upholding of honor through violence is a stupid, pointless game. When Don Vito comes to pay Mimi a visit, he has another take on the matter: “You’ve earned respect. You defended your honor.” An amnesty will be granted. Against his protests, Tricarico assures him he has a place in the organization waiting for him when he gets out.

When he does get out, he finds all three women and their many children waiting for him, clamoring for Papa. The weight of his responsibility literally brings him to his knees. He turns back to the prison door and pounds on it, begging to be let back in. Though humorous, this incident announces in clear, causal manner why Mimi ultimately falls prey to the Mafia machine: Having abandoned any other support structure (political parties, trade unions, etc.), he must accept whatever help he can get. And the Mafia is waiting to step in with their own particular brand of “assistance.”

The final scene reprises the film's opening. The sound-car rolls along, but this time it's Mimi exhorting the workers, "Vote for Vito Tricarico for a future without violence, strikes, disorder." The future is a machine—ordered, organized, inhuman—as well as a pact between the Mafia and the reigning political party. Mimi spots Pippino, Fiore and his illegitimate son. They constitute an alternative, both politically and domestically, where solidarity and political engagement remain possible. But it's a future Mimi will never see. Shaking their heads with disgust, they abandon him to his fate. He runs after them, calling, "Don't leave me. I didn't want to. I believed in a new, better world too. But they're all cousins!" A series of misguided choices and the machinations of an all-encompassing power structure have come together over the course of the film to strand Mimi in the midst of the wasteland, alone and unaided.

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