

## **Divorzio all'italiana (1961), Pietro Germi**

### **Critique by Elena Gipponi**

With *Divorzio all'italiana* Pietro Germi, already an acclaimed director of high-quality genre films (western, crime film, melodrama), moved into comedy with the first in a kind of 'trilogy of malice' that also includes *Sedotta e abbandonata*/Seduced and Abandoned (1963) and *Signore e signori*/The Birds, The Bees and the Italians (1965). *Divorzio all'italiana*'s story is at first glance dramatic, and only turns into a grotesque farce in the manner of its telling. Such farcical satire is thanks to screenwriters Giannetti and De Concini, who, along with Germi, and unusually for an Italian film, received an Oscar for best original screenplay. Although comic, the narrative displays a decidedly black humour from the outset as over the opening credits a love song plays on a mandolin (the principal folk instrument of the Italian South) but quickly turns into a solemn funeral march played by brass band. The first part of the film is marked by Fefè's fantasies of possible methods of doing away with Rosalia: dissolved in a boiling cauldron to make soap, swallowed up by quick sand, even sent into orbit around the Earth. The repetition of certain situations is one of the film's favourite comic mechanisms, used to show that married life between Fefè and Rosalia is the same as that of his ageing parents, and in the many scenes where sister Agnese and her boyfriend Saro Mulè are interrupted whilst exchanging tenderesses. Recurrent repetition (the plan for the murder and the subsequent trial echo the case of Mariannina Terranova) adds up to a portrayal of a social and familial world in which daily habits and collective rituals are handed down the generations in the name of a strict respect for tradition and an unchanging sense of identity (on the surface at least). The film's malice is aimed at the persistence of antiquated and stubborn moral and social codes (the honour of the Latin male) in the face of situations in which they have become hopelessly outdated: Don Ferdinando Cefalù cannot stand his wife but instead of demanding the modernization of local custom and of the law (divorce was only legalized in Italy in the 1970s) he prefers to adopt a hypocritical respect for tradition (legislation on crimes of passion goes back to the Fascist era and was not repealed until the 1980s) and settle with the status quo. The all'italiana of the title, therefore, refers to the co-presence of backwardness and modernity, each of which are exploited by the characters when it suits them. Thus it is not only Fefè and his family who are all'italiana, but the whole town of Agramonte, which is conformist and tightly-knit, negotiating the wicked prurience of enthusiasm for Federico Fellini's scandalous *La dolce vita* (1960) with penitence in the face of the priest in his pulpit. Stylistically, Agramonte and its inhabitants are presented with a sharp and vigilant eye which differs from the realistic and invisible directorial style of many contemporary comedies: Fefè's thoughts are rendered by zooms, panoramas and slapstick fast-motion, establishing an ambiguous and subtle relationship between his narrational voice and its filmic enunciation. The director also emphasizes the aspects of caricature in the protagonists (Rosalia's facial hair, thick eyebrows and low forehead, Fefè's tics, the over-rhetorical language of the lawyer and so on) from whom our cynical detachment continually increases up to the film's unexpected finale.

From: *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, edited by Louis Bayman, Intellect Books Ltd, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1057951>