

FILM 366: Spotlight on Sicily in Literature and Film  
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Gia-Bao Dam

Gallismo in Italian Cinema: Law, Community, and Psyche in *Divorce Italian Style*, *Seduced and Abandoned*, and *L'Avventura*  
by Gia-Bao Dam '26

In post-war Italy, the collision of a deeply rooted Catholic moral order with the economic miracle produced a curious legal and cultural contradiction: while civil law still banned divorce until 1970<sup>1</sup> and granted lenient sentences for so-called “crimes of honor,” the same society celebrated an ethos of *gallismo*—a macho braggadocio that normalized male sexual freedom and policed female chastity. Italian cinema of the early 1960s seized on this tension to expose the inequities embedded in law, custom, and everyday psychology. Pietro Germi’s satirical comedies *Divorce Italian Style* and *Seduced and Abandoned* and Michelangelo Antonioni’s modernist drama *L'Avventura* together form a triptych that dissects the patriarchal code from three angles. While all three condemn the double standard that privileges male chauvinism, each illuminates a different angle of the same ideology: *Divorce Italian Style* unmask the legal-institutional machinery that licenses male violence, *Seduced and Abandoned* exposes the “village honor economy” that enforces chastity through collective coercion, and *L'Avventura* reveals the existential residue of those norms in bourgeois psychology—viewed together, dismantling patriarchy requires simultaneous reform of law, community practices, and internalized mindsets.

Pietro Germi’s *Divorce Italian Style* attacks patriarchy at its most impregnable point—the statute book. Until 1970, Italy offered no civil exit from marriage, yet Article 587 of the 1930 Rocco Penal Code allowed a husband (or father or brother) who killed a spouse, daughter, or

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/12/01/archives/italys-first-divorce-law-is-approved-by-parliament.html>

sister caught in “illegitimate carnal relations” to receive a sentence of just three to seven years, a clause repealed only in 1981<sup>2</sup>. Against this backdrop, Germi fashions Baron Ferdinando “Fefè” Cefalù, a minor Sicilian aristocrat who discovers that murder is not merely cheaper than divorce—it is legally incentivized. The screenplay makes the contradiction painfully explicit: a newspaper clipping about a celebrated honor-killer inspires Fefè’s scheme, while the town priest and lawyer both treat the homicide-in-prospect as a respectable solution. Germi’s *mise-en-scène* reinforces the critique: the baron pores over the penal code in a decaying palazzo whose flaking stucco and yawning ceilings evoke the rot of a legal order still governing the Church’s moral policing; distant church bells bleed into the tic-tac of his pocket metronome. The film is a hilarious and cutting satire of Sicilian male-chauvinist culture that pivots on the illegality of divorce in that Germi positions *gallismo* not only as an act of blustering bravery but also as state-sponsored misogyny. The film’s most revealing sequence is Fefè’s “legal-loophole monologue,” a darkly comical set that turns a legal procedure into a financial spreadsheet. Seated beneath stern ancestral portraits, he reads Article 587 aloud in a silky voice-over while dreamily fantasizing: bewigged judges nodding, courtroom spectators applauding, and oversized numerals that flip downward—seven, six, five—as each mitigating clause lops another year from the prospective sentence. Rustichelli’s score blends a ticking metronome with faint liturgical chords, underscoring how clerical morality and secular law collude to price a woman’s life. Each time the number drops, Fefè’s eyes glitter; at “six years, eight months” he whispers “accettabile,” jotting the figure on blotter paper like a travel budget. The camera lingers on ink soaking into parchment, a visual pun on blood already accounted for. When he finally closes the code, Germi smash-cuts to an imaginary reception in which Fefè, freshly pardoned, receives civic honors—a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/the-operai-maria-rosa-final-version.pdf>

gag that exposes how thoroughly the law transforms femicide into public service. In this single sequence Germi lays bare the first stratum of Italian patriarchy identified in the thesis: legal institutions do not merely tolerate male violence in the name of honor; they algorithmically optimize it. The scene's wit shocked 1961 audiences into recognizing that the true culprit was not passion but jurisprudence itself—a recognition that fed the growing campaign to abolish Article 587 and, eventually, to legalize divorce in 1970.

Pietro Germi's *Seduced and Abandoned* shifts the critique of *gallismo* from the courtroom to the dust-choked alleys of a Sicilian town, exposing how an entire community becomes the tribunal that guards female chastity and restores male honor. The plot is triggered when sixteen-year-old Agnese is impregnated by her sister's fiancé, Peppino, and her volcanic father Don Vincenzo vows to salvage the family name by forcing a marriage: “shotgun weddings, kidnapping, attempted murder” are presented as everyday tools of respectability. Germi anchors the farce in Article 544 of the Italian Penal Code, a clause that wiped a rape conviction from the books once the aggressor wed his victim, turning matrimony into legal absolution until the statute's repeal in 1981<sup>3</sup>. Within this framework the village functions as what scholars of Mediterranean society call an “honor-and-shame economy”<sup>4</sup>: gossip circulates like currency, older women police doorways, and every male eye tallies a girl's value. The system comes to manic life in the film's famed public “kidnapping” sequence. At dawn, Germi frames the town gate in deep focus as Vincenzo—center-screen with a rifle—drags the ashen Peppino downhill while Agnese stumbles behind, flanked by rosary-clutching relatives. Windows slam open; neighbors lean out to hiss “Vergogna!” as the camera racks focus from the shotgun to their judging faces, making the spectators co-authors of the coercion. Mid-march, a notary trots

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marry-your-rapist\\_law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marry-your-rapist_law)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/441-seduced-and-abandoned-honor-and-family>

alongside reciting Article 544 in bureaucratic monotone and signs papers on Peppino's back, literalizing how state law has been absorbed into village ritual. Germi's soundtrack hammers the point: clanging church bells and overlapping insults accelerate with whip-pan edits until the procession becomes carnivalesque hysteria. Even Agnese's brief rebellion—she bites Peppino's hand, drawing blood—elicits only gasps, not help, underscoring that her body is less a person than collateral in a reputational ledger. By staging felony, sacrament, and collective civic spectacle in one breathless tracking shot, Germi demonstrates that patriarchy's second layer survives because whole communities invest in honor as a social currency; every shout from a balcony is another shackle on the victim, proving that repealing a statute means little unless the gossip-driven economy that enforces it is dismantled too.

In *L'Avventura*, Michelangelo Antonioni relocates the critique of Italian patriarchy to the interior life of Sandro, an affluent architect whose virility has curdled into bored entitlement. Antonioni famously told reporters at Cannes that “Eros is sick; man reacts badly, only on erotic impulse, and he is unhappy,”<sup>5</sup> a diagnosis he visualizes by making Sandro incapable of sustaining either work or love. When we first meet him, Sandro boasts that he abandoned architecture for easy profits “selling plans” to speculators, revealing a psyche hollowed out by modern consumerism. His attention span mirrors the film's drifting camera—he can no more complete a building than remain faithful to a woman. Antonioni truly invented a new “grammar of alienation”: long takes, empty foregrounds, and architectural barriers render the Sicilian islands and later the baroque streets of Noto as emotional deserts where Sandro wanders in perpetual distraction. In place of Germi's swaggering machos, Sandro embodies existential *gallismo*: sexual entitlement inflated into a desperate strategy against boredom. His seduction of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/100-l-avventura-cannes-statement>

Claudia begins only hours after Anna's disappearance, yet he betrays even that makeshift bond at the first opportunity, confirming yet another assumption about an upper class hardened, yet still filled with desperate yearning. Where Germi exposed patriarchal violence in penal codes and village rites, Antonioni shows it persisting as a psychic reflex that treats women as emotional morphine—a reflex that law reform and social shame have failed to cure. The final sequence crystallizes Sandro's pathology and Claudia's ambiguous complicity. After Claudia discovers him having sex with a would-be actress in their hotel, Sandro stumbles onto an empty terrace overlooking Noto's stone geometry. Antonioni frames the shot in a wide, static composition: Sandro, foreground right, collapses on a bench and begins to sob; the massive wall before him consumes two-thirds of the frame, while Mount Etna hovers on the horizon. Claudia enters, stopping behind him; Antonioni keeps their backs to the camera for almost half a minute, the silence broken only by ambient wind—an aural void that resembles a yawning vacancy in their souls. When she finally places her hand on Sandro's head, the gesture is tremulous, part consolation, part resignation; the camera does not move, forcing viewers to read meaning in stillness. Patriarchy here ends in emotional caregiving: the wronged woman tends to the man who has wounded her, exemplifying how internalized gender prejudices survive the collapse of external sanctions. The static frame therefore completes the film's indictment: Sandro's tears are not moral awakening but narcissistic grief; Claudia's hesitant forgiveness signals the cost women still pay to keep male despair from spiraling into chaos. In Antonioni's bleak masterpiece, its residue only lingers as a psychic malady.

Germi and Antonioni drew out a three-tier map of Italian gallismo. *Divorce Italian Style* proves the law itself licensed masculine violence; *Seduced and Abandoned* shows a whole village enforcing the same code through collective surveillance, gossip and forced marriage;

*L'Avventura* reveals the residue of that code as bored, entitled desire that women are still expected to soothe. Together the films argue that dismantling gallismo demands more than repealing bad statutes—it requires dismantling the communal rituals and inner reflexes that keep the double standard alive.

#### Works Cited

*Divorce Italian Style*. Directed by Pietro Germi, performances by Marcello Mastroianni and Daniela Rocca, Titanus, 1961.

*L'Avventura*. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, performances by Monica Vitti and Gabriele Ferzetti, Cino Del Duca, 1960.

*Seduced and Abandoned*. Directed by Pietro Germi, performances by Stefania Sandrelli and Saro Urzì, Titanus, 1964.