CHAPTER I

The Seduction of Mimi: Order and the Family

The Seduction of Mimi was the third of Lina Wertmüller's films, after *The Lizards (*1963) and *Let's Talk About Men* (1965), but the first of her American hits. It introduced us to what the critics and the public came to recognize as the signature Wertmüller themes, characterization and cinematic style. Although initially almost universally praised, soon the evaluation and appreciation of these elements became the object of controversy and dispute, with judgments running the gamut from adulation to contempt. One thing was sure, it was agreed that she was the most talked about director in a long time. She had the knack for touching raw nerves, and she reveled in it.

To some critics the Wertmüller protagonists, Mimi, Gennarino, Tunin and Pasqualino, were examples of the "Chaplinesque underdog" (Michalczyk 238) confronted by powerful institutions such as the Government, the Church, the Mafia, the Nazis and the Family, as well as the more generalized social structures such as class and gender. In short, they were all those forces that in this study I contend collectively represent the "Order" that Wertmüller fears and indicts in her films, and what her "new man," the "Man in Disorder," was meant to overthrow if civilization was to be saved. Wertmüller usually situates this underdog in a political and ethical dilemma where in order to survive he must abandon his moral principles (238). To some critics like Michalczyk, this constitutes a realistic treatment of the leading character (238) and he argues that Lina Wertmüller's politics are more pragmatic than ideological. In his interview with her, referred to in his book, *The Italian Political Filmmakers,* he was struck by the way that, "She addressed these issues in a simple, colloquial manner that shows that they have entered into her everyday life and are not simply political platitudes" (238). This particular critic believed that Wertmüller had her finger on the pulse of the industrial and post-industrial society dealing with all the plagues

that industrialization brings: terrorism, youth and drug problems, proletarian and class conflicts, economics and politics, the feminist movement and gender conflict, and the power of mass culture in general (238).

To Gina Blumenfeld, on the other hand, Lina Wertmüller's themes are only "an unfortunate hodgepodge of contemporary European 'leftish' thought" (4). According to Blumenfeld, the problem is always posed in an either/or framework, and Wertmüller is repeatedly guilty of creating false dichotomies such as love/politics, material security/human dignity and individual aggrandizement/social responsibility (4). As we will see throughout the following discussions, this criticism, voiced by so many other critics as well, (Marcus calls it the politics of polarity, which I will examine in the context of *Love and Anarchy)* is hard to dismiss because there is some evidence for its truth. When these false dichotomies are created, the director shirks the more difficult responsibility of finding a middle ground. Hence, for reasons that may or may not be considered valid, and to which I have alluded in the Introduction, we repeatedly feel that she offers no solutions. The question of whether or not it is incumbent upon her as an artist to provide solutions is a thread that will run throughout our exploration.

Even more dismissive of Wertmüller's films is Lino Micicché, one of the most influential and powerful critics in Italy. To him the director's films are nothing more than a little sex, a little drama and a little *commedia all'italiana,* and her efforts, with the exception of her critically acclaimed first film, *The Lizards,* are aimed at pleasing the consumer even at the cost of producing vacuous trash. Micicché's blistering critique claims that she suffers from "iterazione seriale" (serial reiteration) and that the constant repetition of the basic elements[1] all add up to total predictability where "another Mimi suffers another wound" and each time the public gets exactly, no more and no less, what it got the first time (157).

In Lina Wertmüller's own words, her fundamental theme is, "The simple story of a man in relation to his society or in conflict with it, a man who arrives unprepared, naïve, and is confronted with the machinery of a certain society which he is forced to make peace with" (quoted in Bachmann 7). *The Seduction of Mimi,* as controversial as all her other films, if not more so, fits this plot description pretty neatly, as do the other three films under discussion here. History tells us that this film created a furor when it was released in New York in 1974.[2] Vincent Canby, leading a chorus all singing the same paean, called her brilliant and very original and her film, "unlike the work of anyone else" (1). She was compared to Bertolucci, Pasolini, Visconti and Bergman and soon the Shah of Iran offered to build her a film studio in

Teheran (Gerard 21). As we will subsequently see, this worship of "Santa Lina di New York" lasted about two years. Lillian Gerard, (then manager of the Paris Theater in New York City) who was instrumental in introducing European directors to the American public, pointed out that before the release of *The Seduction of Mimi* the American public might have mistaken Wertmüller for the name of a German beer (21), but afterwards it was on everyone's lips and hers became the must-see films of the season.

This then is the context of the critical and public reception of *The Seduction of Mimi*, the film that arguably more than any other of Lina Wertmüller's 1970s films, is an exploration of the problematic and conflictual relation between the individual and Marxist ideology. Although *Seven Beauties* and *Love and Anarchy* also deal with the life of the underclass, Wertmüller's primary focus in the latter two films is not on economics. This is also true in *Swept Away* to some extent, because although we hear quite a bit about the proletariat and the Communist gospel as preached by *L'Unità,* the Communist organ, the theoretical core of the film revolves around the pervasiveness of cultural conditioning and how it molds gender and class relations.[3]

In *The Seduction of Mimi,* however, the scrutiny is on the economic system and its various ramifications and facets, especially the political, and how the pressure of its external forces determines the course of the individual's life. Mimi's life choices are established by the economic imperative that willingly blinds him to all others; at first because he must earn a living and later because he becomes a willing consumer in pursuit of material gratification. The story of Mimi's economic life is simple enough, he leaves his hometown near Catania when, as a result of political naiveté he votes for the wrong candidate. Thus by antagonizing the town boss he loses his job. He immigrates to Torino (land of employment opportunity) to become a "metallurgist" and all that term implies and returns to Catania subsequent to a decision made by his "employer." Once there he is held figuratively captive by the capitalists who decide whether or not he will retain his job, and is ultimately morally destroyed because he must support Rosalia, Amalia, Fiore, and the eight children they collectively have. We can call this the Marxist matrix of *The Seduction of Mimi.*

Historical materialism tells us that human beings are totally subject to forces they do not understand and cannot control, and that under these conditions, they cannot be free (Singer 33). Furthermore, Marx identified the primary force driving societies as being economic and declared that, "In the social production of their life men enter into definite relations that are

indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces" (Tucker 4).

However, economics does not exist in a cultural and psychological vacuum, and many critics have pointed out that one of the chief flaws of Marxist ideology is to ignore or gloss over this important fact. Indeed, this criticism was so frequent even in Marx's later life that in 1890 Engels, acting as Marx's champion, in a letter emphasized that to say that the economic element is the only determining one in the Marxist conception of history is to distort it (Heilbroner 66). Moreover, he went so far as to say that Marx had never made that claim, that instead, we should view the "economic situation" merely as "the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure…all exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles…" (Tucker 760, 762).

Engels defended himself and Marx against charges of crude "economism" by stating, "We had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to enter into their rights" (Heilbroner 66; Tucker 760, 762). Whether Marxism is or is not crudely simplistic or monolithic is not the immediate concern here. The important fact is that while the economic theories of Marxism do provide the ideological matrix of *The Seduction of Mimi,* it remains merely that and no more. Although exposed to Marxism, indoctrinated and pressured to join the labor union, Mimi ultimately proves to be totally resistant to Marxist ideology and Communist practices. We see for example, that while at one time it serves his purposes to live under the watchful eye of the Lenin poster hanging over his and Fiore's bed, he later asks her to remove it. Mimi's social conditioning and cultural limitations prove to be far stronger than Marxism, and if he finds himself in the end overwhelmed with the financial support of three women and eight children it is principally because he has chosen to avenge his honor in the time-honored tradition of his environment. We will see that the driving force of the film is, as it is in *Seven Beauties* and to a lesser extent in *Love and Anarchy,* the politics of individualism, that is, the inability to reconcile the personal with the political. Individualism seems to preclude politics for Mimi. However, this is not true for Fiore, who sells both hand-knit sweaters and Mao's *Little Red Book* side by side, a deft directorial touch on the part of Wertmüller to suggest that the two domains coexist in harmony for her. The fact that the exploration of individualism is the true concern of this film may explain why the film's initial focus on Communism gradually fades in the second half. This shift in focus reflects the evolution of Mimi's consciousness

as well as his praxis. Although it is Mimi's defiant vote for the Communist candidate that sets the events in motion at the start, in the end he has turned away from the proletarians now under his direct control at the quarry and shares the aspirations of the capitalists whom he previously abhorred; the latter apparently inseparable from the Tricarico family identified by the ubiquitous three mole cluster on the cheek.

In the end, it is Mimi's "three great refusals," expressions of his unwillingness to toe the line, anyone's line, that both define his individualist philosophy of life and cause his moral failure. It is around these refusals that the film is structured and we will examine them in due course in order to comprehend the complexity of Mimi's journey and his "political" education. But more immediately we need to address the issue of the film's deceptive simplicity, because how we understand the so-called simplicity that some critics claim borders on a shallow and reductionist treatment of the ideas presented by Wertmüller, will affect our evaluation of her as writer and director and of her film as a whole.

This is an especially important issue for another reason, because it is closely linked to the repeated accusation of reductionism and intellectual confusion—the charge being that she suffers from the latter and that she therefore causes it in the viewer. Blumenfeld, Marcus and Michalczyk have all expressed their views on this subject. Pauline Kael also believed that the director's tendency to reduce ideas to absurdity was the equivalent of sticking "political labels… on the participants so you'll know what you're watching" (104). Blumenfeld has attempted to justify this alleged reductionism as the director's desire to "make radical ideas palatable" to what is essentially a politically unsophisticated audience that prefers to be entertained instead of harangued. The result, in Blumenfeld's estimation, is that this philosophy "so simplifies these notions as to misrepresent them, insuring that they will be misunderstood" (4). This of course, could also explain the sheer volume of controversy generated by the Wertmüller films. Blumenfeld's speculation is quite plausible, at least in part, because Lina Wertmüller herself has implied as much in her many interviews. She has asserted in more or less the same words, to Blumenfeld, Bachmann and Ferlita at least, that her top priority is to reach the working class. "My greatest desire is to make popular cinema. I continue to do all I can to avoid addressing the elite, intellectual or otherwise" (Blumenfeld 5). Apparently this is a deliberate policy that emerged when her first film, *The Lizards,* won a dozen international awards and was praised by intellectuals. The director claims that as a result she changed her politics and her approach, "searching for a popular cinema while

trying not to reject anything that might enable me to communicate with people" (Blumenfeld 5).

John Michalczyk, on the other hand, sees this tendency as part of the aesthetic of the neo-realist and post neo-realist filmmakers whose goal was to be both instructive and moralistic. In Rossellini's terms, they produced "theses through fiction… but based on the sociopolitical reality of their times" (17). These films were meant to raise consciousness and to "persuade the viewer to act differently without being a brainwashing experience" (17). The price of reducing complex social issues to a two hour film, as Wertmüller does, is frequently reductionism—albeit with a noble intention. However, Lina Wertmüller is in excellent company in this respect. The other directors "guilty" of the same charge are Petri, Bellocchio, Pontecorvo, Pasolini, Bertolucci and Rosi (Michalczyk 17).

In *The Seduction of Mimi* there are two principal examples of what can be construed as reductionist representation. The first is that although Mimi's exposure and response to Marxism is the foundation of the plot, Wertmüller's treatment of Marxism is shallow, if not actually peremptory. While agreeing in part with Blumenfeld and Michalczyk's speculations, I would argue that this is neither an accident nor an indication of insufficient knowledge, and certainly not of confusion on the director's part. Rather, it is her attempt to mirror the level of sophistication and comprehension at which the working class understands the theories that the party elite feed them. The plant workers with whom Mimi works in Torino speak in clichés about politics and the economy in their attempt to seduce our hero to Communism, but their indoctrination is limited to generalizations about the purchase of a pair of underpants being a political act and platitudes about capitalist bosses who "stick it up our asses." Indeed, much of this talk is not heard at all by the viewer, being instead voiced over by the reading of Mimi's letter to his family—a way of emphasizing the utter banality of this political palaver.

Equally, Mimi's father, in his fury against his son's self-destructive adherence to the Party, spews clichés about Communists being "a bunch of gangsters," an ironic comment when we consider that, as we will see, it is the capitalists who are represented as being hand in glove with the crime bosses. Moreover, the black-clad, obviously uneducated women of Mimi's family make the illuminating observation that, "everyone knows that unions are subversive" when it is abundantly clear that they do not know the meaning of the word at all. Nor is Mimi himself immune from this condition. He too is guilty of reductionist thinking. In his case he equates Communism with sexual libertinism. When he meets Fiore, he asks her, "Please, as a favor

comrade, do you mind if I kiss you?" When Fiore refuses, he insists with, "But didn't you say you were a Tro…Tro?"—a word that she finishes as Trotskyite but that every Italian speaking member of the audience finishes as "troia"—whore. Ironically, and revealing Mimi's real motives in their budding relationship, the scene ends with Mimi calling her a slut because she will *not* sleep with him. The story that Fiore tells about how she was fired from her job because she would not "come across" for her boss when he found a copy of Mao's *Little Red Book* in her possession serves to reinforce the impression that for others, as well as for Mimi, Communism means little more than loose morals, at least for a woman party member. These reactions are all indications that what the average member of the working class knows about Communism is reduced to misinformation and misunderstanding of facts that are distorted to begin with.

Yet the conditions existing in the Torino factory where Mimi works as a "metallurgist," are a classic illustration of the most dehumanizing form of capitalism—exactly the sort that Marx condemned and wished to eradicate. The noisy, dirty, depressingly anonymous workplace is complemented by long hours, dangerous working conditions and little or no respect for the proletarians on the part of the management. Wertmüller's use of the soundtrack is frequently invasive, certainly it is rarely unobtrusive. At the start of *The Seduction of Mimi,* however, it is masterful in its expository and ironic economy. The aria's words, "We have arrived. This is the land where the political prisoners weep…Ah! This is where the poor man was brought to," informs us and foreshadows plot developments.

The alienation induced by capitalism is a subject close to the director's heart, and on a number of occasions she has expressed strong opinions about its destructiveness. Indeed, she has identified it as the greatest violence that can be perpetrated on a fellow human being, greater than insults, slaps, and injuries and even greater than rape because it diminishes the individual's humanity (Garson 71). "People are made to feel worth little," she has passionately declared, "and then worth less so that they can be used as soldiers, as workers, as fascist goons, used for someone else's profit" (Garson 72). Although we can easily perceive that this sentiment is relevant to all four films, the statement that seems to be most relevant to *The Seduction of Mimi* is that, "Repetition is like death! Think what man asks of man, to stand in an assembly line, putting in the screws all day!" (Sayre 1).

Despite the fertile ground for Communism that such conditions provide, there appears to be no character who displays an intelligent or accurate knowledge of Marxist theory or Communist praxis in *The Seduction of Mimi.*

This should not be surprising when we consider that another of the well-known weaknesses of Marxism is that, although its birth and life among the proletariat hinges on indoctrination, they are usually the least equipped intellectually (due most frequently to insufficient education) to understand the theories in any but the most rudimentary fashion, and are therefore vulnerable to manipulation and demagoguery. In short it can be argued that the way in which Wertmüller's characters understand or misunderstand Marxism is reflective of the general level of comprehension that Marx should have expected of the proletariat class on which he based the future of his ideology. Admittedly, Mimi seems to be among the least informed about politics at that stage of his political education, something that has not escaped Lucy Quacinella who commented that in fact, "in his ignorance and political conservatism, he is far from reflecting the actual situation of the Southern proletarians who have emigrated to the big industrial centers…" (16). Yet even if there are others among his "comrades" who may be somewhat better equipped to take full advantage of Marxism, it is clear that Mimi is representative of a large segment of the proletariat. Therefore this apparently simplistic representation of Marxist theory serves a very specific and rather sophisticated purpose for the director.

The second aspect of Wertmüller's film that has been judged to be reductionist pertains to politics. Although this word, "politics," is bandied about by many of the characters, closer examination reveals that what may at first appear to be an off-hand treatment of the subject is in fact deceptively complex. Close scrutiny reveals that the very concept of politics, central to the structure and meanings embedded in the film, is defined in at least three different ways by the three different "interest groups" in the film: the capitalists/crime syndicate, the proletariat and Mimi. In *The Seduction of Mimi* Wertmüller deliberately conflates the identity of the capitalists and the crime syndicate, for it is obvious that the same people run both "families." Visually this is suggested by the director's use of the three mole cluster that adorns the cheek of key figures in both these organizations from Torino to Catania. This device, important in itself for the latter use, accomplishes a number of additional purposes: it provides continuity in a diegesis whose setting shifts twice (south, north and south again); it gives us an insight into Mimi's fear-ridden consciousness, and it makes a powerful statement about the dangerous similarities between capitalists and crime bosses; that is, ordered institutions.

A man with three moles (a synecdoche for the Tricarico family) forces Mimi out of town when he has foolishly voted independent of Tricarico's

"suggestion," another leads the hit operation witnessed by Mimi at his son's christening in Torino. But the most important of them all is Tricarico himself. Having summoned Mimi to a meeting whose purpose is to induce him to join the "family," the big boss arrogantly brags that he is the owner of all that they survey from his terrace. Tricarico has of course completely miscalculated the motive for Mimi's lack of cooperation with the police in Torino. Whereas pure terror and perhaps a touch of self-interest caused Mimi to keep silent, the crime bosses interpret his actions as loyalty to the mob and Mimi's adherence to the much-valued Mafia code of *omertá.*

The scene on the terrace unequivocally makes explicit the common identity of the Tricaricos as the controllers of both the local (and perhaps not only the local) economy and the crime syndicate. The industrial crane towering over the urban sprawl of the Catania skyline visually dominates the background as the boss's mole cluster dominates the foreground through the director's use of the extreme close-up. Pointing and waving at the view from his terrace, Tricarico informs Mimi that "all this" is not enough to satisfy his much bigger ambitions; he must also control the "legitimate" political machinery. We know that he is well on his way towards accomplishing this goal since Cannamozza, the candidate for whom Mimi refused to vote at the start of the film, is Tricarico's puppet. The stated goal, to build ever more capital, demands methods that must include the ability to control labor, and this can only be done through the strategic placement of key people on the City Council and other positions. This objective is not only theoretically attainable for Tricarico and his minions, but it is something that, as he informs Mimi, he will be able to do in two or three years' time. We know that his reach is already formidable; it is his organization that gets Mimi transferred from Torino back to Catania. Indeed, as has been suggested by a number of critics, in *The Seduction of Mimi* the Mafia functions as a metaphor for corruption and the abuse of power not only in Italy, but as a universal plague.

Giannini's well-known facial mobility, and especially the emotional and psychological nuances he is able to suggest with his eyes, gives us an insight into Mimi's reception of all this information. We guess that roiling around in his mind there is a combination of fear, cynicism and stubborn determination to refuse the boss's blandishments—at least for the moment.

Nor are we left in any doubt as to the probity of Tricarico's methods. He boasts to Mimi that he burns down existing buildings in order to put up his own, buildings which ostensibly are to serve the proletariat's needs but which are actually too expensive for them to afford. Indeed, the crime boss even

brags to our protagonist that he is not squeamish about committing murder or corrupting whatever government agency or agent necessary. Mimi's weak objections are no match for Tricarico's rebuttal, that exploitation, corruption, robbery and murder lead to "a political system that works." How it works, or in whose interest other than his own, is not made explicit. But his claim is a potent reminder of one of the axiomatic assumptions of Marxism, that "the state is generally used to defend the interests of the ruling class," almost always at the expense of the proletariat (Heilbroner 67). Another salient point is that Tricarico's words referring to a "system that works," are highly evocative of the director's dread, the concept of order.

The problem in the society presented by *The Seduction of Mimi* is that we can no longer be sure about what constitutes "the State." However, we are certain that Tricarico not only uses the state machinery to defend the interests of the ruling class, but may even have the power to choose who shall constitute "the State." There is no doubt whatsoever in the film that in certain spheres his organization has already preempted the functions of the legitimate state. Consider the fact that it is his machinations that eventually get Mimi into prison and out of prison. Evidently he can fix judicial sentences as well as elections. Is Wertmüller claiming then, that capitalists are criminals? Perhaps not, but what she is suggesting is much closer to the spirit of Marxism: that the driving force of abuse and crime is coterminous with the desire for economic gain and power—and that organized institutions make such abuses possible.

The sophistication and complexity of the Tricarico "family's" political-economic ideology is vividly contrasted to the platitudinous and simplistic exposition of Marxism that we have already discussed. What both groups do, however, to a different degree of success, is to use rhetoric in the service of self-interest. I might add that the misuse of rhetoric recurs frequently in the Wertmüller films under discussion. The glib and self-serving capitalists on the yacht at the start of *Swept Away,* to name just one example, use rhetoric about the environment and the need to protect it from pollution and other abuses, to even justify genocide of the lower classes.

If the proletarian's definition of politics proves to be unarticulated or diffused at best, Mimi's articulation of it, when he eventually emerges from the literal and metaphorical fog of Marxism that he encounters in Torino is very clearly felt and expounded by him. However, Mimi's peculiarly personal philosophy and definition of politics are the product of the three "refusals" mentioned earlier, and of the way in which he accepts or rejects their consequences. In order to understand Mimi's ideological evolution, it is

necessary to examine these more closely.

In the opening scene Don Calogero's thugs are distributing campaign pamphlets at the cement factory/quarry. Although they usurp the rhetoric of Communism to appeal to the workers whose votes they are soliciting with the slogan: "Workers, for a future of liberty and well-being vote for Cannamozza!", Mimi sees the system for what it really is, the arbitrary exercise of Don Calogero's personal power through the granting or withholding of privileges and rights such as employment. This perspicacity is especially ironic when we consider that most of Mimi's troubles and his eventual moral bankruptcy, as we will see shortly, stem from a fundamental blindness, an inability to see reality that consistently leads him to make the wrong choices. Yet at least this once Mimi is seeing the situation clearly. It matters little that the slogan's vagueness is such as to render it meaningless—slogans are merely the pretext that allows the system to retain a modicum of apparent respectability and legitimacy. Everyone knows that the real reasons for which they must vote for Don Calogero's man are more urgent: if you don't, you may lose your job, your limbs or even your life. Mimi, in his own unsophisticated and unintellectual manner, comments on the hollowness of the political rhetoric and form with a typically *ad hominem* displacement of his own: "His father married a whore, didn't he?"

But while Mimi is savvy, or at least cynical, about the source of political power, he is abysmally naïve and credulous about the mechanics of the system, believing the half-hearted assertions of his Communist friends that the ballot is secret. Ironically it is Mimi's father, who is certainly less educated than his son, who knows the score. "Secret?" he asks, "they even know the number of hairs on our asses!" Despite this claim, Mimi asserts unequivocally that he will not vote for Cannamozza. His reason, "I don't like him!" assumes an almost metaphysical dimension reminiscent of Melville's Bartleby, as Mimi punctuates his definitive statement with a click of the tongue and an uplifted chin, a gesture that Giannini uses to good effect in other similarly crucial moments in the portrayal of Mimi.

Nevertheless, the significance of our protagonist's magnificent refusal is powerfully undercut by the ignorance that accompanies it. It is one thing to stand up to corruption, knowing the consequences and being willing to accept them; it is quite another to do so hiding behind the anonymity of the secret ballot. The first of Mimi's refusals is therefore not an act of self-empowerment; it is merely a display of naiveté and ignorance. These are weaknesses that apparently are shared by his Communist friends, who first encourage him to defy the system, and then shrug off the mistake whose

consequences only Mimi must suffer. After this episode Mimi must face the unquestionable fact that his life is ruled by external forces.

His second refusal is an equally visceral one. Having witnessed by sheer accident a mob rub-out at the restaurant where his son's christening is being celebrated,[4] Mimi refuses to divulge information to aid the local police investigation. This rejection of the established order should come as no surprise since Mimi, obviously knowing how to play the deadly game of *omertá,* has pleaded with the killers to spare his life because he "didn't see anything. [I] was looking the other way." His fear is immeasurably compounded by the fact that both the killer and an investigative officer bear the dreaded mole cluster on their cheeks, another reminder of the futility of trying to separate the legitimate power base from the illegitimate interlopers. It is significant that this refusal too is punctuated by the same clicking of the tongue and uplifting of the chin that we have seen before. It leads us to believe that Giannini chose this as the visual leitmotif to punctuate the decisive moments of his character's life.

However, to say that Mimi has made a conscious or deliberate choice is still premature. At this stage of his development Mimi's level of self-awareness is minimal and his reactions are more an expression of the survival instinct than of reasoned motivation. It is fear that prompts his silence. The fact that the mob misinterprets it is providential for him not only because it changes the economic course of his life, but because it is around this time that Mimi begins to truly understand himself and his aspirations. When berated by his comrades for not attending the union meetings and for "having gone over to the other side," Mimi aggressively defends himself by asking, "What's wrong with that? I decided to build a career." That he is no longer "one of us" matters not at all because whereas the newly-emigrated Mimi basked in the camaraderie of the union and the Communist party meetings, and proudly flaunted his brand-new identity of politically initiated "metallurgist," the present Mimi lays claim to a more fundamental identity, and one which is more congenial to his cultural conditioning and temperament. Mimi is now a father. This is indeed the stated justification for the rejection of his socio-political life.

This kind of cynical and self-serving ideology has a historical precedent in Italy, the *qualunquismo* movement popular before World War I. The reasoning behind it held that since exploitation and power relationships remain essentially unchanged regardless of political ideology, it does not really matter which party or ideology you subscribe to. The *qualunquisti* recognized the predominance of "sentiment and self-interest" (Quacinella

16). Lucy Quacinella argues that Wertmüller's ultimate approval of this ideology for Mimi is proof that her political ideas are far from being as progressive as the American public mistakenly believed. They are in fact as reactionary as the Italian public claimed.

It makes perfect sense to agree with Marx that the individual must be viewed as merely a cog in the juggernaut of capitalism, but I would argue that one of the weaknesses of Marxism is an insufficient weight given to the psychological forces driving the individual. It is true that the proletarian experience is similar for all its members—at least in the external reality of exploitation and alienation. And given this starting point, it is tempting to agree with Marx that, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Tucker 4). Unfortunately however, Marx believes that, "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general" (Singer 62). Marx's assumption implies that human nature is not fixed, but will change with the changing socio-

economic system (Singer 62). So far we can still accept the theory, but to believe, as the practical application of this theory would suggest, that each person would willingly work for the benefit of others and identify his or her own welfare with the collective welfare (i.e. Communism in practice) has been disproved by recent history. The fall of Communism has in fact proved that human nature is not as pliable as Marx optimistically posited. There are two facts to consider. First, human emotions such as greed, individualism and yes, parental love, are impossible to eradicate or perhaps even to attenuate. Second, although individuals like Mimi may be ideal candidates for Communism because of the conditions of their lives, the infinitely diverse psychological make-up of the individual and the social and cultural texture of his or her own environment make human reactions both unique and largely unpredictable.

Faced with the long-term and abstract welfare of humanity and the short-term but concrete advancement of Mimi Mardocheo and his baby son, Mimi chooses his son. And so, Mimi, like Pasqualino in *Seven Beauties,* opts for the quintessentially Italian *menefreghismo,* a way of saying that, "I'm out for my own good and the hell with everybody else!" When shortly after his chosen silence he swears an oath on his baby's head, he is making a clear statement about his priorities and what he holds most sacred. In essence he has definitively refused Communism at this point. When he asks Fiore to remove Lenin's portrait from the wall over their bed it is merely an outward confirmation of a psychological *fait accompli*: the refusal of Communism..

Mimi's return to Catania initiates what thematically and structurally should be considered the second half of the film. In the first half the protagonist has gone out into the world to be exposed to new ideas, Marxism being the principal one, and he has proved to be resistant to them. His resistance has crystallized around the three refusals we have just discussed: to vote for Cannamozza, to aid the legitimate authorities and to work for the collective welfare. In the second half Mimi's socio-cultural conditioning proves to be the motivator of his actions and starts with a reluctant acceptance that sets in motion the ironic coupling of Mimi's economic success and moral failure.

The logical, although ironic, use of "friends" provides one of the elements of continuity in the film. But whereas the invitation in Torino to be "one of us" was extended by his fellow workers, in Catania the same invitation, set in a radically different context, is made by Tricarico and his mob. Although Mimi was a free agent in the first situation, he discovers that he is not in the second. His spirited attempt to reject the "invitation" is

ignored and he is manipulated, indeed coerced, into a relationship that he does not want but that is the logical outcome of the recent events of his life choices. Apparently Tricarico's reward for Mimi's silence is not refundable, once bought it cannot be returned. In a statement that could at once be a promise or a threat, Tricarico tells Mimi, "Friends are not forgotten."

The scene that takes place on Tricarico's terrace, a vantage point from which he can both survey and display his extensive domain, is punctuated by the mention of "trust," "honor," and "payback," concepts whose dangerous implications do not escape our hero. The promise of "an important career in the refinery" no doubt interests the new father who has vowed to turn his baby son into an arch-consumer, but Mimi balks at becoming "one of us"— a group that is clearly understood as The Mob—out of fear and mistrust. He therefore tells Tricarico that he wants nothing to do "with you people." Mimi indignantly and pompously notifies the Boss that he still believes in the virtue of doing an honest day's work. Nor does he stop there. He goes on to give Tricarico, in what proves to be his last flash of independence and revolt, his opinion about the mob's corruption, their methods and their treatment of poor people. As it turns out, even Mimi has underestimated the scope of the corruption involved, for he is informed by Tricarico that far from serving the politicians, as Mimi has suggested, it is the politicians that serve the mob. This fact in itself would be disturbing enough to any civic-minded citizen, but Tricarico's speculation about why Mimi protected the killer in Torino from the police is even more so. In the boss' estimation Mimi kept silent because ultimately he has greater trust in the mob than in the police. This suspicion, not an unreasonable one given the big picture that we have just been given of Catania and its political workings, lays bare the rotten foundation of the entire social edifice. It also suggests that there is no safe haven from organized crime, whether we call it The Mob, the Mafia or by any other name. Indeed, given what we have seen of the election that started Mimi's peregrinations, it is disturbingly clear that it is not only organized crime that is the problem. Big Brother is also watching.

The scene ends with Mimi's symbolic defeat. He is manipulated into picking up off the floor the emblematic coin of his future wages that Tricarico has deliberately dropped. If Mimi had before this already gone over to the capitalists in principle, now he joins the practice to the principle. In a wonderfully compact cut from this scene, in the next we see our protagonist abusing the refinery workers under his despotic rule. Having now become a textbook illustration of the exploiting capitalist (albeit without the capitalist's wealth), he demands ever greater production out of them. In terms of Lina

Wertmüller's central theme, it is obvious that Mimi has now drifted totally to the political right, and from that position he craves and imposes order. Having become alienated from the human struggles of his co-workers, he has not only forgotten the oppression that he himself has experienced, but has now become part of the *Order* that had attempted to crush him.

Nevertheless, in spite of the sea change that has occurred in Mimi, the reputation of the progressive, worldly and politically savvy "metallurgist" still clings to him for a while longer. This world of illusion is shattered by the reality of the deeply ingrained social prejudices he still shares with his fellow Sicilians. His vanity and outrage prompt him to reveal the double life he has been leading with Fiore and their baby when his long-neglected wife Rosalia, whispers to her friends that Mimi is impotent. To be thought "a pervert, a queer, a man who likes men," is totally unendurable. Not unexpectedly in a culture where double standards of all kinds are adopted, the revelation that he has been cheating on Rosalia makes him "more of a man" in the eyes of his friends—if not in the mind of the viewer who by now is aware that Mimi has no real moral strength or integrity. On the other hand, of course Rosalia is considered a slut by everyone, and most especially by Mimi. The only law he knows is the proverbial law of the jungle: do whatever is necessary to get ahead. It comes as no surprise therefore that the façade of the self-described "civilized man" breaks down completely and spectacularly when he is informed that his wife has not only cheated on him, but is now pregnant. In an instant we see the thin veneer of civilization that he has acquired up North and that the label of progressive, modern "metallurgist" implies, disappear. The "civilized" Mimi disintegrates even physically, changing from a controlled, overbearing, vain and arrogant macho to an enraged, quivering, hysterical animal that goes wild. "But what about your Communist ideas?" his friend Peppino shouts at the berserk Mimi. His answer leaves no doubt about the place of political ideology in his real world: "Go to hell, you and your Communism. I don't care if it's Lenin's baby!"

In quite a number of the interviews that the director has granted over the years she has referred to the idea of the "false progress." She has also defined it as false consciousness-taking or false political growth (Biskind 11). What she wishes to communicate through Mimi is that we all live a kind of double life, the ideological and the emotional. Every day, all of us, we accept things without thinking; we accept compromises in order to simply carry on. The people in the street, she claims, will talk about politics and progress, but deep down they feel very differently from what they admit. Despite the lip service that they pay to neophilia, "They continue to live in the past, they are

superstitious, they continue to believe in all the antique sicknesses, in the Mafia, in the idea of power…" and so on (Bachmann 8). Of course, it is precisely this kind of disconnect that we have been discussing. Marxism is an ideology, and as an ideology it may even be noble, but Mimi has all the failings and weaknesses of human beings.

One of the ambiguities of Wertmüller's characterization of the male protagonist is that he is a combination of attractive and repelling traits (Michalczyk 238). He is macho, brash, arrogant, vain and frequently violent, but he is also, like Mimi, endearingly naïve, loving and pathetic. She clearly has a great deal of sympathy for him, yet she still presents him warts and all.[5] We probably cannot admire him, but we certainly can sympathize with his ambivalence. In short he is as contradictory as most of us human beings.

In another respect, Lina Wertmüller's notion of the "false progress" can be seen as the inevitable result of the rapid industrial development that produced the so-called economic miracle of the 1960s. Just because the economic conditions of a society improve dramatically and suddenly does not mean that they will abandon the long-held prejudices as quickly. The gap that opens up between lip service and true belief may become wide indeed. As such, while Mimi congratulates himself on being a progressive and politicized "metallurgist" and pays lip service to Communism, he is actually mired in the old values. The result is that he is blind to his true nature and has no accurate moral compass to use as a guide. It is an inescapable fact that as a theory, Marxism is a beautiful ideology, perhaps too beautiful and austere for mere human beings with sordid desires and drives. Mimi, for example, becomes a rabid consumer once he becomes a father, ostensibly because he wants his son to have what their society has traditionally identified as "all the good things of life."

Once Mimi learns that his wife has cuckolded him, he wants revenge in the time-honored Sicilian tradition. As a result, he plans and stages the seduction of Amalia Finocchiaro, innocent wife of the man who has put horns on our hero's head. An eye for an eye seems to be the only *modus operandi* that Mimi recognizes. It is through this seduction that Lina Wertmüller breaks open the carapace of the civilized Mimi to reveal the elemental Sicilian lurking inside it. Wertmüller also lays bare the pretense of his political allegiance. Thus, even though before we had the sneaky suspicion that Mimi's law is the law of the jungle, now we see that the director uses visual metaphors to explicitly suggest precisely this fact. Mimi's "seduction" of Amalia has all the earmarks of a predator stalking his prey. He relentlessly pursues her through the streets of Catania, from her children's school to her

workplace, and even to church, unceasingly taunting her with, "You'll never be able to get away." The camera tracks Giannini and Elena Fiore from the back in these scenes, visually underlining the predatory nature of the pursuit. Eventually Mimi convinces her to acquiesce in his designs by revealing the motivating cause for the seduction, her husband has cheated on her. In what is perhaps Wertmüller's sly and ironic commentary on the ubiquity of this outmoded code of honor, now she too wants revenge. Nevertheless, once in the beach cabana where he plans to consummate the seduction, he does finally resort to overt violence after he has growled, purred and bitten.

And it is here that Mimi's blindness and self delusion become most clear to the viewer. Although it is perfectly clear to the audience that he is in the process of exacting the Biblical revenge of "an eye for an eye," (in this case a seduction for a seduction) and of cruelly victimizing a perfectly innocent woman for her husband's misdeed, Mimi tells Amalia that he is "a civilized man, a metallurgist," boasting that, "I have a brain that's intelligent. I can reason." The juxtaposition of this fictitious civilized man to the elemental predator we have just been shown by the director makes a convincing

statement about the power of social conditioning and its ability to destroy objectivity. It also reinforces the director's pet notion of the "false progress" mentality we have previously discussed, as a "demonstration of the superficiality of ideological change in the face of deeply ingrained cultural patterns of behavior" (Biskind 11).

Another defining characteristic of the law of the jungle is that its driving force is individualism. The seduction of Amalia thus also serves to clarify Mimi's allegiances and priorities. In effect, he has only one—to himself. That is the reason why he chooses this particular manner to avenge his honor. Indeed, it is why he believes he must avenge his honor in the first place. Once again he chooses to rely entirely on himself, flatly rejecting the mob's offer to take care of the problem for him in whatever way he chooses. Nor will he resort to legal means. And once again he displays a stunning ability to make the wrong choices; Mimi does now what he did in Torino. There too he refused to cooperate either with the mob or the police. Nevertheless, Tricarico has been wrong in his assessment of Mimi in at least one respect. Although Mimi does seem to have more faith in the mob than in the police, evidently he has the most faith in himself. It is as an individual that he chooses to operate. Despite his exposure to the Communist party and its principles of collective welfare, principles that are ceaselessly reiterated by Fiore, the woman he loves, Mimi cannot break out of the personal domain. This has been the driving force of all his decisions thus far. The one exception he makes is for his son. But then a son is for some people merely an extension of oneself, as it is for Mimi.

However, Mimi's individualism is founded on the delusion that he is in control of his own life. This clearly is not the case, and it has been proven at the critical junctures of his life: the rigged election, the unrequested transfer, the recruitment into the mob and as we are about to see, in the denouement that seals his fate.

Again, with the usual overconfidence in his ability to reason, Mimi has "planned" the climax of his revenge, the confrontation with his wife's seducer, Amilcare Finocchiaro. But here too Wertmüller uses the deft device of irony to place the viewer in a position of superiority over the protagonist. This device only serves to reinforce the idea that Mimi is blind and that he has been blind all along. Mimi is trapped in his own subjectivity. We have already commented on alienation in the Marxist context (i.e. as it pertains to economics and the labor market), but there is also the psychological form to consider. In "Lina Wertmüller: The Politics of Private Life" Peter Biskind notes that Fellini's later films, like Antonioni's, are an expression of the

alienation experienced by the individual as a result of the pressures of modern life, leading to the bifurcation of experience into fact and fancy, the public and private (10). As happens to Mimi, "The withdrawal or exile of consciousness from the world leaves consciousness imprisoned in its own subjectivity, and the world a menacing collection of lifeless objects" (Biskind 10). Hence Mimi is blind to his own mistakes and unable to see that the consequences he is suffering have been produced by his own choices. He believes instead in the fiction that there are ubiquitous, omnipotent forces persecuting him. Hence the figures with the three mole cluster appear as Tricarico (Mafia), the Cardinal (the Church) and the Police Inspector, representing the all-encompassing power of the very foundation of society.

Thus, although he foolishly believes he is in control of the outcome, we know that the mob has staged another rigged result. In a scene that serves as a structural parallel to the initial episode of the election, here too the crowds gather in the town square for a collective and staged spectacle. Here too Mimi's gullibility and naiveté bring about serious and detrimental consequences. More importantly, as in the previous case, Mimi is about to make a decision based on an erroneous assumption, that he is controlling external forces. In typical fashion his braggadocio quickly turns to despair when he realizes that the blank bullets he was intending to shoot at the *carabiniere* Finocchiaro have been substituted with real ones by a hidden mobster who after shooting, jams the gun into Mimi's hand and makes his getaway. As a result Mimi is trapped in a manner which although more blatant, is no less effective and insidious than the machinations the mob has already used to bring him to that point.

Fiore's assessment of the situation is that "we get what we deserve," and that Mimi got his for believing in "the game" of honor. This she defines as being destructive and as sheer stupidity. She also makes a prediction (or is it merely wishful thinking?): that out of Mimi's misfortunes will come maturity; or as she characteristically states it, "an understanding that is child-like in its simplicity." However, Fiore is not the only one to make a prediction for a new life. Tricarico does the same. He expects Mimi to finally fall into his arms once he is released from prison for the most compelling of reasons—because he will need money. Still too obtuse and blind to the reality of the life his choices have created for him, and more importantly, still blind to his own nature, Mimi refuses to believe him. Once again the lightning quick pace that we have come to expect from Wertmüller does not disappoint. In the next scene Mimi reluctantly emerges from the prison door only to desperately attempt to get back in when he sees a horde of children

who call him papa with their respective mothers—all will be his dependents from now on and all are holding their arms out to him.

It should be amply clear that Wertmüller aims some serious criticism at the family as an institution at both its micro (i.e. both nuclear and extended) and macro (i.e. "institutional" or figurative "families" such as the Mafia) avatars. We see that in *The Seduction of Mimi* the family in its hierarchical structure is just as oppressive and invasive as any other group or institution whose primary function in society is meant to be regulatory. Indeed, in the opening scenes we notice that the extreme proximity of the other family members inhibits Mimi and Rosalia even in their sexual performance, as they enjoy no privacy whatsoever. The structural similarities between the family and other institutions are blatantly underlined by the terminology that they share: the Mafia is also popularly referred to as the family and its members as the brotherhood; the Church calls their clergy father, mother, brother and sister. *The Seduction of Mimi* makes a clear statement that the family, in all its forms, is destructive.

As we have seen throughout this discussion, one of the things that distinguish Lina Wertmüller from many other directors is the thorough manner in which her private opinions interface with the director's themes. She has absolutely no reluctance to express her ideas on the same themes on which she builds her films and she is intrepid, repeatedly reminding the interviewer that she makes films in order to communicate her ideas about society, politics and the human experience in general. Thus the scholar studying her films must also take into consideration all those passionate pronouncements, sometimes self-contradictory, that the director has made—not to use them to validate a reading of her films, but because to ignore those pronouncements would be to violate the self-described spirit of her art.

As a result of these many interviews we know that Wertmüller has had a lot to say about the injurious nature of the family—in this film and outside of it. To Gideon Bachmann she explicitly admitted that the family "is a form of social organization that precludes equality between men and women" (6). Although the man/woman relationship is the focus of *Swept Away,* in the present film there are other deleterious aspects of the family that are glaringly obvious as the determining factors of Mimi's moral capitulation. Underlining the parallel that we have already alluded to before, Wertmüller avows that, "this whole business of love and sons, the obligations and feelings that these provoke, are blackmail weapons" (Bachmann 6). In her opinion the abrogation of the family structure is absolutely essential for the welfare of humanity as a whole.[6]

What she would like to see in its place is the kind of "tribal structure" that she refers to as a "commune" (Bachmann 6). The big apartment block that she created in *All Screwed Up,* for example, functioned in much the same way as the village of the pre-industrialized society. Whereas the small family unit fosters the kind of ruinous individualism that leads Mimi to shirk his social responsibilities in order to protect his individual interests in the persons of his son and Fiore, the tribal structure offers the possibilities of exchanging rights and duties. The nuclear family that Wertmüller thinks of as a couple sharing a two-room apartment with three kids and a television set (Bachmann 6) is doomed to an isolation whose inevitable result is moral and social solipsism. The "tribe," on the other hand, offers not only space and communication, but also brings together the similar and the different, she argues. It fosters inter-generational exchanges and the compromises that arise out of sharing common interests. In short, while the small family unit is dangerous on every level and it is "pure hell," the tribe is a quasi-utopic social structure (Bachmann 6).

Elsewhere, the director has offered a variation on this theme, asserting that what must replace the kind of family structure that she condemns in *The Seduction of Mimi* should be the "monastic or conventual concept" (Ferlita 82). Yet, as if to provide an example of her many contradictions, in this particular interview it is not clear whether the family is such a totally destructive force, for on this occasion she also offers that, "Once the atom or the molecule of the family is broken up, society loses a great element of its equilibrium" (Ferlita 82). Perhaps we are to understand that it is the *shattering* of the family, attributable to the industrial and post-industrial blight that makes an alternative model of group life indispensable (Ferlita 82).

Given this view, it is interesting to speculate on Mimi's reluctance to face his own "tribe" upon his release from jail. The eight children and three women that are now dependent on the protagonist certainly constitute a tribe in the popular jargon. The question is: will these people organize themselves into the sort of idealized community so admired and extolled by Wertmüller? At the conclusion of *The Seduction of Mimi* there is no hint that this will be the case. Mimi does not appear to willingly embrace the new-found responsibilities; indeed he appears to want to run from them. When at the end Fiore drives away, Mimi pursues her, desperately trying to get her to return. It is quite obvious that he would like nothing better than to reconstitute the little family of three (an ironic representation of the Trinity as has been frequently suggested) that he brought down from Torino. Is this the director's commentary on Mimi's continued inability to learn from his

mistakes? On the futility of exposure to a more progressive ideology that conflicts with the millennial traditions and customs?

It can be argued that this is indeed an illustration of what is perceived to be Lina Wertmüller's inconclusiveness. In addition, it seems to validate the charges of political conservatism brought against her. Quacinella's verdict is that "Mimi's path is a closed circle; it denies the possibility that the South can escape the oppressive, provincial mentality imposed by centuries of economic underdevelopment, the Church, the Mafia, and the Christian Democrats" (16). Predictably, the director disarms this criticism by frankly admitting that she has "no recipe" and no solutions. All she knows, she states, is that, "the family, as it is conceived now, is destructive. It is, by definition, a blackmailing form" (Bachmann 6). We could add that it also undermines ideology when this does not serve its interests.

In the end Marx has the last laugh. Mimi has been manipulated by outside forces that he does not understand and that he foolishly and blindly believes to be in his control; and it is indeed the economic imperative that ultimately determines the course of his life. But this was not inevitable. It is because of the choices that Mimi has made all along. Had Mimi not cultivated blindness, he would have seen more clearly. Had he chosen class solidarity, had he chosen legal recourse, he would not have placed himself in the power of the mob. Had he truly adopted the modern values that he boasts of to Amalia, he would not have killed Finocchiaro to satisfy his outdated notion of honor. Incidentally, on the moral level he also would not have victimized innocent Amalia. It is because at every fork in the road, when given a choice, Mimi has always chosen the traditional values with their double standard and their moral corruption that he now must suffer these consequences. As Biskind states, Mimi "is unable to see around the corner of his own masculine obsessions" (13).

Wertmüller's denouement is highly problematical. In one respect it appears to be a condemnation of the kind of individualism that Italians call *menefreghismo,* or the "me-first" mentality that is the guiding principle of Mimi and his kind. On the other hand, many times Wertmüller has professed unequivocally, "I believe in the individual" (Ferlita, Bachmann). Judging by this film, we can only conclude that individualism presents its own dangers; it is risky, it is full of contradictions. Moreover, we must admit that her position is implicitly unclear on the subject. Mimi's choice to rely exclusively on his own efforts is the motor of his tragedy. In Catania, stubbornly defying his father, the mob and virtually the entire town he votes for the Communist candidate. In Torino he refuses to side either with the Mafia or the Law out of self-interest. After a brief and cursory flirtation with the Communist party

and the labor unions he declares that as a new father his priorities are now individual. Back in Catania he rejects the help of the Mafia and instead plots his revenge against Finocchiaro single-handedly. All these expressions of individual initiative prove to be disastrous. Yet when he finally acquiesces and accepts the Mafia's assistance in the execution of his revenge it lands him in jail.

Wertmüller has made other statements that further confuse the issue. Speaking to Bachmann, she suggested that human beings should learn from ants how to coordinate their efforts and share responsibility for the collective welfare. She further added that, "This is what individualism can lead to: ideas of domination always spring from the head of single individuals, who try to *become* society. All they do is destroy it" (7 italics in the original). At least on this issue, it is difficult not to agree with Quacinella that "one really isn't sure where the filmmaker herself stands in the end" (16).

Blumenfeld has suggested that this ambiguity and confusion is a product of Wertmüller's "haphazardly thought-out politics" (4). David Grossvogel opined that, "Because Lina Wertmüller speaks for the record with verve rather than reflectiveness, she invites the kind of scrutiny that she might not otherwise be subject to," and lists a number of self-contradictory pronouncements that she had made in some recent interviews. It was precisely this kind of linguistic legerdemain on the part of the director that frustrated Molly Haskell and caused her to write the first negative critique of Lina Wertmüller in the U.S. in 1976. It was she who opened the floodgates that eventually swamped the formerly unanimous praise that the director had received since her New York debut in 1974.

Yet surprisingly at the end of *The Seduction of Mimi* it is Mimi who distributes the flyers for the next rigged election. In a curiously illuminating manner he has come full circle. Despite the combination of willful blindness to the real impact of "politics" on his life, and faith in an ersatz Leibnitzian world where everything should turn out for the best, Mimi still retains the viewer's empathy. This is probably the result of Giannini's excellent portrayal of Mimi as simultaneously strutting and insecure, brash and "clueless," and Wertmüller's liberal use of irony and humor. She claims that she tries to remember at all times that no matter what the situation we must not take ourselves too seriously, (Bachmann 6) and here she follows her own advice. As Mimi emerges from prison, for example, we hear maudlin, overwrought, melodramatic music in the background, but at the same time Mimi bumps his head on the lintel of a ridiculously low door. In short, although he is arrogant, macho and abusive, there is still a core of stubborn

innocence in the character that prevents the audience from condemning him. He stumbles and blusters his way to the rocky barrenness of the quarry where Fiore drives away in her little red car with the hammer and sickle painted on the door. She, at least, has retained her principles. We understand, although it is by no means clear that he does too, that the future economic success promised him by Tricarico is ineluctably tied to his moral failure. Mimi has been defeated by his own weaknesses.

Nevertheless, Wertmüller's statement about society in general and "systems" in particular is no less discouraging: capitalism is too contaminated with exploitation, corruption and crime; organized Communism does not work because the very people who should understand it in order to promulgate it distort it; and individualism is destructive of integrity and personal fulfillment—not to mention that it is dangerous to society's cohesion. It is no wonder that Wertmüller has been so severely criticized for what has been seen as her inconclusiveness—she airs problems but offers no solutions. What are we to make of this? Michalczyk has suggested that the director draws on lived experience with its multitudinous contradictions, instead of abstract ideals. Real life is frequently riddled with the kinds of difficult decisions that are not easy to make or to categorize. Wertmüller's presentation of problems is more consistent with real life than with fiction, according to him (238).

A further possibility has already been suggested in the Introduction, this inconclusiveness may simply be consistent with the evolution and aesthetics of the genre. Throughout the 1960s *commedia all'italiana*, caustic and non-conformist, targeted the legal, judicial, penal and all social institutions in a strategy that Lino Micicché calls "una tematica dell'impegno"[15] (1997: 5). Equally he reminds us that while French cinema was following the same aims, it did so by a different route: French cinema took on a serious tone, in Italy these themes blossomed in comedy—but their aims were equally serious. Until television came to take over this role, the cinema of commitment in Italy in the mid-1970s (Micicché 11) denounced the inequities of the institutions, the corruption of politics and politicians, the Mafia, and Fascist repression; what Giorgio De Vincenti names, "l'articolazione repressiva degli apparati statuali"[7] (Micicché 1997: 269). We can clearly see that these are indeed the elemental themes of the Wertmüller films and that collectively encompass the concept of order.

Furthermore, De Vincenti underlines that the general aim of this genre is to *reveal* the fundamental reason-for-being of this corruption: the perpetuation of an essentially anti-democratic system whose actions, similar

to those of the Mafia, are primarily driven by self-interest. To reveal the problem is not necessarily to solve it—or even to offer solutions. As Wertmüller illustrates repeatedly, everyone knows about "la rete mafiosa del potere democristiano,"[8] yet, as in the Mafia, it is nevertheless impossible to get the politically highly placed to break their code of *omertá* (Micicché 1997: 269). Wertmüller is among the directors who have chosen this vehicle for their social commentary. Some of the others are Damiani, Bolognini, Rosi and Petri. Thus Wertmüller, firmly ensconced in an existing artistic niche, does not believe that her inability or unwillingness to offer solutions is a problem and she is very frank about the issue. She states that, "For the time being I have not made any proposals in any of my films, but I have sounded the alarm. I am still searching proposals myself. It is time for all to search. If I knew how to do more than sound the alarm, I would be more than I am" (Bachmann 9). As we will see this will be true for her subsequent films as well. It is not until *Seven Beauties,* which unfortunately is also the last of her North American hits that she begins to articulate one of the solutions.

In the meantime, until the principle of *man in disorder* crystallizes, what does Wertmüller hold out as hope for humanity in *The Seduction of Mimi*? Perhaps we should learn from Fiore who undoubtedly is the most consistent, steadfast and admirable female character in Wertmüller's repertoire despite the fact that she has not been foregrounded in the film. Because she has principles that she truly understands and adheres to, even when not easy, and because she has grasped that the personal and the political are inextricable, she walks away happy, wise and dignified while Mimi disconsolately suffers the loss of his chosen family and of his independence. The final crane shot powerfully suggests Mimi's current moral and psychological state. His receding figure, progressively smaller and thus symbolically more distant and insignificant, appears as a dark dot in the vast, barren, seared landscape. We can deduce that the moral of this story is that materialism and greed are the root of all evil and those who cannot put the common good above their own interests will be destroyed—at least morally.

Notes

1 According to Micicché these elements are: the Giannini-Melato duo; politics as the background of an erotic sex plot; "serious" jokes in trivial language where the ideological allusion is wasted on the average public.

2 The dates of the Italian releases are of course, different. They are: *The Seduction*

of Mimi (1972), *Love and Anarchy (*1973), *Swept Away (*1974) and *Seven Beauties (*1976). As we can readily see, the last of these was the only one that was released simultaneously in the U.S. and Italy.

3 It is important to note that in certain crucial respects the ideology of the Partito Comunista Italiano differs from that of the Soviet Union. However, the fundamental Marxian concepts relevant in this paper are not among these. For those who would like to delve more deeply into the distinctive characteristics of the PCI, I highly recommend *Italy In the Cold War: Politics, Culture and Society.* Among the essays Gundle's is especially enlightening on this particular topic.

4 Another irony is signaled by the fact that Fiore and Mimi, card-carrying and self-declared Communists, are celebrating a religious sacrament that has ostensibly been banned by the Central Party, if not by its Italian offshoot.

5 In the interview with this author Lina Wertmüller repeatedly referred to Mimi as *un cretino* (an idiot) or more forcefully as *uno stronzo* (a turd).

6 In the January 13, 2006 interview with this author Lina Wertmüller's ideas on this topic seemed to have undergone significant changes. See pages 135-146.

7 "Cinema of commitment"

8 "The repressive function of the state machinery"

9 "The Mafioso network of the Christian Democrats"

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